



A Fresh Coat The rise of boutique house-paint collections is making what used to be merely a backdrop the focal point of the room. *by Joe Harper*
Illustration by Pawel Nolbert

EARLIER THIS YEAR, the French brand Ressource introduced an official Yves Klein Blue house paint. Together with Klein's estate, the company had spent more than two years developing a formulation that could withstand the wear of everyday use yet maintain the conceptual artist's signature hue—whose shadowy texture evokes an infinite void. "Blue has no dimensions. It is beyond dimensions," Klein once said. "Blue is suggestive of the sea and the sky." Now we can display the ocean on our living room walls.

“Twenty years ago, paint was very much a perfunctory thing,” says Farrow & Ball’s Patrick O’Donnell. “Now paint can hold its own.”

The 20-year-old Ressource (whose saturated shades seem to pop up in almost every French home featured in a *DEPARTURES* interiors story) opened its first U.S. showroom in New York last year. “When designing a space, people want control from the beginning—the floor, the rug, and also the paint,” says Julien Chapuis, Ressource’s CEO of the Americas. “Now we can offer paint advice in a setting similar to one for purchasing a sofa.” What Ressource, like many brands, sees is a growing interest in house paint that goes beyond the standard bucket from the hardware store: Last fall, England’s Little Greene launched an archival collection in partnership with the British National Trust, reproducing 31 shades of green from places like Winston Churchill’s family home and George Bernard Shaw’s famous writer’s hut; Benjamin Moore debuted Century, its highest-end product, in 2017, with just 75 colors marketed mostly to professional decorators; and Ressource recently enlisted Parisian designer Sarah Lavoine to develop her own selection of colors. Elena Frampton, a designer in New York who is known for her studied use of color, says people today have a more refined palette. “They’ve seen more now than they ever have, so a conventional color selection isn’t enough,” says Frampton.

Around the time that Yves Klein Blue was released, the New York–based color consultant Martin Kesselman created a new shade of white called Elliyah, using Farrow & Ball paint. A simple white that is said to look like 2 percent milk—not whole—made waves in the design world: The *New Yorker* asked whether we even needed another white paint; *Artsy* profiled Kesselman and his background as an artist.

After recently designing a home in Bridgehampton, New York, Frampton came to understand the hullabaloo. “My client only wanted shades of whites and grays, so it was really about a warm white, a cool white, and so on. With this, the quality of the paint is so important,” she says, noting that she herself uses Farrow & Ball almost exclusively for her projects.

Farrow & Ball is known for paints with decidedly flat finishes, providing an almost chalky look. The British brand also maintains a limited palette—just 132 shades at any given time. It swapped in nine new offerings this past fall. “Twenty years ago, paint was very much a perfunctory thing. It served as a

backdrop for layering your own aesthetic over—artwork, prints, drapery,” says Patrick O’Donnell, head of Farrow & Ball’s in-house color consultancy. “Now paint can hold its own.”

But most of the larger paint companies have the technology to replicate specific colors, so why spend \$110 on a gallon instead of, say, \$30? “It’s all about the ingredients,” says O’Donnell. “We’ll use a large quantity of the best ingredients rather than a small amount of the cheapest versions.” Most mass-produced paints are 70 percent water, he explains, whereas those of a small-batch manufacturer like Farrow & Ball might be only 50 percent (these ratios are closely guarded). “The water will evaporate once the paint is on the wall. Less water leaves room for more binders and pigments, making the colors stronger and the paint more durable,” says O’Donnell.

Durability is just one factor in why you should choose a better paint. “If the quality is high, you don’t need as many coats, it lasts longer, and the finishes are easier to clean,” says Frampton. A higher-quality paint will also work better in real-world scenarios. A paint swatch can be deceiving. “You must first think about the orientation of the house,” says Chapuis, adding that rooms on the northern side may get less natural light, meaning they need paints that look best in artificial light. In a south-facing room, where sunlight might flood in, a paint’s color can change constantly throughout the day. “There’s a science in paint production—the richness of color, the depth, the amount of pigment, and ultimately how these all react to light,” says O’Donnell.

Aura, another premium line from Benjamin Moore, touts a Color Lock technology that protects against fading. “Years ago, people would say you have to use a specific finish in a certain room just because of functionality,” says Benjamin Moore’s color expert Andrea Magno. “The one that always drove me crazy was that you had to use a higher-gloss finish in a bathroom because of the moisture.” With collections like Aura Bath & Spa now offering bathroom-ready paints in matte finishes (a surface that’s otherwise notoriously prone to scuffing and difficult to wash), Magno says personal taste finally trumps practicalities. “We no longer have to follow the rules we had years ago.”