



Traditionally Prepared Paints

Since 2006 Erika Sanchez-Goodwillie has been manufacturing oil and distemper paints with traditional materials, tools and techniques. She has installed the paint using traditional tools in museums and landmark structures to achieve accurate recreations of historic finishes. Her predecessor, Chris Ohrstrom, pioneered the use of these materials using historic treatises and trial and error until workable formulations were achieved. In recent years, Chris Mills has been working with Erika using these same formulations to recreate finishes with the specific pigments identified by cross-section microscopy.

The manufacture of traditional oil house paints requires integrating pigments into linseed oil via a hand-crank grinding mill or a stone or glass muller and slab to form a dispersion. This process results in an uneven distribution of coarse pigment particles into the oil that when brush-applied onto a sealed surface presents unique physical characteristics not found in modern paints. The characteristics of hand-ground paint include high gloss, brushy texture (called a “ropey” texture), and a very slight tonal variety to the finish that gives the perception of depth. The distinct ropey surface texture is dictated by the force, angle and direction of the brush during application. Traditionally, the brush strokes followed the direction of the wood grain, providing a linear formality (and in some cases a pattern) to the room that changes with the lighting conditions. Over time, the high gloss finish gradually shifts to a softer semi-gloss that is hard and durable. These characteristics served as the aesthetic standard in distinguished households and buildings through the mid 19th century.

The development of factory made paints after 1875 was dictated by the demand for an accessible product (premixed in a can) that was consistent and did not require the work of a professional or craftsman for application. These were finely ground by machine and formulated to cover in a uniform manner and level off to a smooth finish. The new paint market became competitive and thus affordable to accommodate a wider range of consumers and the expanding décor possibilities.

The application of traditional hand ground paint is not without limitation. As with any historic site restoration project, a thorough assessment of site conditions and finish investigation should take place. This investigation should include media analysis and microscopy to ensure that a traditional application is appropriate and that the conditions of the substrate are stable.

Other considerations include:

- The cost of producing a custom-colored traditional paint is greater than commercial paints.
- Application of the material requires considerable experience and thus labor costs are also greater.
- Drying or curing times are extensive and require a certain degree of isolation from traffic.
- Linseed oil has a slight odor while curing and sometime requires additional ventilation.

The following sites have had traditionally manufactured paint installed in selected rooms:

- Kenmore Fredericksburg, VA.
- Mount Vernon Mount Vernon, VA.
- Montpelier Montpelier Station, VA.
- Hewlett American Wing, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC
- Van Rensselaer Hall American Wing, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC
- Alexandria Ballroom American Wing, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC
- Verplanck American Wing, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC
- Charleton Coffee House Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, VA.
- Eastfield Village East Nassau, NY.
- Johnson Hall State Historic Site Johnstown, NY.
- Stratford Hall Stratford Hall, VA.
- Boscobel Garrison, NY
- Wilton Hartfield, VA.
- MESDA Winston Salem, NC