

INFORM

INFORMATION FOR TRADITIONAL BUILDING OWNERS



Decorative Paint Finishes: Graining and Marbling





Severe deterioration can lead to the loss of decorative finishes

to avoid knocks and brushing against painted surfaces. Nails or screws should not be fixed through a historic surface and the installation of services, where they are likely to affect a decorative painted surface, should be carefully considered.

Conservation and repair

Good conservation practice can be exercised by minimising works which may affect painted finishes and by choosing materials that match, or are compatible with, original materials.

A condition survey of historic decorative paint finishes should record and assess the condition of the materials, and make recommendations for immediate treatment and future care. If the surface of the painted substrate is sound, simple remedial treatments can be carried out

to clean, consolidate flaking pigments and repair small areas of damage. All treatments should be reversible and leave no harmful residues.

It is generally too difficult to entirely uncover a decorative scheme that has been covered with many later layers of paint, even if it is likely that large areas of the early scheme survive underneath. It may be more feasible to reveal just a section as an example of the decoration, and to incorporate this fragment into a new or reproduced scheme. A plastic or glass layer should not be placed on it, as this could encourage condensation and damage rather than protect the surface.

Modern recommendations for preparation before re-painting generally advise that all previous layers of paint should be stripped off. If a decorative paint scheme is in poor condition, or only survives in fragments, a conservator may advise that the original finish is consolidated and protected before a new finish is applied. It is preferable to leave a historic painted finish in its original position with a good record made of it, and to create a new scheme on top.

Reproducing a historic decorative paint finish

Uncovered areas of historic graining or marbling of a sufficient size can provide an indication of the original patterning and colour of the scheme, so that the scheme can be reproduced over a larger area. An effective reconstruction should achieve the same quality as the original and should reproduce the patterning, colours and texture using templates of the original detailing set out in their repeating pattern dimensions.



Decorative finish reproduced from a small surviving fragment

It is essential that the chosen decorator is able to undertake a high quality scheme and has experience of working in historic buildings. It is unlikely that a standard domestic decorator will have all these skills. Samples of work and references from previous clients should be sought before choosing the company.

Although lead-based paints were once commonly used, these are now regarded as a health hazard and can only be used on



Fully reproduced decorative scheme

Category A listed buildings with permission from Historic Scotland. It is possible to obtain traditional paints that are very similar to the composition, colours and performance of those that were used in the past. The choice of paint should be discussed with the conservator or decorator, who should be able to advise on an appropriate choice for the circumstances. To avoid unnecessary damage, all adjacent historic surfaces should be carefully protected prior to and during any repainting works.

Introduction

Decorative paint finishes imitating natural materials such as wood and stone have been used to enhance interiors for many centuries. Graining and marbling techniques were particularly fashionable during the C17, C18 and C19. Early marbled or grained paint schemes or wallpaper may remain under later layers of paintwork.

Graining is the simulation of the colour and grain of timber in paint and transparent mediums.

Marbling is the simulation of marble or another stone in paint and transparent mediums.

This INFORM aims to assist in identifying, protecting and reinstating historic grained or marbled finishes.

Early marbling showing beneath a later paint scheme which had been previously been covered by a fitting



Identifying a historic decorative paint finish

The common use of graining and marbling in many C18 and C19 properties suggests that decorative schemes may remain beneath layers of paint and wallpaper. Paint and paper were not always stripped before redecoration and historic paint schemes may have been over-painted many times. An existing graining scheme could be relatively modern and care needs to be exercised in determining its provenance.

Fragments of earlier decorative finishes may emerge in the course of redecorating. Taking time to discover more about these can provide significant information on the past appearance and use of the building, and the taste and fashion of its previous occupants. Access to documents relating to the property, such as old accounts, may mention when work was carried out.

If it is suspected that a paint scheme may be of historic value, a specialist paint conservator should be contacted. The quality and importance



A decorative scheme uncovered and reproduced



Room showing extensive use of graining and marbling

of a grained or marbled finish needs to be carefully assessed, together with its state of repair, whether it should be gently cleaned and left as found, or whether it can be restored or reproduced.

A conservator will be able to investigate and analyse paint layers, colours and materials. They will be able to reveal the number and type of early decorative paint coats and provide information and advice on the historic significance of the scheme, how best to preserve the remains of an old scheme, or how to go about re-creating an early decorative finish.

History of graining and marbling

From the C17, graining was used to imitate the finishes of fine cabinet hardwoods such as oak and mahogany. Early examples were crude. Patterning and colour were more abstract, rather

than attempting to imitate the natural appearance of a better quality timber. Graining schemes were applied not only to softwoods, but also to hardwoods to imitate the finest of cabinet-making techniques. Techniques became more sophisticated as materials and skills developed. By the early C19 graining on panelling and joinery in principle rooms was highly fashionable. Marbling was also practised, generally in halls and staircases. Some schemes achieved immense richness with imitative inlays and contrasting colours of marbles.

Techniques developed considerably during the early C19, with darker transparent glazes applied over lighter base coats or 'ground'. The dark glaze was 'wiped out' to imitate features of the required timber, and could be manipulated with great subtlety. The previous practice of building up the pattern in body colour was more laborious, and soon superseded.

Historically, decorators would have learnt their trade as apprentices, developing their skills through observation and experience. High quality graining and marbling requires considerable technical skill and knowledge of the physical properties and the character of the type of timber, or marble, to be reproduced. The finest examples of historic grained and marbled surfaces show that the best decorators were also artists, who employed considerable freedom of expression in their work.

Techniques

Graining

A smooth oil or distemper ground (a heavily pigmented water-based matt paint) was prepared to match the lightest colour of the timber to be imitated. An oil or water glaze of

almost transparent colour was laid onto this, and manipulated with tools such as brushes or combs. This allowed the lighter ground to show through in a pattern imitating the grain of the timber. Darker veins were added once the glaze was dry. A protective coat of varnish was finally applied.

Marbling

Marbles were copied using similar methods to those used for graining. Specific techniques varied according to the marble to be imitated, and the base to which the finish was to be applied. A distemper ground rather than an oil ground was used where the finish was to be applied to plaster. For darker marbles, a dark ground would be applied, onto which lighter veins would be painted. The surface preparation was crucial to achieve a degree of smoothness which would represent a polished marble.



Marbling employed on a fireplace

Care, conservation and repair of a historic decorative paint finish

Deterioration of decorative paint finishes

General wear and tear, central heating, open fires, damp walls, condensation, inadequate ventilation, poor previous repairs and inappropriate redecoration can all lead to deterioration of paint finishes.

The cause of a problem should be identified before any repairs to historic paintwork

are carried out. A conservator, or a historic building professional should be able to provide advice on more complex problems. Following a regular maintenance regime will significantly reduce the risk of further damage to historic features.

For the protection of painted surfaces, blinds can be fitted to windows to reduce damage resulting from exposure to daylight. Rooms should be provided with adequate ventilation. Large fluctuations of temperature should be avoided, and the use of open fires limited. Furniture should be kept back from walls, and the route through a room could be changed



Wear and tear can cause damage to decorative paint finishes

Useful contacts

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Further information

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