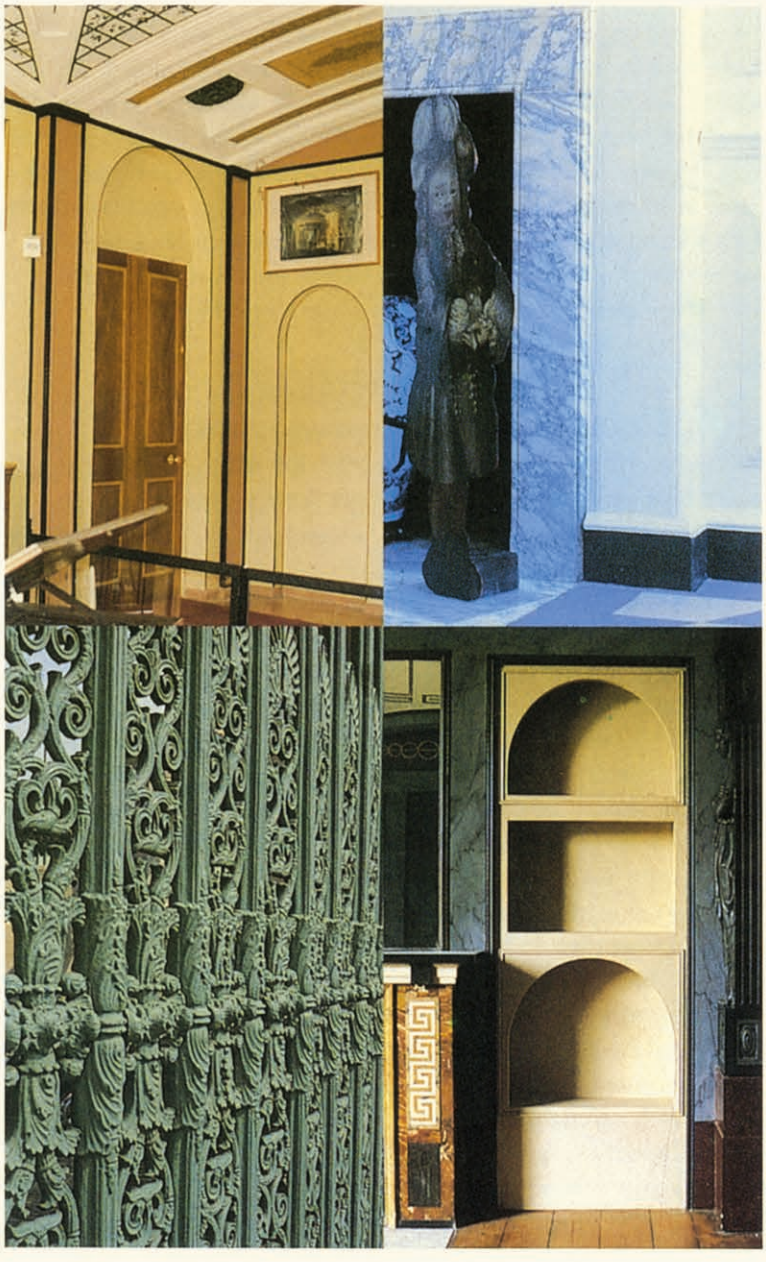
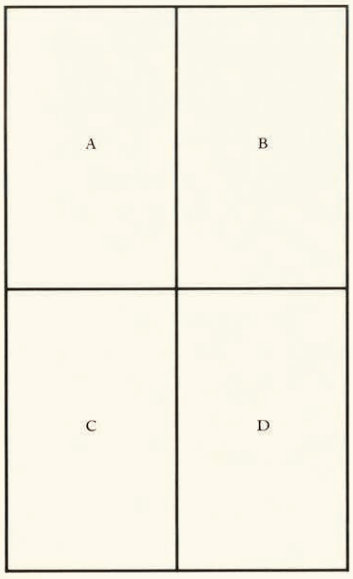
The Georgian Group Guides

№4

PAINT COLOUR



A Brief Guide to the Colours and Application of Paint in Georgian Houses



A) Detail of the Library at Soane's Pitshanger Manor, Ealing c.1800. *Courtesy London Borough of Ealing.* B) Detail of redecoration at Pallant House, Chichester, Sussex. *Courtesy Pallant House.* C) Recently-restored Railings at Apsley House, London, c.1820. D) North Wall of the Breakfast Room at Pitshanger Manor. *Courtesy London Borough of Ealing.*

THIS SHORT GUIDE is not intended as an exhaustive description of Georgian paint colour or composition. It seeks rather to address a few fundamental misconceptions about Georgian colour and to suggest methods of approach with regard to internal and external painting.

