

Paint By The Numbers

THE COLOUR WINDOW

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Meet Loree Wallace From
Homestead House Paint

It's not all about putting it ON. There are times when it is all about taking it OFF! Er-yes, referring to paint!! Do you ever wonder what is under all those coats of paint? History. Lots of layers of history. A history of paint colour, type,

style etc. waiting to be discovered by you. It's actually quite easy, really! A couple of steps to uncovering all this – History.

Perhaps you are returning your century home to the traditional décor of the time in which it was built. Or you may be embarking on a restoration project. Well Sherlock, time to put on your deerstalker cap, get the magnifying glass, and make your way to the hardware store. You will need to purchase some 000 steel wool, methyl hydrate, and a good pair of protective gloves.

Pick an inconspicuous spot on the project you are to “investigate”. This could be, for example, the lower part of a wall, back of a banister, or the side of a verandah. Wearing your gloves (AND eye protection – if you are a “spilly / splashy” OR “bull-in-a-chinashop” type) apply a small amount of the methyl hydrate to this spot. Re-apply as needed. Using the steel wool as an abrasive, apply pressure while moving in a circular motion. Gradually make

your circle motion into a spiral so the circles become bigger. This will remove more paint from the centre of this circle. Slowly you will see layers emerging similar to the layers of an onion (or those of the candies that slowly dissolved in your mouth, every coloured layer a different flavour – I miss those days!). This process is referred to as a “colour window”.

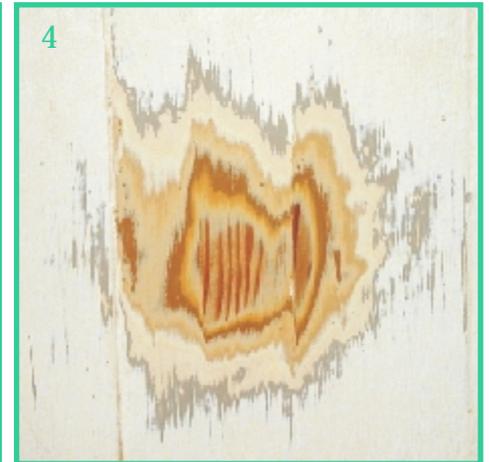
This colour window will show all the paints and primers, right down to the earliest of paints, as they would have appeared when first applied. Because of old age, however, any oil-based paint will be slightly darker and more yellow than the original colour. Even oil-based paints of today will yellow, however the discolouration is noticeable only with lighter paint colours. Within a year, a bright white oil paint will have assumed a soft yellow appearance.

Some of the earliest paints used were made of slaked lime, water and a bit of earth pigment called limewash. ➤



What You Will Need Image 1: A bucket or container with fresh water to neutralize the paint remover. Keep a clean cloth handy. A litre can of commercial paint remover. 000 steel wool. A small container to dip the remover in. And the most important tools, rubber gloves and eye protection. **Image 2 & 3:** Dab your steel wool into the container of paint remover and start at the centre and work your way out. Once the layers start to appear neutralize with fresh water. **Image 4:** The close-up of the colour window will show a radiating pattern of paints down to the original surface.

Need a colour consultation? You can call Loree at 416-504-9984 or log onto the Homestead House web site at www.homesteadhouse.ca.



Or distemper, which was calcium carbonate (also called lime or chalk) mixed with animal glue, such as rabbit skin glue. Limewash and distemper were often used to provide a temporary decorative scheme on new lime plaster which is still carbonating because of its vapour permeability. Applying one of these early paints provided a hint of colour in the interior without delaying the drying process of the plaster. This painted décor was usually temporary because when the plaster was thoroughly dry (or carbonated) the intent was to apply hand-painted or block printed wallpaper.

Milk also played a role in early paints for it was an excellent fluid vehicle and contained a protein, casein, which acted as a

binder. Earth pigments and vegetable dyes were added for colour. These paints were fine for interior surfaces, but could not be washed and were not durable enough for exterior uses. The addition of oils derived from flax (linseed), hemp, walnut, poppy seeds (all drying oils), improved the quality. Later, some paints were comprised mostly of lead and oil to give a nice opaque white with a lovely sheen. Higher sheen levels required more oil in the mixture. Our forefathers, unfortunately, seem to have had no idea how toxic lead was. Lead, however, worked VERY well in paint and continued to be used in the industry up until the 1980's. Other "dangerous chemicals" such as mercury, arsenic, copper and lead chromate were used to achieve

certain colours. Protective clothing, rubber gloves, and a lead-approved respirator must always be in your paint removal kit, as well as a plan to dispose of the material properly and responsibly after their removal!

So, as you are uncovering our painted past you will need to be careful as well. Do research on how to take certain precautions if you are into uncovering these old paints. It might be best to use the "colour window" for the particular information that you need. If you need colour matching, you can easily do this on site or send us (Homestead House Paint) a scraping for colour matching. If you want to find out what kind of paint was used, originally, paint scrapings will need to be obtained and sent for analysis, a costly

proposition.

There is no need for concern if you do have some "nasty paint" in your old house. It is fine as long as you don't disturb it by trying to remove it or sanding as a surface prep for new paint. Repainting, using the traditional palette of the time period, may be your best bet. Generally, Early Victorian era colour consisted of very pale pinks, blues, and yellows; while late era Victorian tastes leaned towards the dark, rich, and vibrant colours.

If you are interested in colour matching your colour-window findings, give me a call or drop me an email or just drop by the store in Toronto. Calabash pipe, deerstalker hat and magnifying glass optional!

