

Repainting Interior Trim

Careful preparation and confident brush work are the keys to a professional finish

BY BRIAN J. DOHERTY

A few years ago, a real-estate agent friend called to ask for a favor. Her client had slapped a fresh coat of paint over all the interior trim of his century-old house prior to putting it on the market. She'd called me because she thought his paint job looked "kind of funky." I wasn't even 2 ft. inside the door when I saw why she'd been concerned: From almost every square inch of the beautiful, ornate trim, the new paint was peeling away in sheets. This disaster was a classic example of what happens when latex paint is applied directly over high-gloss oil paint without proper surface preparation. I didn't have the heart to tell them what it would cost to fix the mistake, so I referred them to another contractor, someone I didn't like much.

Getting paint to stick is only half the battle. Interior-trim elements may not endure the same hardships as those on the exterior, but they're subject to much closer scrutiny. When I'm painting a window that's right next to the couch in the family room, I have to make sure that the painted surfaces are silky smooth and that the lines where trim meets wall are razor sharp, or I might never get paid.

Detective work precedes prep work

Interior-trim elements, such as crown molding, chair rail, casings or baseboards, are designed to stand out from the walls and ceilings. In most homes, the walls and ceilings are painted with a flat finish (see

"Painting Walls and Ceilings," *FHB* #128, pp. 82-87), while the trim receives a gloss. Until recently, the only way to get a smooth, glossy finish, free of obvious brush strokes, was to use an oil-based paint. Acrylic latex paints have made great strides in recent years, but putting latex over oil is still a challenge (sidebar p. 93). Unless the client requests otherwise, I prefer to apply latex over latex and oil over oil.

A TEST FOR LATEX



To guarantee that the new paint stays stuck, you need to know what the old paint is made of. If a chip of old paint bends rather than breaks, it's latex.



If a latex solvent causes the paint to bubble, then it's latex.

There are several ways to determine whether the existing paint is oil or latex. If some of the paint is peeling, I take a large chip and bend it in half (photo top left). Oil paint is brittle, but latex is flexible: A clean break tells me I'm working with oil; otherwise, I've got latex. If the painted surface is not peeling, I'll put a few drops of Goof-Off (Valspar Corp.; www.goof-off.com; 800-345-4530)—a product that messy painters use to clean up dried latex-paint spatters—on a flat horizontal surface such as a windowsill and wait a few minutes (photo bottom left). If the paint becomes soft and gooey, it's latex.

Painting's all about prepping

Regardless of the type of paint I'll be using, almost every surface needs some type of preparation to ensure a high-quality finish. No paint sticks to dirt, grime or grease, so I perform the "white-glove test" before I do any scraping or sanding; if the surface feels sticky or looks grimy, I wash it. Vertical surfaces in bedrooms and living rooms are often clean enough to paint over, but horizontal surfaces in these rooms and all the surfaces in kitchens and bathrooms generally need a good scrubbing. I use an all-purpose household spray cleaner and a rag (photo center right); then I rinse well with a wet sponge. After I'm finished cleaning, I remove as much of the hardware as possible—items such as window locks, drapery supports, door bumpers, locksets. Then I bag all these items and store them in a safe place.

Once the hardware is out of the way, I remove any flaking or peeling paint using a sharp hand scraper (photo top right). For trim surfaces, I really like the Pro-Prep scraper (Pacific Handy Cutter Inc.; 800-229-2233) because it comes with six interchangeable blade profiles. Its stainless-steel blades don't hold an edge as long as the carbide variety, but I can sharpen them on site using a hand file.

After I've scraped off all the loose paint and vacuumed up the mess, I lightly sand the areas I've just scraped. If I've uncovered a lot of bare wood, I start with a palm sander loaded with 60-grit, open-coat sandpaper. For small areas, I use a sanding sponge or just a folded sheet of sandpaper (photo bottom right). Roughly sanded wood stands out after it has been painted. So I finish-sand all bare spots with 120-grit sandpaper, and I take extra care to feather the edges where bare wood meets intact paint. Finally, to give the old paint a bit more "tooth," I lightly sand all the trim surfaces with 150-grit sandpaper. Whenever I'm working on older homes that might contain lead-based paint, I





Don't paint over loose, rough or dirty surfaces. *Before any paint cans are opened, dirt and grease are removed using a household cleaner (photo left). Loose paint is taken off with a sharp scraper (top photo). Bare spots are sanded, and the edges where they meet the paint are feathered smooth (bottom photo).*



Wipe it only when you're cutting in. *A paint bucket with the rim removed is perfect for loading a paintbrush. Dipping the brush into 2 in. of paint, then gently tapping each side of the brush against the side of the can loads plenty of paint deep into the bristles and ensures against drips. Only when you have to cut in straight lines do you need to wipe the edges of the brush on the rim of the can.*



isolate the work areas and take extra precautions to protect myself and my clients (for more information about working safely with lead paint, see *FHB* #150, pp. 66-73).

