

PAINT PRIMER

Picking paint may seem like a no-brainer after you've spent hours belaboring which hues to use. Everyone from your architect or interior designer to your paint contractor will tell you, "Use latex on ceilings and walls and oil on doors and trims or for faux finishes." They'll also recommend a brand, be it an exclusive designer line or merely their favorite premium paint-maker. Easy, right?

Wrong. That premium paint may not be the best brand for the job. And those status designer paints "may be the right color but are very expensive and often don't perform that well," says Jeff Hester, vice president of Hester Decorating in Skokie, the largest residential painting contractor on the North Shore. Thanks to technological advances, most faux finishes, which traditionally required slow-drying oil-based paints, are done in latex paints today. Yet "oils are still necessary for certain finishes or effects," notes Jorge Simes, a fine artist who also does decorative painting through Chicago-based Simes Studios. Plus there are other issues to consider, such as paint quality, which high prices or good advertising campaigns don't necessarily ensure. And what about sheen? Should you use a flat, semi-gloss or high-gloss finish? Picking which paint to use is part science, part art, and it pays to listen to the pros. So we went to the experts to get a few pointers. Here are the basics:

Latex vs. Oil: Oil paints (which are interchangeably called alkyds) contain hazardous air pollutants called Volatile Organic Compounds, which are now government-regulated and even banned in some states. Though there was a time when oil-based paints were more durable, "paint companies have poured lots of money and technology into developing latex paints that are equally durable and in many instances more effective," says Hester. Not only are they safer, they dry faster, cure sooner to reveal their true finish (a day instead of two to three months) and are easier on the nose (the smell of oil paints lingers up to a week instead of a day or two). However, when you're repainting surfaces, you usually can't use latex on top of oil-based paints (special primers allow this to be done in some instances). Also, oil-based primers are necessary under any kind of paint on knotty woods.

Oils on Trims: Most people assume that oil paint is still more durable, and that's why it's used on trims. Truth is, oils are used on trims because it's necessary to apply paint to these surfaces with brushes. Oil-based paints "lay out better than latex paints, which means they self-level and smooth out themselves," explains Hester.

Paint Quality: All paints consist of liquids (either



This faux English tile finish from Simes Studios evokes European ambiance.

water for latex points or solvent for oil-based paints) and solids (the pigments and binders). Top-quality paints contain higher volumes of solid materials that ensure a thicker paint film when they dry. Volume solids are actually listed on paint cans or material data sheets, but buying a high-volume paint still doesn't guarantee the best fit for the job. "Various brands have individual properties based on their chemistry, and you can only really tell how something lays out when you work with it a lot. That's why people hire experienced painters. We pick and choose the best products from every manufacturer," Hester says. And their picks may surprise you: he finds certain designer brands often don't measure up to his standards and points out that virtually any color can be cross-matched.

Sheen: High-gloss surfaces are ideal for high-traffic areas because they are more stain-resistant and easier to wash clean. But they will also highlight the imperfections in a surface, which is why plaster walls are often painted with flat-finish paints. Also, certain faux finishes need base paints with a certain amount of sheen, but it takes experience to know whether low-luster or semi-gloss paint works best.

Faux Finishes: Extenders increase the "open time" of latex paints so they can be used to create faux finishes that require paint to be manipulated while it is still damp. Thanks to these products, "Most of the finishes we do today use latex paints," says Simes. But some faux finishes require great technical know-how and require oil products because of the chemistry involved. For example, "Some metal finishes oxidize and can't be used with water-based products," he adds. Or metal tools used to achieve certain effects, such as steel wool to create a linen look, can cause latex paint to rust, notes Hester. Simes also uses artist-quality acrylic and oil paints to achieve many of the faux finishes he creates, especially when deep, saturated colors or smooth transitions from one color to another are required.

silk finishes require three layers — the first is done with newspaper, the second with rags and the last is a pearlescence glaze. And finally, Simes uses oil-based products because she believes they are richer and lend themselves better to these techniques. However, they are much trickier to work with and can be dangerous for the non-professional.



This elaborate, pale, terracotta milkwash finish with a scrolled border is an example of what you can get from the professionals at Simes Studios.

DIY Techniques: “Color washing, stries and textures are the new things,” says Denman, pointing out that color washing can be used to emulate parchment, a simple strie done in two directions can look like linen, and a suede-like finish can mask imperfections in a wall. Benjamin Moore’s new Studio Finishes Latex Glaze Extender is “a work-horse that can be added to any of our latex glazes and paints to increase their open times and achieve these effects,” he explains, while the company’s new Studio Finishes Latex Texture yields a sandy surface and can be mixed with other products or given different topcoats to achieve a range of effects. “Adding pearlescent or metallic shine to everything is also a strong trend,” adds Denman, and Benjamin Moore just developed latex paints in gold, bronze, silver, copper and pearlescent white that can be blended with other paints to achieve such effects. The company also gives thorough instructions on color washing, dry-brushing, shadow striping, smooching, strie and more at its Web site, www.benjaminmoore.com. 