



Specialist Paint Finishes



Decorative painting has been used for centuries to enrich and enliven homes and public buildings. From the trompe l'oeil frescoes of Pompeii, the hand-painted details and painted plaster of Georgian interiors, to Art Deco's burnished surfaces, special paint effects have played a role in the revival and reinvention of interior design.

For period restoration there are two basic frameworks for specialist decorating. First, there is authenticity: to restore as accurately as possible the colours, materials, textures, and decorative elements of the original interior, a more achievable goal today thanks to modern techniques for identifying colour and composition from a paint scraping (although lab results don't always settle the debate).

Second, there is the more interpretive approach: to create a period look, feel and colour scheme appropriate to the age and style of the building, without becoming pedantic or enslaved to scholarly standards (which change over time anyway). This approach also accommodates personal preferences and the functional requirements of modern living.

Whether the context is historic or even contemporary, many paint effects are rooted in traditional techniques that date back to the ancient worlds of Egypt, Greece and Rome.

SPECIALIST PAINT FINISHES

Specialist paint finishes tend to fall into one of two baskets: 1. **broken colour**, which includes glazing, dragging, cross strie, stippling, and frescoing with colour washes; 2. **faux finishes**, which run the gamut from stone effects (e.g., marble, limestone and granite) to wood effects (graining), metallics (gilding, bronzing, copper, verdigris, chrome, etc.) and exotic finishes like tortoiseshell, lacquer, leather, and even fur. Trompe l'oeil, perhaps the ultimate skill in the faux repertoire, involves painting murals directly onto a wall or other flat surface to create the illusion of perspective and open up interior space.

One of the most popular broken colour effects is the colour glaze, the application of a tinted layer to a coloured base. Glazes, essentially paint thinned with spirits or water, can be scumbled, brushed, and manipulated to create texture, various degrees of translucency and

Left:
Wood grained
Arts & Crafts
door (detail)

Middle:
Trompe l'oeil
curtains and
wood graining for
Biedermeier-style
cloakroom

Right:
Stipple & wipe
with gold leaf
on plaster,
Jacobean ceiling
restoration

**From the
portfolio of
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colour-play. Glazing can also be a useful antiquing technique and a way of tweaking a base colour that missed the mark.

Dragging—the elegant, two-tone vertical pattern created by dragging a brush through wet glaze to create very fine vertical lines—was popular in Georgian interiors, which favored painted doors, window casements, panels, and furniture. As with most paint effects, less is more: The subtler the contrast between the base and the top layer, the more pleasing the effect. Dragging seems to fit well in a range of period interiors, helping to evoke the appearance of age and softness. Finished with several layers of varnish, it is also surprisingly good-tempered and even appropriate for kitchen cupboards and cabinets.

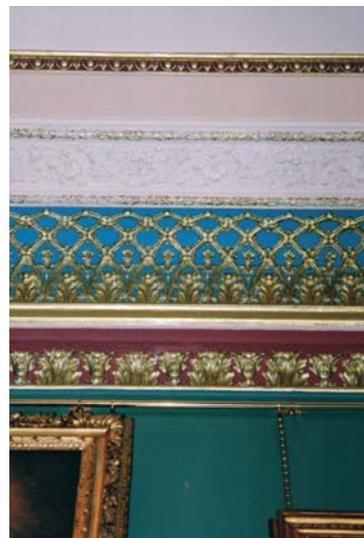
The excavations of Pompei and Herculaneum in the 18th century inspired a fresh vocabulary of classical ornament. Rendered in paint and plaster, these ornaments and motifs were used to decorate cornices, friezes, ceilings, and walls, reaching their finest expression in the neoclassical interiors of Robert Adam. Besides hand-painted decoration, gilding and paint were also used to accentuate plasterwork, ➔



Left: Wardrobes with hand-painted laurel motifs



Right top: Hand-painted detail over dragging



Right Bottom: Gilded and painted cornice in Edwardian salon

helping the eye to “pick out” swags, wreathes, arabesques, acanthus leaves, medallions and other adornments high up in a room. Stipple and wipe is one such picking out technique used on fibrous plaster and wood. “Stippling” entails a delicate build up of coloured glaze with a brush, and “wiping” reveals the contours below. This technique can be used to breathe life into replacement mouldings or to restore original mouldings whose definition has been lost through years of over-painting.

WOOD GRAINING

Wood graining (*faux bois*) has deep roots. In Ancient Egypt, where timber was scarce, there is evidence that furniture and pottery were painted to look like wood. Scarcity and economy were often important drivers for decorative substitutes. Used to enrich the look of cheaper

woods (MDF today) and imitate expensive hardwoods, wood graining has probably been an economic as much as an aesthetic choice, and now an ecological one when we reproduce the grains of precious timbers from trees not available from readily sustainable sources.

