

---

---

## Book Review

---

### House Paints, 1900-1960 History and Use

Harriet A. L. Standeven

Getty Publications 2011  
Getty Conservation Institute  
ISBN-13: 978-1606060674  
ISBN-10: 1606060678  
176 pages \$60

I love this book but then I am a bit of an anorak\* when it comes to house-paints. As an architectural paint researcher I spend much of my time looking down microscopes at layers of house-paint samples mounted in cross-section. Any information which helps me date these more recent layers of house paint, helps me clarify the full decorative history of a room of a building. But why would anyone else be interested in reading this book?

This question is raised by Timothy P. Whalen, Director of the Getty Conservation Institute in his Foreword. He admits that the subject of house-paints does not offer an immediate and obvious fit with the Getty's research focus and remit. But after a little consideration he realised that *'these paints are encountered by conservators in a wide range of areas of twentieth-century cultural heritage – and not just those dealing with painted door frames or architectural finishes.'*

Artists use ready-mixed house paints because they are readily available, cheap or have attractive workings properties. Some artists may decide to use house paint for more complex socio-political reasons – to challenge the values of 'fine art'. Harriet Standeven is a paintings conservator with an MA from the University of Northumbria and a PhD from the RCA who now specialises in the care of modern and contemporary art.

Her book provides a clear and accessible history of the development of house-paints, from the more traditional oil and natural resin based paints which have been used for centuries to the complex ready mixed synthetic based paint systems which now envelop our world. As these paints systems have been applied to a wide range of artefacts, such as furniture and toys, conservators in all disciplines must engage with house paint technology.

In her introduction Standeven provides a brief discussion of the use of house-

paints by such notable artists as Picasso in the 1910s, Sidney Nolan in the 1940s and Patrick Caulfield in the 1960s. Because their works can be precisely dated it has been possible to trace the development of house-paints through the technical analysis of their works of art. Early gloss paints used by Picasso are based on more traditional oleoresinous binders, while the gloss paints he used on his 1960s' works consist of oil-modified alkyd.

It is worth noting that major developments in paint manufacture were made in Germany before WWII – but these fall outside the scope of this book. And the development of modern paint systems in the UK lagged behind that in the USA. The 1940s and 1950s saw major changes in the formulation of paint but the impact of World War II and the immediate post-war shortages and restrictions on the use of paint halted the development and use of house-paints generally.

During the 1940s and 1950s Jackson Pollock used household gloss paints for his 'poured paintings'. Analysis of works painted before 1949 indicate that Pollock used an oleoresinous based gloss paint similar in composition to that used by Picasso. After this date the gloss paint he used was an oil-modified alkyd. His use mirrors the technical advances made in such paints during the 1950s, when manufacturers were making increasing use of alkyd resins in the formulation of gloss paints.

Painting conservation students are encouraged to produce copies of tempera panel paintings and canvas oil paintings, and eagerly set about mixing gesso, breaking eggs and grinding pigments in oil to gain an understanding of how these objects were constructed. These were relatively simple systems. The formulation of modern house paints is so complex, however, that no student could be expected to begin to reformulate Jackson Pollock's 'off the shelf' gloss paint.

But anyone charged with preserving house paints must be aware of the characteristics and weaknesses of modern paint systems. There may be occasions when a conservator needs to establish make up and date of a modern house paint. Having an understanding of the chronology of

house paint technology is a good starting point for commissioning advanced material analysis - if it is required. It is always helpful to first establish the questions you want analysis to answer. An appreciation of the development of house-paints might help you spot a fake Picasso!

After providing an introduction to the paint industry and an overview of traditional oil-based and water based paints, the book traces the development of the three major modern paint systems developed during the 1900-1960 period: nitrocellulose lacquers, synthetic based oleoresinous paints, synthetic based emulsion paints. Each section provides information on the availability, acceptance and use of each system.

The book cites recent ground-breaking analysis and the international discussion of the problems of conserving modern paintings. Amongst its more historic references are various articles published in 'The Decorator' from the 1920s to the 1950s. The titles of these articles convey the tensions and suspicions of house-painters to the arrival of these new products, *'Should high-class decorators use ready mixed paints?'* (The Decorator, July 22, 1922, pp 14-15). The Decorator provided much needed advice to the house-painters who had to use these new products.

It is disappointing that the book makes no reference to the work of contemporary house-painters. Most large painting and decorating firms, whose staff have a lifetime's experience of applying these house paints, have contracts for the conservation of large ornate schemes in government buildings, royal palaces and historic houses. Conservators of modern paintings seem to be unaware of this wealth of knowledge and practical experience.

The Traditional Paint Forum (TPF) was founded to encourage discussion and debate in this very area, but the book makes no reference to its publications or conference proceedings. The TPF has always considered alkyd resins and acrylic emulsions to be the *'traditional paints'* of the twentieth century. Witness the current demise and eventual obsolescence of solvent based gloss-paints, and good old Nitromors will soon be the stuff of memories.

---

---

## Membership

---

*Chris Stavroudis*  
*membership secretary*

---

House paints are designed to protect and decorate surfaces under a wide range of conditions. The concerns of the paint manufacturers and intended users are quite different from conservators. House paints are not designed to last forever (though in some interiors they have lasted in admired faded glory for hundreds of years) and their renewal or over-painting is a routine cycle.

The conservation of household paints is an under-researched area. This book provides a discussion of the chemical composition of these ubiquitous materials, their characteristics, and weakness and will be of great assistance to all conservators as an important reference book.

*Helen Hughes*

This article first appeared in *Icon News* in July 2011 and is reprinted with permission of the author and the Institute of Conservation.

\* It is the policy of the *Newsletter* to leave intact elements of the author's voice and peculiarities such as "color" spelled with a "u." However, this slang term does beg some explanation. So, courtesy of wikipedia:

Anorak (slang)

In British slang an anorak is a person who has a very strong interest, perhaps obsessive, in niche subjects. This interest may be unacknowledged or not understood by the general public. Although the term is often used synonymously with geek or nerd, the Japanese term otaku or the American term "fanboy/fangirl" are probably closer synonyms.

The most established explanation to the origin of the term, is that it was first used in 1984 by the *Observer* newspaper, which used it as an alternative term for the prototype group interested in detailed trivia, the trainspotters, as members of this group often wore, by then very unfashionable, civilian versions of the USAF N-3B parka with fur-lined hood, which was often called an anorak in the UK, when standing for hours on station platforms or along railroad tracks, noting down details of passing trains.

Civilian versions of the N-3B parka (commonly called snorkel parka, because the hood can be zipped right up leaving only a small tunnel/ snorkel for the wearer to look out of) were extremely popular among youths in the UK in the late 1970s to mid 1980s, and at many schools almost every boy had one. By the second half of the 1980s the parka had become unfashionable, but was still com-

---

monly worn among trainspotters, as it was practical for their hobby and as most of them were uninterested in being fashionable. This reinforced the usage of the term further, and it soon became derogatorily used for any group of (mostly) younger people uninterested in their outer appearance and engrossed in activities that other youths found boring, i.e. "geeks" or "nerds."