



OLD SCHOOL

Respecting Vintage Houses
By CJ Hurley



Balancing Then and Now: Painting the Interior of Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts Homes

Painting colors in your period home's interior should be an exciting adventure. After all, the reason we paint our living spaces is to create an atmosphere that feels comfortable, relaxing, and results in an environment that says something about us. If we didn't, we could simply paint our homes institutional white and be happy. Choosing colors that are personal to us is challenging enough, but the challenge takes on greater significance when we are dealing with a period home.

Colors not only say something about our personalities and values, they also reflect our place in history, and vintage homes had colors that were indicative of the values and concerns of their age. All too often I've heard people complain that the colors they used in their period home somehow didn't work — they felt awkward, out of place, or looked downright awful. Understanding the history of your home can help you understand the kinds of colors your architecture was designed to incorporate. Having this knowledge can free you to mix in your own personality and strike a happy balance between self and history.

The Colors of History

Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts homes shared the same colors. Beginning in the late 1880s, formerly expensive pigments became a low-cost commodity. The gates to a vast array of

Above: The living room of a 1920's Four Square takes advantage of painted trim. A softly muted shade of cream rests unobtrusively next to the rich blue shade of the walls and original matte blue fireplace tiles. The mild off white of the ceiling prevents eye fatigue, while richly textured fabrics, furnishings, and artwork complete the color arrangement of this warm and inviting room.

colors were thrown open, and deep, rich, and highly saturated colors were the vogue — replacing the muted, understated colors of the Colonial and Early Victorian eras, which heavily relied on lead white with little pigment.

Pure pigments of red, cobalt, ultramarine, yellow, green, and violet were toned down into earthy shades to complement the Victorian and Arts & Craft's period obsession with nature. Trim and architectural moldings framed the wall colors and showcased them in their vivid splendor.

Unpainted and Painted Trim

When choosing colors for a home, begin with the trim. The trim can be the anchor that all color choices conform to. Beginning with a reference point that doesn't change helps keep choosing colors manageable. A trim color that works with a variety of wall colors becomes especially important in Arts & Crafts houses, where open floor plans offer fewer separations between the rooms, and trim elements flow seamlessly into each other. This design leaves no point to make a color break.

Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts houses had both stained natural wood and painted trim. Natural wood, stained dark, was the standard. A variety of hardwoods were used, from mahogany and oak to softer-grained woods such as pine and fir. All woods have an underlying hue — mahogany has red, oak and pine have yellow, and fir is yellow-orange. This undertone should be considered when picking colors in order to create a satisfying harmony. Stains and finishes also have a



The mid-tone grey of the built-in buffet and other trim wood is the perfect foil to the warm golden yellow of the walls and a collection of fine Italian ceramic ware. Deep black dining chairs add an air of traditional formality to this well-appointed dining room that rides the line between casual comfort and formal elegance.

hue, such as red, orange, yellow, and a kind of purple. Most trim woods here in Portland have an orange cast, since we are in the Northwest, and many of our homes are fir finished with orange shellac.

If your trim is fir with orange shellac, you need to find wall colors that harmonize with orange. Earthy yellows, mustards, and gold tones will work well for a room in a lighter color — even if the yellow leans toward the green, which most historic yellows tend to do. Earthy blues will work well. Greens that lean both towards yellow and blue work well with orange shellac wood trim. Also, orangy-brown tones that aren't too red will sit nicely next to orange-based trim. Deep red tones tend to conflict with orange trim wood, and I rarely recommend them in this context.

Keep in mind that dark-trim woods will make your wall colors look lighter; so be bold, and don't be afraid to choose



The living room of this gracious Arts & Crafts bungalow boasts deeply stained fir trim that frames the warm mid-tone green of the walls. The saturated red of the fabrics and carpets, the earthy yellow of midwestern fireplace bricks, and the blue greens plants, fireplace tiles, and other ceramics all add to the drama of this 1910's room.



The second story bedroom of a stellar Arts & Crafts home from the 1910s has original fir trim finished with orange shellac. Dappled light from the large bank of windows dramatically displays the mid-tone blue used for the walls below the frieze level. The owners of the home call this the Midnight Room, and the darker blue used for the frieze level and turreted ceiling deepens the mood of restfulness. Both shades of blue allow the old-growth graining of the trim wood to shine.

deeply saturated colors. Going too light will weaken the impact of your colors as well as weaken the impact of the fine grains you want to highlight in your wood.

There is more flexibility in selecting wall colors when you have painted trim because you can pick the base that is going to work with many colors instead of a few. Late Victorians had a penchant for darker grey-greens and soft, mid-toned grays for trim. Lighter trim colors were more common in the Classical Revival styles and later Arts & Crafts period homes. Both styles drew on Colonial tastes for color direction. Creamy colors with a yellow base were popular from the late 1890s to the 1920s; however, many of these colors look too yellow to modern eyes. And there is a preference today for colors that have more of an off-white appearance.

Late Victorian and many Arts & Crafts houses have clearly delineated rooms that allow for easy changing of trim colors from room to room. I always make sure that the two trims look nice together to ensure a successful outcome. Treat wall color selections in rooms with darkly painted trim like you would rooms with darkly stained wood. Remember that if you pick colors that are too light, they will look washed out. Rooms with lighter trim can handle both darker saturated colors and lighter-value colors. Dark walls with light trim will result in the trim looking even lighter.

Evaluating Personal Color Choices and Honoring History

Understanding the sorts of colors used in Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts houses will help to inform your personal color choices and make them work in your period home. Keep in mind that Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts houses from the late 1800s to 1920 tended to be darker, moodier, and more atmospheric than modern homes, where the focus is on lightness and airiness. At the turn of the last century, the home was regarded as a refuge from the harsher side of the Industrial Revolution: shaded, softly lit intimate spaces created a mood of quiet shelter.

If your goal is to get a more light and airy feeling while staying true to period, it is a more difficult road to travel. But not impossible. Create a list that describes the mood you want to evoke in your home. The process will help you decide which colors will best achieve your goals. At the same time, knowing a little of the history of Late Victorian and Arts & Crafts houses will help you choose colors that will be perfect matches. ■

CJ Hurley and his wife, Barbara Pierce, of CJ Hurley Century Arts help people with color and design for new construction and period homes. They can be reached at www.cjhurley.com, or call 503-234-4167.