Buy the caulk by the case

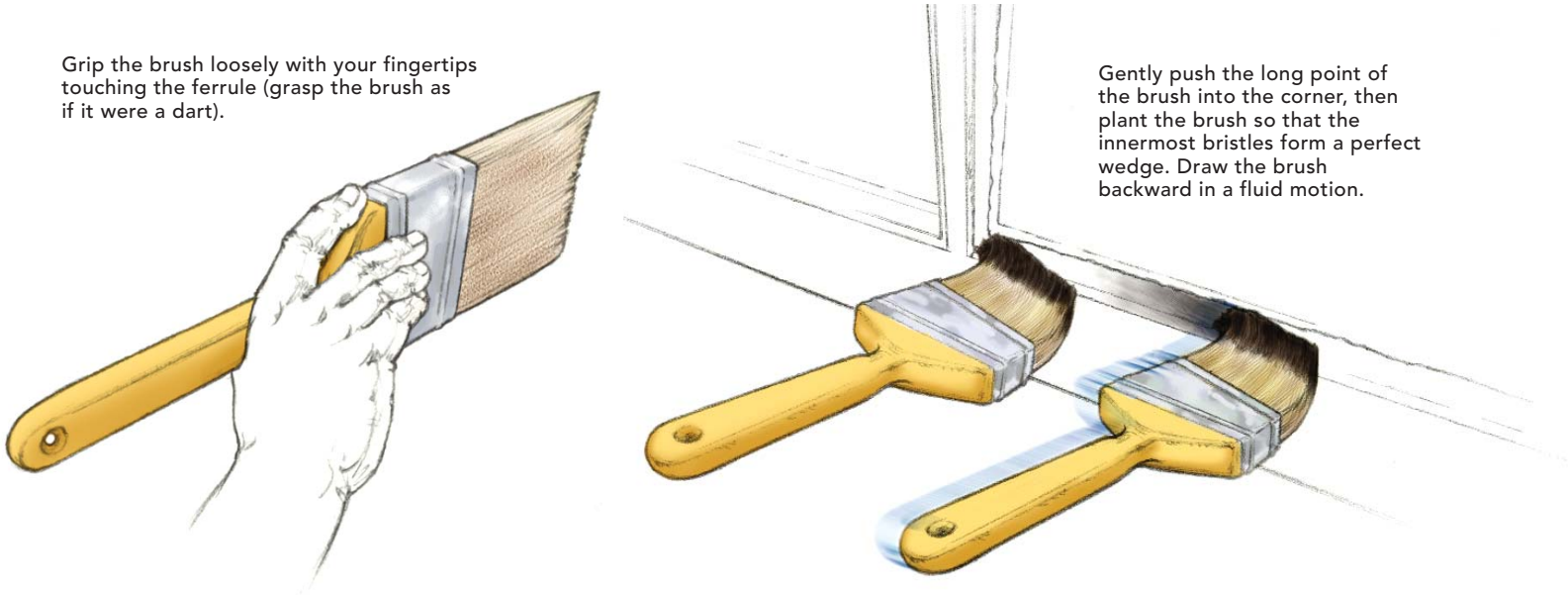
After I've done all the prep work, I spot-prime any bare wood with a fast-drying acrylic primer (Benjamin Moore & Co.; 800-344-0400; www.benjaminmoore.com). This primer takes only an hour to dry, during which time I use a nonshrinking wood filler (Elmer's Products Inc.; 800-848-9400; www.elmers.com) to fill nail holes and other minor imperfections in painted surfaces. Whenever I've got a large gouge to repair, I use a two-part wood filler such as Minwax High Performance Wood Filler (Minwax Co.; www.minwax.com; 800-523-9299).

After the holes are filled, I thoroughly vacuum every square inch of trim; then I break out a case of high-grade acrylic latex caulk. Anywhere I see gaps in joints—particularly where the trim abuts walls or ceilings—I run a bead of caulk (photo top left, facing page). I wipe down every joint using my index finger and a damp rag (photo bottom left, facing page). I try to plan my workday so that caulking is the last thing I do before I shut down for the night. That way, I can start painting first thing in the morning without worrying about whether the caulk has had enough time to dry.

Cheap brushes won't cut it

More than any other factor, the quality of the paintbrush determines the quality of the paint job (see "Choosing, Using and Maintaining Paintbrushes," *FHB* #112, pp. 80-85). For almost all interior-trim work, I use a professional-quality 3-in. angled sash brush like those made by Purdy (800-547-0780; www.purdycorp.com) or Wooster (800-392-7246; www.woosterbrush.com). A 3-in. angled sash brush is wide enough to hold plenty of paint when I'm filling in wide, flat sections, yet its tapered shape allows me to paint nice, straight lines when I'm

AN ANGLED BRUSH AND A SUPPLE WRIST MAKE A STRAIGHT CUTLINE



Drawings: Chuck Lockhart

cutting in the edges where trim meets flatwork. I use a synthetic-bristle brush when I'm working with latex paints and a natural-bristle brush when I'm working with oil.