Historic paint colour is an area about which The Georgian Group receives a vast number of enquiries. However, the Group does not envisage that the following guidelines should be meticulously followed by house owners. Clearly areas which do not involve potential structural damage, for example, will always to some extent remain matters of personal taste. However, if you are aiming at a faithful re-creation of any aspects of Georgian decoration, then the advice given below should be of some help.

As with all of the subjects covered in the Group's series of advisory leaflets, inadvisable alterations which seriously affect the character of a listed building can result in prosecution – even in the area of paint application (see below). However, these guidelines are not just applicable to listed buildings of the Georgian era, but are relevant to unlisted buildings both within and outside this particular period. As with all cases involving major alterations, it is always best to consult the Conservation Officer of your local District or Borough Council before beginning.

A Brief History

ALTHOUGH A NUMBER of painters' manuals did appear during the late Georgian period, few specific instructions for decorating a house have yet been found dating from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Much depends, therefore, on painstaking research involving paint sections and laboratory analysis.

Verbal descriptions of seventeenth century English interiors are particularly uncommon, but the evidence suggests that most of the less grand English interiors prior to the early 18th century were rather dark and drab. White, however, was used on ceilings from c.1570 right through until the mid-18th century – except in cases where the owner could afford to engage a decorative painter such as Thornhill or Laguerre. Note, though, that such whites were not equivalent to modern, 'brilliant' whites; Georgian white paints were not so clean as modern products, and during the Georgian era were most often 'broken' – i.e. mixed with a tiny proportion of black and other pigments.

Early eighteenth century colours were not as limited as is often thought. After c.1720 the Palladian designers began to move away from the dark timber colours of the seventeenth century towards lighter, wholly painted (and often plastered) interiors. White itself gradually became more important, although white walls were often covered with wall hangings or, after c.1730, wallpapers. In addition, colours such as Pearl Colour, Lead Colour, Drab, Olive or Stone Colour were often used as an alternative to broken whites – 'stone' meaning anything between the colour of Portland Stone and Bath Stone. At Marble Hill House in London, for example, the internal walls were mostly finished in a stone colour, with only the Saloon being decorated in white and gold.

Palladian taste (corresponding very roughly with the years 1720–60) also, however, admitted stronger paint hues on the main wall plane, i.e. the areas between the cornice and the dado. These included 'pea green' (most likely a fresh, bright green; the colour of uncooked, not dried, peas), sky blues, straw and other yellow tints, and the expensive 'fine deep green'

Chocolate - not currently a very fashionable colour, nor one popularly associated with the Early Georgian era - was very commonly used for internal woodwork, particularly doors and skirting boards.
boards.

By the 1740s matt ('dead') finishes were replacing the eggshell-like sheens in vogue earlier in the century. Only in North America did shiny wall finishes continue throughout the 18th century; in Britain the fashion for matt paints persisted well into the 19th century. One should rarely use gloss paint in Georgian interiors.

The use of paint colours within the home became more complex with the advent in the 1760s of Neoclassicism, a taste popularised by Robert Adam's influential interiors. Increasingly, richer colours based on Antique Roman precedents appeared in combination with each other; typical Adam colours can be seen in surviving Adam interiors such as Syon Park in Middlesex. It is important to remember that Neoclassical designers did not, as is often thought, rely only on pastel hues. Bright blues, greens, browns, and lilacs were becoming increasingly popular.

The dominant feature of many of Robert Adam's rooms was the ceiling, which was often decorated with richly-coloured grounds, with details picked out in white or another strong colour. By the later eighteenth century the fashion for Etruscan rooms (which still survive in houses like Heveningham Hall in Suffolk) had introduced deep red-browns to the architectural palette; in the early nineteenth century 'Pompeian red', directly derived from archaeological discoveries, was a widely-used background for prints and pictures.

It is certainly an exaggeration to view Regency interiors as entirely rich and dark, yet it is true that a change of taste was evident during the 1800s. Soane and Nash both used strong reds, greens and yellows; an excellent surviving example of this approach can be found in the domestically-scaled Regency interiors of Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, created in the early nineteenth century. Such powerful colours were often combined with tints of their complementaries, and the influence of archaeology continued with the use of black to imitate Antique decorative patterns and forms; and by the 1820s graining, marbling and bronzing were at the height of their popularity.

RESTORING INTERNAL PAINTWORK

'Georgian' Colours

FIRST AND FOREMOST, remember that there are no easy formulae for Georgian colour combinations or for particular hues. The colours as described by contemporary commentators were never standard: 'stone colour' or 'pea green', for example, could vary substantially in hue. It is not known now what all of the colour names actually signified.

