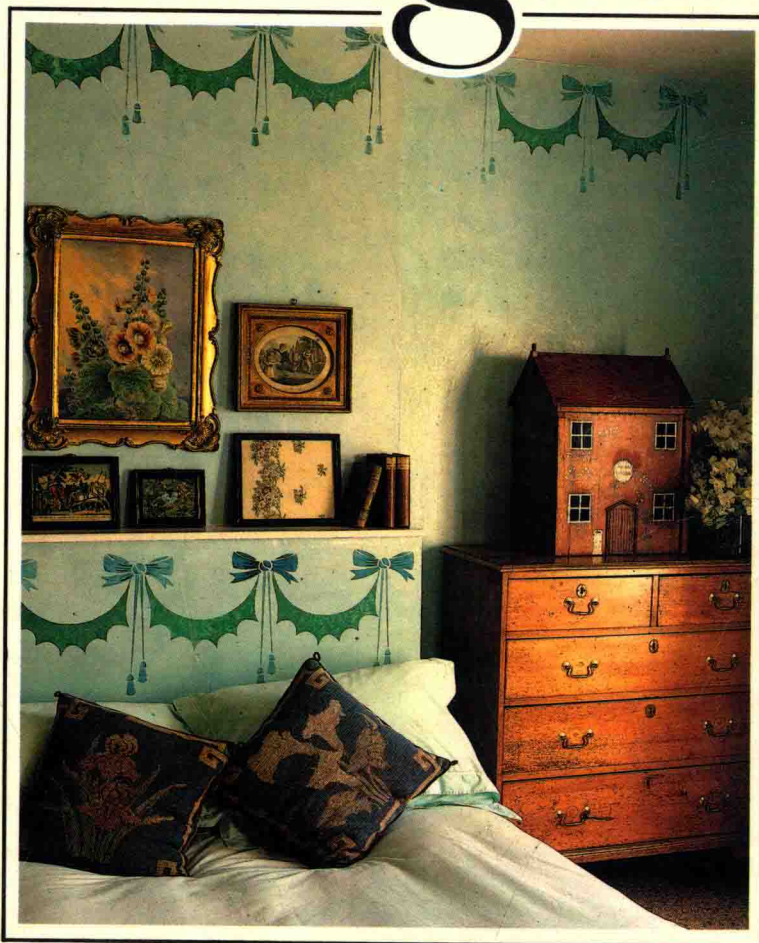


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JOCASTA INNES

REVISED EDITION



JOCASTA INNES

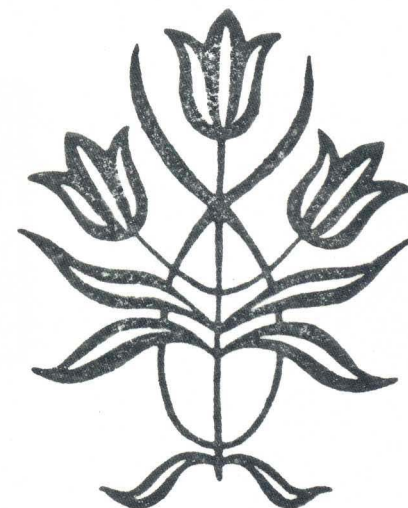
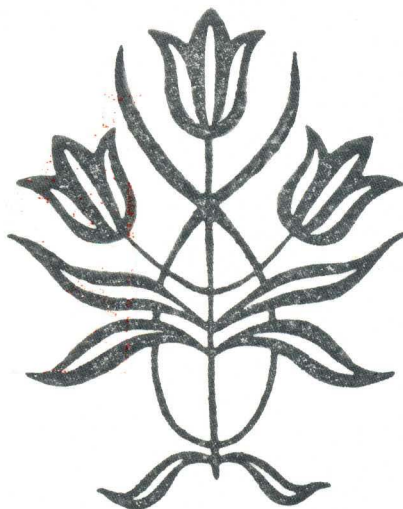
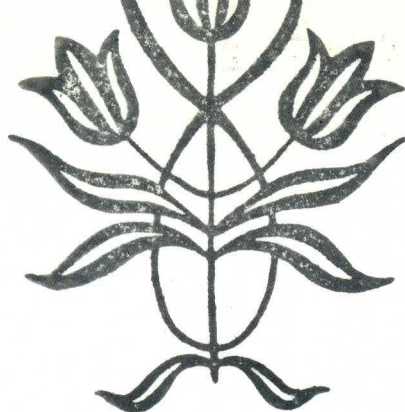
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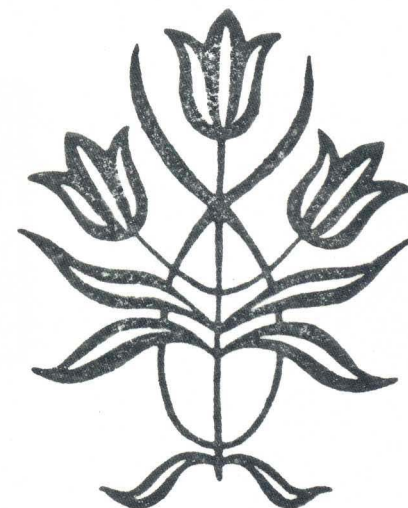
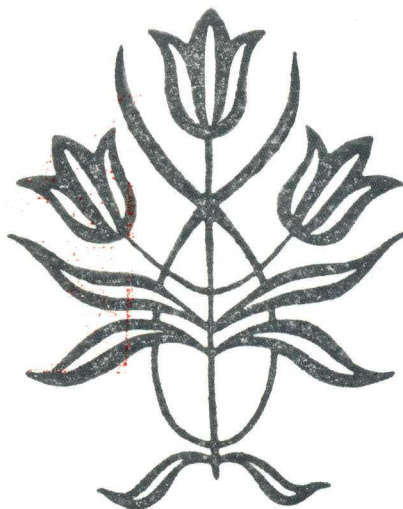
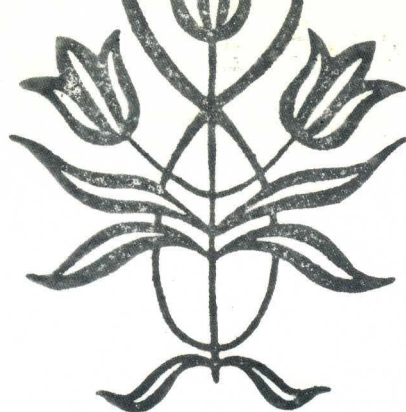
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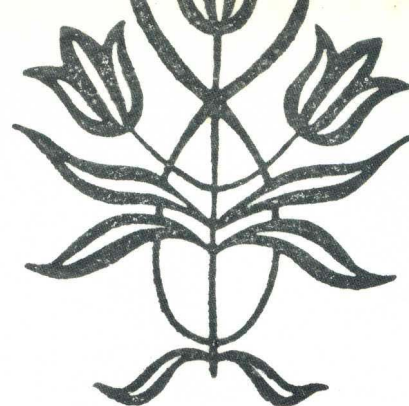
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# Foreword

**P**aint, colour and pattern are classic ingredients of interior design but they are subject, all the same, to the caprices and shifts in mood of contemporary fashion. In the few years since the first edition of *Paint Magic* appeared, different paint finishes have succeeded each other in popularity. After a first rapturous and experimental stage, when walls rained colour and distressing began to take on a double meaning, the paint movement has matured and crystallized. Definite new preferences and trends have emerged, attractive in themselves, and interesting because they indicate new departures in the many products and techniques which combine to create today's domestic interiors.