I always use an additive to extend the drying time of the paints I use. To achieve a seamless finish, I cannot allow the last section I painted to dry before I paint back into it, or the overlap will be noticeable. Latex paints are renowned for setting up quickly, but oil paints can be just as finicky. To ensure that I am always working into a wet edge, I add Floetrol to latex paint (photo far right) and Penetrol to oil. Both of these products are manufactured by the Flood Company (800-321-3444; www.floodco.com). I follow the mixing ratios as written on the can.

Masking tape is the last refuge of a scoundrel

As I alluded to earlier, trim painting involves two stages: First, you cut in along the edges; then you fill in the field. Cutting in, of course, is the hard part. To avoid this challenge, many amateur painters mask off adjacent surfaces and depend on the tape to make straight lines for them. In my opinion, besides being a waste of time, using masking tape is risky: If the paint seeps under the tape, you not only end up with a crooked line, but when you try to remove the tape, you're likely to pull off some of your new paint along with it. I prefer to take a deep breath and trust a properly loaded brush and a steady hand.

The key to a properly loaded brush is the paint bucket you use. If you dip a brush into a fresh can of paint and wipe it on the lip, what you get is a sloppy brush and a bucket with paint running down the sides. I work out of what's called a cut bucket (photo facing page). A cut bucket is simply an empty paint can with the lip removed. I remove the lip using a painter's 5-in-1 tool, but a hand-held can opener might work as well. I recently discovered a production-made plastic cut bucket that included a comfortable, adjustable side grip (Bercom International; 877-464-1170; www.handypaintpail.com).

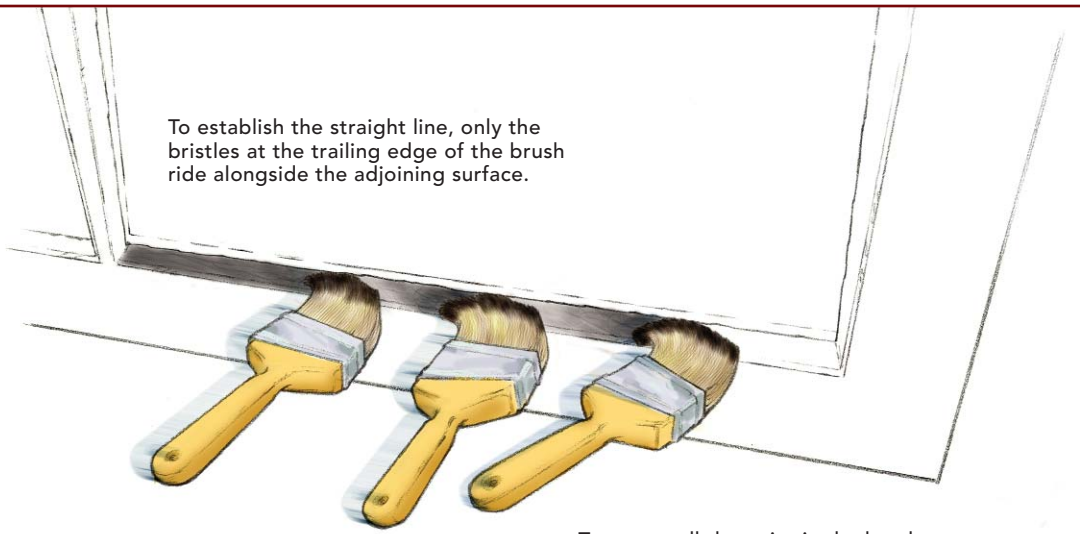
Trade secrets

To ensure seamless results, professional painters caulk every joint—where trim meets flatwork as well as where built-up trim elements meet. To eliminate visible brush strokes, pros rely on additives such as Floetrol (Flood Co.; 800-321-3444) that extend the working time of paints.



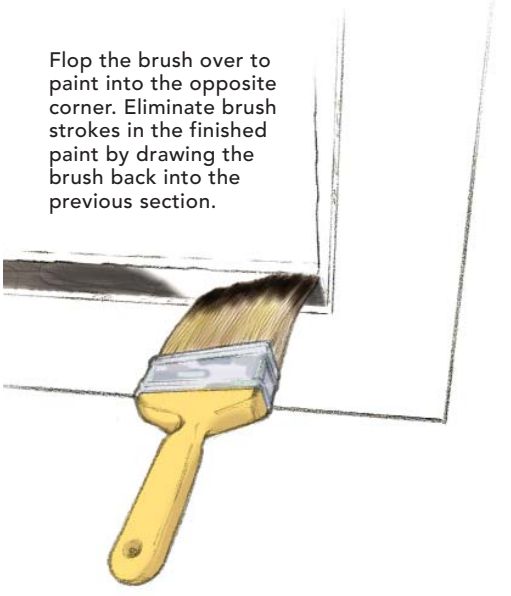






To establish the straight line, only the bristles at the trailing edge of the brush ride alongside the adjoining surface.