Thus Georgian room colours can, within certain parameters, be largely a matter of personal taste. Remember that internal paint colours may have simply matched the colour of the furniture and fabrics in the room, or vice-versa. (By 1825 though, Ackermann's influential *Repository* was noting that "the fashion of making the coverings of furniture similar in point of colour to the walls of the room has at length subsided".) Thus each material used in internal decoration possessed its own range of colours and, although there was some overlap, these could not always be transposed from one to

Grained Door from Nash's Royal Pavilion at Brighton, Sussex. *Courtesy Brighton Pavilion.*

the other. To make use of the colour, for example, of Wedgwood Blue for internal paintwork is a most unsafe way of attempting to restore a Georgian interior.

Woodwork

Despite many beliefs to the contrary, woodwork in a Georgian house was almost *never* left unpainted, as it was often of inferior quality – frequently cheap pine or fir. Only very expensive woods such as mahogany would have been left unpainted, and these would have been covered with repeated layers of beeswax.

The widely-held belief that stripped pine is historically accurate is in fact based on few Georgian precedents, but seems instead to result from a confusion arising from the post-Arts and Crafts advocacy of 'honest' materials and more recently the enthusiasm for stripped Scandinavian – or, latterly, South American or Filipino – timber.

Georgian woodwork was generally painted a single colour, or subject to a variety of ingenious 'sham' treatments. Graining was very popular at the beginning and the end of the Georgian period; with this technique woodwork – particularly window frames and internal and external doors – was painted in mimicry of a good quality wood such as seasoned oak, rosewood or mahogany. The techniques of marbling and bronzing were also widely employed throughout the period, particularly during the Regency era. The former involved painting the surface to suggest real or imaginary marble types. Bronzing became particularly fashionable with the advent of academic Neoclassical taste during the 1800s, and involved the application of bronze powder or similarly-coloured matter onto green paint; the aim was to re-create a material widely used in Ancient Rome. This century, faded bronzed surfaces have often been mistaken for murky green or green-browns.

All of the above techniques can be reproduced today with surprising ease by amateurs as well as professionals. Before starting on such work, however, it is best to examine other instances of these treatments that survive today.

Internal doors were not only grained, but could also be painted a single, dark colour. This colour often matched that of the skirting boards, generally the darkest element of the wall. Balusters were also grained on occasion.

Floors were often painted too – either a flat single colour or in imitation of expensive woods, parquetry or black and white marble blocks. In many houses, however, the floor did not show at all: fitted carpets or other floor coverings are not an invention of the twentieth century, but were in evidence by the mid-eighteenth century. Practical floorcloths, made of a durable material and decorated, were very prevalent during the whole of this period.

Blue painted Ironwork on the Stair Balustrade at No. 1 Greek Street, London. *Courtesy of 'Traditional Homes'.*

Ironwork

Internal ironwork of the Early Georgian period was most often painted a lead-colour, although wealthier households often used bright mid-blues or, by the end of the 18th century, 'bronze' greens. (For further details see Georgian Group Guide No. 8, *Ironwork*.)

Plaster Mouldings

Using emulsion paints on moulded plaster nearly always leads to a considerable amount of detail being obscured by a general build-up of paint. Emulsion is very difficult to remove, but this can be done through the use of gentle steam and a palette knife. For elaborate plasterwork there are products available that will greatly ease the task of paint removal. When repainting, ideally use a soft distemper, which can be washed off with ease next time you decorate; this will avoid clogging up the detail. In painting moulded plaster, take care to discover what type of paint has been previously applied. *Never* use emulsion if it has not been applied before.

When deciding on a colour scheme for the wall and ceiling, bear in mind that the cornice and its mouldings should always be interpreted as part of the wall, not of the ceiling. In the classical vocabulary the wall corresponds to the column, with the cornice representing the column capital and entablature.

Gilding was often used in grander houses to pick out mouldings in the earlier eighteenth century. If decorating plaster in this way, always try to use gold leaf; obviously this is not cheap, but it is always superior to, and better value for money than, simple gold paint, which can tarnish within a year. Differing shades of gold were commonly in use during the early nineteenth century; the Music Room at Brighton Pavilion is a good example of the resultant effect.

DETAIL OF PLASTERWORK AT NO. 1 GREEK STREET. *COURTESY OF 'TRADITIONAL HOMES'.*

Discovering Original Paint Colours

Stripping may be advisable in order to rediscover the detail of particular carving or moulding which has been obscured through repeated layers of unsuitable paint.