Decorative painting seems to be moving in two distinct and divergent directions at present: towards the delicacy and sparseness conjured up by interiors in the Swedish eighteenth-century style, christened Gustavian, after the ruling monarch of the period; and, in contrast, towards the richness and flamboyance of colours and patterns epitomized by high-Victorian polychromy in the manner of William Burges, the Pre-Raphaelites and William Morris.

The charm of the Gustavian look is in its refreshing serenity and simplicity. Colours are pale, with a certain cool, but not icy, light blue taking pride of place. In a typically Gustavian interior, this is invariably balanced by much white, or rather off-white, in the form of painted furniture and simple muslin drapes. The combined effect, which can hardly be coincidental, is of a summer sky, particularly welcome in a land where winter brings long months of near darkness. Bright notes are sometimes introduced for gaiety, usually earth colours – yellow or red ochre, a deep thundery blue, bright red – in fabrics, rag rugs and old folk-painted pieces. With their bare bleached floors, transparent curtains and light-painted furniture, Gustavian style interiors offer a look that is easily imitable and transposes as successfully to city flats as it does to country cottages. The ingredients are few and need not be expensive, though one or two pieces of quality – a gilt-framed mirror, painted *tôle* candle sconces, one or two pretty cane-seated chairs – will help to anchor it visually.