To access all the paint in the brush, slowly rotate the forward bristles into the cutline. Carefully back the brush off the surface before it reaches the opposite corner.



Flop the brush over to paint into the opposite corner. Eliminate brush strokes in the finished paint by drawing the brush back into the previous section.

"A high-quality 3-in. brush and a cut bucket are all the tools you need to paint trim."



One brush, no tape. *A 3-in. wide, angled sash brush is narrow enough to cut in straight lines along the edges and wide enough to fill in the middle sections.*

ONLINE CONNECTION

See videos on how to make a cut bucket and how to cut in razor-sharp paint lines on our Web site at www.finehomebuilding.com.

To load a brush for cutting in, I dip the brush into a paint bucket typically filled with only 2 in. of paint, tap the wide sides of the brush a few times against the sides of the bucket—you can't do this unless the lip has been removed—then scrape most of the paint off both sides of the brush using the rim of the can. If I load the brush properly, I have enough paint to cut in a perfectly straight 3-ft. swath with no drips, runs or errors.

I grip the brush as if I were holding a dart (the kind you'd throw in an English pub). I plant the brush in a corner and apply just enough pressure to make the bristles fan out into a wedge shape (drawing p. 90). Then I draw the brush toward me in a fluid motion. Painting freehand is a bit like driving a car. Instead of staring directly at the bristles, direct your attention slightly down the road. The brush will follow, and a straight line will result.

When I'm painting up to a flat surface, such as window glass or new drywall, I've learned to let the outermost bristles gently ride alongside that surface, using it as a straightedge, without getting any paint on it. When I'm painting trim that abuts an uneven surface, such as old plaster, however, I ignore the boundaries between these objects and trust my brush to invent a straight line.

Fully loaded brush fills in quickly

To maintain a wet edge, I fill in as I go. If I'm painting a baseboard, for example, I cut in a 3-ft. swath along the top and bottom edges; then I fill in the middle section before moving on (bottom photos, facing page). For this step, I want as much paint on the brush as possible, so I don't wipe it down. I dip the brush into the bucket and gently slap it a few times on each side (photo p. 90); then I simply raise the brush and get to work. The slapping action loads the paint into the bristles and prevents drips. Before moving to the next 3-ft. section, I go back and forth with the brush to make sure the entire area is covered; then I finish with a final stroke back into the previously painted section. This practice eliminates visible brush strokes and lap marks. □

Brian J. Doherty is a painting contractor and musician who works and plays in Richmond, Virginia. Photos by Tom O'Brien.



Paint back to make it blend. *To ensure consistent coverage, the author applies paint in a back-and-forth motion (photos above left). To eliminate visible overlaps (such as brush strokes), he always paints back into the previously painted section (photo above right) before moving on to the next one.*



Fill in as you go. *For maximum efficiency, the author applies paint in 3-ft. sections. When painting a baseboard, he cuts in the top and bottom sections using a lightly loaded brush (photo above left). Then he fully loads the brush and fills in the middle (photo above right).*

Latex over oil takes extra prep

Lacking the proper preparation, a new coat of latex paint placed over an existing layer of gloss oil paint is akin to paint applied over Teflon. If you have oil paint and want to switch to latex, you can do it, but you must remove the gloss and use a primer. There are a number of solvent deglossers on the market, but I don't use these products because all of the ones I've seen are highly flammable and they give off toxic fumes.

Unless the topmost layer is lead-based paint, I prefer to use old-fashioned sandpaper. I degloss flat surfaces with a palm sander loaded with 150-grit paper. Smaller areas get the same treatment with a detail sander such as the Fein MultiMaster. (To read more about this tool, see "Tools & Materials," p. 116.) I use a folded sheet of sandpaper or a medium-grit sanding sponge to get into the nooks and crannies.

After the sanding is done, I vacuum each surface. Then I prime the trim using a fast-drying bonding primer. This product adheres thoroughly to the paint surface and grabs tightly onto whatever finish paint I choose. For years, I've gotten excellent results using an oil-based primer (photo right) called Cover-Stain (Wm. Zinsser & Co.; 732-469-8100; www.zinsser.com). Although I was skeptical that a latex primer could deliver acceptable results, I recently started using an acrylic latex product (photo left) called Fresh Start (Benjamin Moore & Co.; 800-344-0400; www.benjaminmoore.com), and I haven't been disappointed.



—B. J. D.