Bear in mind, though, that stripping away accumulated layers of paint does have the effect of removing all traces of the paint history of that particular feature. Thus it will be impossible in future years to discover the exact character of historic colour schemes. Try instead to rub down and repaint, rather than engage in drastic stripping; it is also best to test a small area first.

The best way to determine the original colour of a wall is by a wall cross-section, performed by a paint restoration expert. Remember that the lowest layer you may encounter might well be the undercoat or the primer, or simply the lowest surviving layer that postdates the Georgian era.

Also remember that what is exposed will have almost certainly discoloured over the years. Paint containing linseed oil slowly yellows when placed in the dark. The effect of being hidden by layers of subsequent paintwork might, for example, turn an original broken white into a brownish beige. Often the colour can be restored by exposure to daylight or ultra-violet light, but care must be taken, since over-exposure can cause some colours to fade.

So, again, your own discretion must be used if you seek to restore the original Georgian colour scheme. If you are in any doubt, ask the scientific department of a museum or an acknowledged paints expert to take, and analyse, paint sections.

TOP) WATERCOLOUR OF ENTRANCE VESTIBULE AT REMPSTONE HALL, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE, C.1830 BY SOPHIA SITWELL; MIDDLE) WATERCOLOUR OF THE LIBRARY, IN A HOUSE ON BATTERSEA RISE, LONDON, C.1830; BOTTOM) AN EARLY 19TH CENTURY INTERIOR DEPICTED BY MARY ELLEN BEST. *(COURTESY SOTHEBYS).*

EXTERNAL PAINTWORK

A CELEBRATED LEGAL CASE (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead v. Secretary of State for the Environment, 21 December 1987) involved the prosecution of a house owner for painting a listed Georgian house to produce "a most unfortunate aesthetic result" - in this case deep pink and black. Subsequently, Central Government has laid down specific guidelines for paintwork on listed buildings, in their Planning and Policy Guidance PPG 15

"External painting - or repainting such as a change of colour requires listed building consent, when it could affect the character of a listed building"

This requirement underlines the need for sound advice. Thus it is important to bear in mind a few key points when considering repainting external walls or other exterior features.

External Brickwork

It is *always* best to leave original brickwork unpainted. Modern, oil-based paints and emulsions - are generally impervious to water; if they crack, water can penetrate into the bricks behind but cannot escape through the paint layer. The result is that even newly-applied paint will quickly fall off, whilst the bricks behind deteriorate more rapidly.

If the wall has been painted with limewash, however, it will still be able to 'breathe' properly. Check first to see whether your painted wall has been limewashed and, if so, repeat with the same medium. But remember that even this may need Listed Building Consent if your house is listed. (An excellent guide to the preparation and application of limewash can be obtained from The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings at 37 Spital Square, London E1 6DY.)

Stucco

Painted stucco walls should be repainted every three to five years to preserve their appearance and to stop water from entering the fabric via paint flakes.

Early forms of stucco, if painted at all, were often a yellow-brown colour; the uniform cream tone now associated with stucco is actually a nineteenth century innovation. The original purpose of stucco was, of course, to mimic stone, to which end what resembled incised ashlar joints were often picked out in a tromp l'oeil fashion. Thus you may wish to apply a colour which is nearer in tone to the colour of local stone work than to the light shades more reminiscent of materials such as Portland Stone. It is important to bear in mind, though, that stuccoed terraces were conceived as a single composition, not as a series of individual houses. A colour that is consistent throughout the terrace, is therefore, a key prerequisite to stucco painting, and one which necessitates some common arrangement with your neighbours.

When repainting stucco - or indeed any Georgian surface - *never* use a brilliant white, which is very much a twentieth century development. Hove Borough Council, for example, specifically recommend five variations of cream: Magnolia *(BS 08B15)*, Soft White *(BS 10B15)*,

Buttermilk *(BS 08C31)*, Vellum *(BS 08B17)*, or Cream *(BS 10C31)*. An unbroken brilliant white looks wholly inappropriate when used in a Georgian facade.

If you wish to be historically accurate, use a flat colour, not a gloss on the stucco. If you wish, it is accurate to pick out the incised 'joints' with a different colour in a trompe l'oeil fashion, which helps to confirm the impression of real ashlar.

More information regarding the history and treatment of stucco can be found in The Georgian Group's advisory leaflet No. 5: *Render, Stucco and Plaster.*

GREEN-PAINTED WINDOW JOINERY IN SPITALFIELDS, EAST LONDON.