The 'polychrome' look is for the adventurous, requiring as it does a brave experimentation with colours, patterns and painted effects. There is no better guide to successful results than old colour plates, printed and hand coloured (as a rule) for painters and decorators of the day. Surviving interiors – William Burges' Castell Coch and certain Victorian churches – provide invaluable evidence of which colours and patterns combine

*Opposite* Combining elegance with simplicity, this Swedish 18th-century interior has all the ingredients that make the Gustavian style so appealing: delicately textured walls in faded ochre and blue, with *trompe l'oeil* panelling; a bleached floor; 'sky' ceiling and painted chairs with simple red and white checks.

effectively; and sometimes, too, of which ones do not. The general tendency, in such a scheme, is for all areas to be coloured, ceiling as well as walls and woodwork, and for the wall surfaces to be subdivided into separate areas by bands of richly elaborate stencilling. A typical room might have marbled skirting and cornice, quite heavy overall stencilling below the dado, and an elaborately decorated frieze running below the cornice. The main wall surfaces would often be left plain, though richly coloured, but would carry a collection of paintings, prints and framed photographs.

A far remove from Gustavian simplicity, this decorative style allows ample scope for 'special effects' and can do a great deal to help disguise a room's bad points, creating an overall effect of gorgeousness and exuberance. Again, a few choice objects help to flesh out the style, but the message is chiefly put across by striking combinations of colours and accumulation of painted patterns and finishes.

As passions and fashions work themselves out, a gradual refining process sets in. The more obvious and easily attainable effects, such as ragging (so popular it was immediately copied by wallpaper manufacturers), have been gradually superseded by more boldly decorative effects – stencilling, marbling, brushy glazing – on the one hand, and much more subtle and simplified colours and textures on the other.

The popular appeal of paint finishes in general seems, if anything, to be spreading and attracting a new and growing public. Paint retains its primary role in interior decoration, not merely because it remains the cheapest and most versatile wall finish, but because of its importance in colour terms. So many people experimenting with paint has led to a widespread awakening of colour awareness, and combinations are being attempted of a sophistication and intensity which would have been unthinkable ten years ago.

Colour is beautiful and a tonic, paint cheap and versatile: may they long remain with us to disguise, beguile and inspire.

*Jocasta Muir*  
*February 1987*



# Introduction

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**T**hroughout a history reaching back to earliest times, paint has played something of a dual role. On the one hand it has had a practical application, acting both as a vehicle for pigment and a protection to the surface it covers. This is how most of us still see paint – coloured stuff bought in a can and applied with brush or roller, the important thing being to get the colour even and the surface smooth. This view is quite sound, of course, but it is less than half the story. Ever since the first shaggy hunter outlined a running deer with a stick dipped in wood ash, or puddled clay, or blood, paint has served a vastly more significant and creative purpose – as a vehicle for the human imagination, a creator of illusions, the modest but endlessly pliable means of fixing a glimpse of loveliness for posterity.

The true originators in this field have always been the great artists. But close behind these masters of illusion came the masters of the applied arts – designers, architects, decorators, legions of craftsmen whose vocation was to reflect contemporary standards of beauty and harmony in buildings, rooms and furniture. Naturally they borrowed freely from the techniques and materials used by the artists, developing these to suit their own ends. Thus we have the use of tinted glazes to enrich colour and give depth, and a host of conjuring tricks with paint to suggest marble, tortoiseshell and other precious materials.

If one had to sum up the difference between this sophisticated use of paint and the approach of the do-it-yourself painter, it would be in a phrase beloved of traditional decorators, ‘broken colour’, or, more succinctly still, ‘distressing’. As every decorator knows, flat, uniform colour is inert and unyielding, while distressed or broken colour is suggestive, atmospheric. Walls treated with distressed paint are volatilized, the brute facts of bricks and mortar dissolved in a fluent movement of transparent colour, shadows and highlights. The plainest box of a room, built yesterday, can be transformed with the right distressed paint finish into a place with a soul.

