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Are posh paints really worth it?



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Heritage palette: paints and emulsions from the likes of Fired Earth and Farrow & Ball can bring the colours of a bygone era to your home

Lesley Gillilan (Telegraph)

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They may be curious and expensive, but as 'paint anorak' Kevin McCloud tells Lesley Gillilan, there is good reason for the popularity of heritage colours

The trend for so-called "heritage" paint collections has been around long enough to be deemed tired, or even tiresome. Yet our appetite for the paint finishes of yesteryear - the evoked Georgian colours, the chalky emulsions and oily eggshells, the curious names (Arsenic, Drab, Baby's Breath, Dead Salmon) - seems healthier than ever.

Farrow & Ball, or "F&B", now sells more paint in a week than it did in a year during the early days of its long-standing National Trust partnership (which ended a year ago). And this is despite a crowd of rival companies now serving up pots of posh paint.

Aside from Fired Earth (which has ditched its V&A archive collection in favour of a "balanced" traditional-modern palette developed by Kevin McCloud), there are paint ranges by Sanderson, Zoffany and Designer's Guild. There are niche-market "designer" paints, with Cath Kidston and Kelly Hoppen among those to put their names to colour charts.

"Boutique paint-maker" Little Greene has enough faith in the longevity of the historic paint trend to launch a range of "truly authenticated historical paint colours" in association with English Heritage. Researched and developed by historian Patrick Baty, Little Greene's "Colours of England" collection offers a spectrum of 60 period shades from Georgian to post-war. They include Shrimp and Orange Aurora (from the 1950s), Middle Brown ("a British Standard paint colour of the 1930s") and, from the Regency palette, Blue Verditer ("an English colour ... found during analysis of the entrance hall of Kenwood House, London"). The coverage of each paint in the range (matt emulsion, flat oil, limewash, distemper) is said to be "excellent".

But does the 21st-century home really need a palette of 19th-century shades? And, irrespective of its provenance, is this, or any other specialist brand really worth the extra money? With the average price hovering at about £22 for 2.5 litres of emulsion, wouldn't it make more sense to slap on the B&Q, or get Dulux to whip up a copy-cat shade? A 2.5-litre pot from B&Q's Colours range costs a mere £9.98.

McCloud, a self-confessed paint "anorak", is unequivocal in his defence of posh paints. "Having used many, many different brands over the years, it is very clear to me that the more you pay, the better the paint," he says. "Cheap paint has more water in it, less pigment and less binder." Thus, as a rule, the more expensive paint covers better and lasts longer. It is also more environment-friendly, being lower in "Volatile Organic Compounds".

There is a place for cheap paint, and McCloud concedes he has painted his own kitchen in "bog ordinary trade white emulsion", but the cheaper paints are made with synthetic pigments. And pigment, he explains, is what gives paint its quality and depth of colour.

"Traditional pigments tend to be made of rocks and minerals, earth and clay," he says. "And consequently they are impure, and rather complex. The more complex the pigmentation, the more interesting the colour. It gives redolence and depth, and you get undertones - colours which subtly change in different lights."

The range he created for Fired Earth is "traditionally pigmented" but, as he points out, "the colours are not historical. And they are not meant to be". In fact, he is sceptical about the justification for using simulated historic colours. "Unless it's for a Grade I listed house, with a particularly important story attached to its paint colours, it's a lot of hogwash," he says. "One can say that this was a colour used in this particular house, on a certain day in, say, 1818, but the colour has probably faded, or gone darker, or yellowed. It's very difficult to ascribe a particular nuance of colour to a room for a particular date."

Paint finishes are something else. F&B, who are keen to call their paints "traditional" rather than historic, have used the same basic recipes since the 1930s (and still produce distempers and even lead paints for grade I and grade II listed buildings). But to describe Sugar Bag Light as "like the blue of paper used for lining drawers in the late 18th century" is hardly a claim for historical accuracy. The English Heritage range, however, gets as close as it can to authentic period shades.

"English Heritage wanted a comprehensively researched palette of paints," says Baty, who runs Paper and Paints in Chelsea. Claiming genuine provenance, they are designed to suit appropriate period houses, but it's okay to mix Georgian and Victorian in a 1930s semi. "What people do with these paints is entirely up to them," he says. "Choosing paint is like tasting wine, perfume or anything else which relies on sensory perception - it's an individual choice."

And what a bewildering choice. "We are besieged by brands and rafts of new technologies," agrees McCloud. "There are paints for decking, paints for fencing, paint for the furniture, another one for the shed. But what it boils down to, is do you like the colour?" And if you don't, it's not

exactly a disaster. McCloud says that even at the high end of the price spectrum, "it's still the cheapest way to introduce colour into the home".

How to find just the right shade

- Compare prices and products online at www.choosingpaint.com which supplies paints from Farrow & Ball, Fired Earth, Little Greene, Sanderson, Paint Library, Designers Guild and Zoffany, as well as American imports Devine and Colortrend's Historic Colour Collection.
- If you know the colour, but don't know where to find it, Papers and Paints in Chelsea (4, Park Walk London SW10), will colour-match almost anything from a flake of old paint to a silk scarf. Or call them on 020 7352 8626.
- The Little Greene Paint Company (www.thelittlegreene.com; 0161 230 0880) has pledged a donation to English Heritage for every pot of Colours of England paint sold. Buyers are entitled to two-for-one entry to some English Heritage properties.
- Fashion plays a big part in our colour choice. For three years of the 1990s, Farrow & Ball's best-selling colour was Sudbury Yellow. Now, usurped by a more popular blue-green palette, it doesn't even feature in its top 30. Reds sell better in the winter, and yellow is predicted to make a comeback.