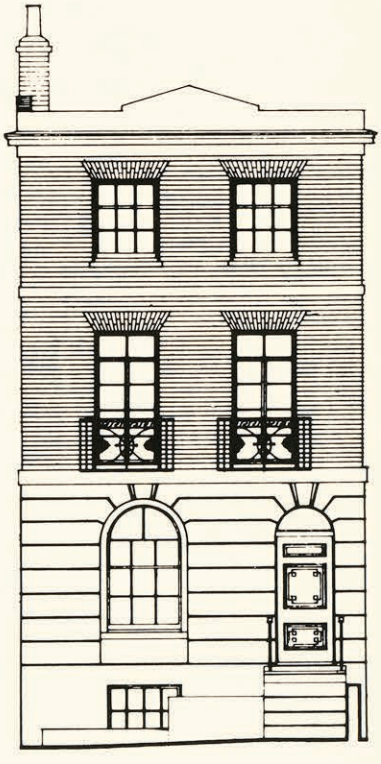
Window Frames

Window frames of the earlier eighteenth century should preferably be a form of broken white. There is increasing evidence, however, that later in the century window surrounds in a context of brick or masonry were being painted in darker colours, usually brown or green, or were grained; window frames in the context of stucco were often brown, grey or some other dark colour. Broken white window frames only became standard with the Georgian Revival of the late nineteenth century.

External Ironwork

Railings and other exterior ironwork were, like their interior counterparts, generally painted grey, or more rarely blue in the earlier part of the period and green some time after the advent of Neoclassicism. Green was also used for all garden furniture, too. The black-painted railings that are ubiquitous throughout Britain's towns and cities are in fact a more modern innovation; green railings, however, rarely survive today.

STUCCO, WOODWORK AND IRONWORK WERW ALWAYS PAINTED IN GEORGIAN HOMES; BRICKWORK AND STONE WERE RARELY PAINTED.



External Doors

Exterior doors surfaces can be of black, brown, dark red or other similar dark colour, or grained. If no examples of grained doors can be found locally, copious examples of the technique occur in the furniture galleries at the V&A Museum in South Kensington, London, or in paintings of relevant interiors in any local gallery.

REMOVING OLD PAINTWORK

IN REMOVING OLD PAINT LAYERS, *never* use blowlamps or blowtorches: their use has caused countless disastrous fires in Georgian houses both large and small. Rather use hot air or steam strippers or non-alkali solvent strippers; warm water alone will be sufficient for old distemper paints. If in doubt, consult SPAB's excellent leaflet on paint removal (see address overleaf).

Avoiding excessively glossy paints in the first place may make removal easier. Of course a 'soft' (size-bound) distemper is even easier to remove - using warm water and a soft brush - and has the advantage of being extremely porous, though rather fragile.

Sources For Paint Colours

AS NOTED EARLIER, the final interior colours for Georgian rooms are largely a matter of personal judgement. To give you an idea of the acceptable boundaries to work within, though, it is always helpful to visit local houses where an authentic colour scheme has been applied. Remember, though, that the scale and thus the treatment of a room in a grand building may be wholly inappropriate to a small Georgian terrace house. Bear in mind that not all interiors were by designers of the calibre of Robert Adam or John Soane, and your own rooms should not necessarily imitate those of great Georgian mansions such as Chatsworth or Osterley.

Below is a list of further reading you may find helpful for matters of greater detail. The Group can supply a list of useful addresses of paint suppliers who will be able to help in matching original Georgian tints. Other local suppliers may be found by consulting your local council's Conservation Officer, or by consulting a recognised expert source such as the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Further Reading

Ed Pauline Agius
Ackerman's Regency Furniture and Interiors (1984)

Ian Bristow, 'Ready-Mixed Paint in the Eighteenth Century' in
The Architectural Review April 1977

Ian Bristow, 'Repainting 18th Century Interiors' in
ASCHB Transactions 1982

Edward Croft-Murray
Decorative Painting in England (1962–70)

Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton
Life in the Georgian City (1990)

John Fowler and John Cornforth
English Decoration in the 18th Century (1974)

Charlotte Gere
Nineteenth-Century Decoration (1989)

Henti Louw, 'Colour Combinations' in
The Architect's Journal 4 July 1990

Steven Parissien
Regency Style (1991)

Peter Thornton
Authentic Decor (1984)

The Georgian Group exists to save Georgian buildings, monuments, parks and gardens from destruction or disfigurement; to stimulate public knowledge of Georgia architecture and Georgian taste; and to promote the appreciation and enjoyment of all products of the English classical tradition. The Group is a registered charity, No. 209934, and benefits from Covenants. The Group can be contacted at:

6 Fitzroy Square, London W1T 5DX
Telephone 020 7529 8920.
Email: office@georgian-group.org.uk

Text: Steven Parissien Design: Asta Advertising Printed By Repro City Ltd