This magical transformation of our surroundings is in no sense beyond the reach of anyone who can read or hold a brush. Paint is cheaper than wallpaper, and distressed paint is often cheaper still, since it is applied much thinned. Maybe a certain manual deftness, a cool head, and an appraising eye are a help toward achieving professional standards first time off. But the most exciting and instructive effects are often won by operating in blithe ignorance of all the rules. What is chiefly needed is a dash of venturesomeness, the will to get the materials together, and the curiosity to try them out.

## Colour

To use colours beautifully you must *feel* them, fall a bit in love with them like that colourist of genius, Henri Matisse. 'Colours win you over more and more,' he said once. 'A certain blue enters your soul. A certain red has an effect on your blood pressure. A certain colour tones you up.'

Colour, not necessarily bright, but positive, is the most memorable feature of all the rooms and interiors I have enjoyed and envied, and is the first question that preoccupies me when I have a room to decorate because I know that it will affect me directly every time I walk into it. I am sure the same is true of almost everyone – young children react with uninhibited delight to colour, so isn't it likely that the need remains present in all of us, but that it has become inhibited, or simply crowded out by other concerns? It needs to be roused and encouraged. Most people take the easy way out when choosing a colour scheme, playing safe, painting everything white or cream, getting a beige carpet because it 'goes with everything'. Colourless rooms do have their own chaste charm, but it is a pity that they should be the rule rather than the exception, when for a modest outlay one can live surrounded by lusty reds, soulful blues and singing yellows, not to mention all the subtle mauves, and apricots and wry greenery-gallery shades between.

The most interesting discovery I have made about the use of colour in decoration is that colours that have been 'distressed' are more flattering to a room and its furnishings than flat opaque colour. It is not just the colour that matters, but the way it is applied. The flat, opaque colours of a conventional emulsion or latex finish shrink a room, making one very much aware of its architectural defects. Brushing on a simple tinted glaze, a shade darker than the ground colour, improves the look of the place at once, giving an illusion of depth that makes the walls appear to recede and the room seem larger. It sounds astonishing, but it works.

The process of decoration is like painting a picture with the room as a blank canvas, and the colours of walls, carpet, furnishings and pictures as paints. Like painting, it is something that cannot really be taught; success depends on a sensitive eye, a readiness to experiment and to turn happy visual accidents – a vase of lilacs whose cloudy mauve lights up a corner of the room, a patchwork coat left over the arm of a chair – to good use.

There is no better way of appreciating beautiful colour combinations than to look – with a relishing greedy eye – at the paintings of great colourists such as Bonnard, Matisse or Monet. Paintings by men like these embody more knowledge about colours and the way they work together than most of us can even guess at. But paintings are only a start – almost any arrangement of colours, formal or casual, is worth looking at in this analytical way. A market stall, a fine Bokhara rug, a scrap of Chinese embroidery – food for the eye is to be found almost everywhere.

When it comes to turning theory into practice – painting your own room picture – the only way to find out whether particular colours really work together is to try them out. Unless you are very rich (or very poor) your colour adventuring will probably be restricted by some expensive

*Opposite* This once sombre hallway has undergone a transformation in polychroming to give a dramatic pastiche of Pompeian ruins. Each area received a slightly different treatment in terms of colour or texture of finish. The panels were rubbed with red ochre emulsion [latex] and then covered with a wash of burnt umber ink to give a weathered, worn effect. The distinctive dull gleam of the overall finish was achieved with a final coat of liquid floor polish.







fixture that must be taken into account – usually a carpet. Never mind, it is useful to have a point of departure.

The most important colour decision to be taken in a room is about the walls. A room has a lot of wall surface and the colour must look happy with the fixtures you have. Tiny samples of wallpaper, or paint colour, are seldom much help since any colour repeated over a large area is intensified to an unimaginable degree. Begin, instead, by making up a still-life arrangement out of bits and pieces in all sorts of colours first – sweaters, book covers, anything will do. Group them near a window so you can look at them by natural light, and squint through half-closed eyes at the colours against carpet, curtains and other furnishings. This is crude but it can help clarify the situation. Next buy a tin of suitable white paint (mid-sheen for the majority of the decorative finishes, see page 214), mix up those colours you like and try them on the wall. A range of universal stainers [tinting colours or colorizers] will give you most of the lighter tints. For rich, dark or strong colour, use the stainers with water only – mixing dark colours in wall paint requires a base colour near the one you are after, which could be expensive until you are sure what that is.