Wood graining can follow a purist approach, reproducing as naturally as possible the look of mahogany, maple, oak or walnut, complete with knots and burls. It can even mimic fine marquetry and inlay. But in many historic interiors, it’s clear that fantasy wood grains, even in a deliberately naïve style, were preferred. This expressive treatment can often be more charming and harmonious with the overall decorative scheme than a botanically correct rendition. Wood panelling featured prominently in Elizabethan, Jacobean, Gothic Revival and Arts &

Crafts periods, and graining is a useful technique for recreating such period looks. Today, wood graining is also called upon to repair and “match in” original work in churches, libraries, public houses, and residences for such applications as panelling, skirting, doors, cupboards, and window frames.

Marbling is the queen of faux stone effects. Like wood graining, it has been used across a wide range of decorative periods. It, too, can be rendered realistically (to match existing marble, for example) or in a fantasy vein that is finely tuned to other decorative elements or to the overall colour scheme. Marbling has typically been applied to columns, pilasters, fireplaces and skirting boards, both for its own sake and whenever marble was desired but cost, weight or availability made it an unrealistic choice.

Though marbling is by far the



most popular faux stone effect, virtually any stone can be emulated with paint. Stoneblocking can create the illusion not only of a stone surface but also of the actual blocks and mortar joints of a constructed wall, complete with the shadows and highlights of imaginary chamfered edges. This treatment is particularly requested for hallways and staircases where such materials would have been traditionally used.

Exotic finishes and effects such as lacquer and tortoiseshell were part of the phenomenon of *Chinoiserie*, a style that reached its height around the middle of the 18th century, continuing into the Regency period. The Chinese style was inspired by the porcelain, silk, and lacquerware imported from Asia and fashionable at the time. Lacquering, faux tortoiseshell, and other exotic faux finishes reappeared during the Art Deco period.

Victorian interiors were characterized by more florid colour schemes arising from the discovery of new chemical dyes. Gilding, graining, marbling, and other decorative paint effects were all used in varying degrees, together with rich fabrics and wallpapers. It was also a period of revivals, and some interiors paid homage to Medievalism, with heraldic colours and motifs in vogue as part of the Gothic Revival style.

Hand painted details and stencilling are another string in the bow of a specialist decorator. The Arts and Crafts style, developed in the 1860s as a reaction to industrialisation and mechanization, featured stencils of natural images such as lilies and oak leaves, and of simple geometrics, in contrast to the ornate wallpapers of Victorian parlours.

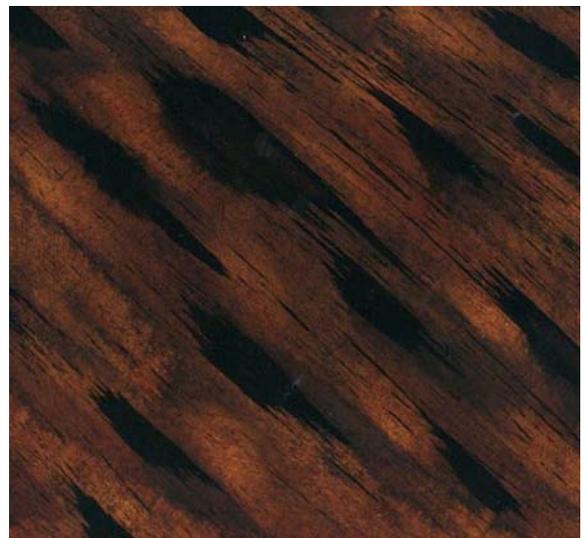
Even as Modernism and the



Left:
Colour wash

Right top:
Colour wash,
Georgian interior

Right Bottom:
Fantasy finish
(faux leopard)



aesthetic of “form meets function” swept through the early 20th century, stripping away decorative elements, the Art Deco movement in the 20s and 30s incorporated metallic effects, including chrome and gold, while Egyptian motifs and exotic materials and their faux versions were used to enhance vividly coloured interiors of violet, chartreuse, and white.

The story of decorative painting doesn't stop there. The 1980s and 90s saw a popular revival of interest in the craft of special finishes, which were used not only in buildings of commerce but embraced by homeowners in the grip of the DIY movement.

Although special decorative effects have repeatedly adapted to the requirements of fashion and culture, these are not the only arbiters. As the green building movement gathers momentum, health and ➤



environment will increasingly be taken into account. Specialist paint effects have typically been rendered using oil based materials, which impart a unique richness and depth, but it is perfectly possible to achieve effects with water-based materials, which have progressed immensely over the last decade.

Colour and decoration has always been defined by the materials available in a particular period. Today new lines of eco paints are being introduced, reminding us of the first 'paints', which included simple ingredients such as chalks, caseins, natural pigments and limes. Lime wash and distemper and the special qualities they impart--

breathability, softness, etc.--are being rediscovered. When surfaces are not appropriate for lime wash, the chamois-like matt effect of lime-washed walls can be approximated by emulsion colour washes.

Special paint finishes and the traditional techniques of decorative painting can restore period authenticity to the buildings we love. From cottage to manor house, they can transform almost any surface and emulate the mellowing effects of age, creating a harmonious backdrop for our interiors and our own personal sense of style.

Top left:
Satinwood
graining
transforms MDF
board

Top right:
Colour washes in
rich apricots
create stucco
plaster effect

Bottom left:
Art Deco doors,
silver leaf

Bottom right:
Painted cornice
with gold leaf
detailing

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