If the idea of experimenting straight on to the wall shocks you, use large sheets of lining paper painted in different colours, and pin these in a position where you get a view of the colour juxtaposed with carpet or curtains. Then hang a picture over it, place a chair in front, and try out some different cushions. All this helps to suggest what the colour would look like as a background to the whole room. When you have whittled the possibilities down to one or two, leave these pinned up and just live with them for a few days. If one colour gives you renewed pleasure every time you look at it, that's the one. The delight of paint is that if you aren't happy with the result after putting on the colour, it can be quickly modified by superimposing one of the decorative finishes described in this book. Strident colours can be softened by dragging or sponging in a softer, or deeper, shade, or simply glazing with a creamy transparent oil glaze, 'thin' pastels can be made richer, drab colours given a lift, or dark ones lightened. You could lacquer the walls, or spatter them with black and white specks for a 'porphyry' effect. If this seems a lengthy way of finding a pleasing wall colour, remind yourself that Monet was not too proud or busy to mix crushed brick into whitewash until he arrived at the shade he saw in his mind's eye, and that all this experimenting has cost time rather than money, and is vital training for your colour sense. Besides, living with the right, beautiful colours about you is wonderful – a constant uplift, like endless fine weather.

Having got the wall colour settled, the bulk of your room is blocked in; the rest is filling in and fun. Go slowly, and keep an open mind. Coloured floors can look splendid. Stain plain wood planks dark green, or blue, as a background to old rugs. If you can't afford an old rug, paint one on the floor, in the mellowest, richest colours your imagination can supply? People tend to leave a room's woodwork white, or off-white – decorators hardly ever use pure white, they prefer it 'dirtied'. But woodwork painted



to match the walls can look exciting, and dramatically alters the proportions of a room, tightening it up so that it feels smaller and cosier.

Furniture, decoratively painted, is another way of introducing colour – paint is the best possible disguise for undistinguished furniture, or plain junk. Imagine a dull but useful little table, or cabinet, given a tortoiseshell finish. Or stencilled with a small diaper pattern for a filigree Moorish effect. Picture frames are naturals for decorative treatment – marbling, tortoiseshell, sponging. Lamp bases, boxes, old trunks ... with paint a whole mass of disparate items can be fitted into your room picture.

The number of permutations derived from the basic primary colours is practically endless and some of the technical terms used in describing them can be confusing. Hue for instance is what differentiates one colour from another – redness, blueness, and so on. It is used interchangeably with colour. The purity of a colour is its intensity, or the absence of grey in it. Pigment is what paint is coloured with, the raw material. Until the discovery of aniline dyes in the last century, pigments were made from natural substances, though these were often treated chemically to produce further colours. The oldest pigments were natural clays – ochre, sienna, umber, the brownish-reds – found in different parts of the world, and refined, and powdered. Nowadays most pigment is either wholly or partly chemical in origin.

Primaries are the colours from which all other colours can be derived – red, blue and yellow. Two primaries mixed together give a secondary colour – red and yellow make orange, yellow and blue make green, blue and red make purple. Two secondaries mixed give a tertiary colour – orange and purple make russet, purple and green make olive. A tint is the result of adding white to a colour, while a shade is the result of adding black. Tone is used to describe lighter or deeper versions of the same colour. Thus a deeper tone of red would be crimson, a lighter tone pink. Value is sometimes used interchangeably with tone. Complementary colours are colours that when added together in equal proportions produce a neutral shade – for example, yellow and blue, magenta and green, red and blue-green – they are to be found at opposite points of a colour wheel. Some knowledge of all this is useful when making up paints from a limited range of stainers or acrylic colours. Mixing a little of one complementary colour with another has a softening effect – thus a little green mixed into a red will take the heat out of it, and vice versa. Any commercial paint colour that is too harsh can be softened by adding a little of the opposite shade on the colour wheel.

A useful division of colours from a decorator's point of view is into warm colours – those tending toward or containing yellow or red – and cool or cold colours – those inclining toward or containing blue. However, this division is not so straightforward as it might first appear. There are warm blues (those with red or yellow in them, like indigo or duck egg blue) and cool reds (those with blue in them, like cerise), while almost every colour

*Overleaf* A multitude of finishes, tastefully combined, lends richness and dignity to this simple dining room. The original wall panelling has been discreetly marbled in different textured shades of grey. The striking green marble table top proves, on closer inspection, to be a clever arrangement of wallpaper, painstakingly cut into pieces and pasted down.

## Colour vocabulary

## Qualities of colour