

Now We Use Colorful Paint On Victorian Mansions

By DALE POLLOCK

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Imagine Santa Cruz in the 1880s with wide, tree-lined avenues, the clip-clopping of horses' hooves, splashes at the beach, and old-fashioned street lamps.

Then picture the hundreds of Victorian mansions, Gothic homes, Greek revival houses and California bungalows that spotted this fashionable seaside resort. They all had one characteristic in common: each was painted the same dull color of white.

That may come as a surprise to modern-day observers who have noted Victorians being repainted in alarming color combinations of blues, reds, browns and yellows. But according to John Cuje of Santa Cruz Painting, this trend of restoration is the farthest thing from the distant reality.

"Very little color was used on Victorians," asserts Cuje. "The west coast was quite provincial compared to the east, without the proficiency in pigments. Even the bland, drab earth tones were available only to the wealthiest," says Cuje.

Why white, then? "Everything was white in those days because white lead was mixed with turpentine and and linseed oil to produce the paint. The lead came in paste form, with the consistency of hand cream, and linseed oil was added to prolong the drying process, with turpentine to thin it. That was painting in those days."

The method of painting 19th century homes is as fascinating of what went into the supplies. "In the interiors of finer homes," relates Cuje, "canvas or muslin would be stretched over plaster walls. Then four or six coats of the white lead paint would be applied.

"Because repainting was so prohibitively expensive, the walls would be given a final coat of starch. When the walls became dirty, instead of repainting, the painter would wash off the starch and all the dirt with it. Then he would re-starch it."

Cuje acquired all this knowledge through research and talking to old-time painters who were more than happy to share their methods. What is even more remarkable is that the 37-

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Victorian housepainter John Cuje stands before a 19th century home

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year old house painter has acquired both the background and the skills in just six years as a house painter.

Although his family's painting background goes back to Wetzlar, Germany in 1848, Cuje is a former economist who went back to school and got turned on to wielding a brush. "I enjoy painting. I do it by choice, not necessity. It's pleasing to watch the creation of something."

While not dabbling in the hunting and forest scenes his great-grandfather would paint on half-timber houses in the German Black Forest, Cuje has painted around 20 "Victorians."

"They are really neo-Victorian, legitimate Victorian, carpenter Gothic, Greek revival, Gothic revival — all are lumped together in common conversation, even the colonials," he explains.

There are two philosophies behind the restoration of older homes. One school is the multi-colored avante-garde style, which employs up to six or eight colors. The other, which Cuje subscribes to, is a subtle use of subtle colors, alternating shades used elsewhere in the house. "I try to work with shadows, and get that effect. The direction of the sun on a gable bracket can be very dramatic. Less is more, that's my philosophy."

Whatever his own beliefs, Cuje is firm in insisting that "what's really important is that the people who live there are happy. Painting can bring out the best or worst in the house. Sometimes colors can be misplaced, and rob a house of its character or dignity."

While careful not to make value judgments, Cuje does believe that architecturally, some houses can't support more than two or three colors, while others can take subtle use of a fourth color, if used sparingly.

"First I do a complete analysis of what's wrong with the house," he smilingly admits. "But preparation is 90 per cent of my or anybody else's success. The color selection usually comes later, always in consultation with the home owner."

Although not wild about garishly painted mansions, Cuje is impressed with the recent spate of restorations along city streets, such as Walnut Avenue. "It's very refreshing, and takes the blandness out of a neighborhood."

Cuje has a small crew of "special" painters he uses, noting, "It takes an awful lot of experience to repaint a house. All the preparation problems, the need to analyze what they are and how to resolve them, what product to use at what stage, and in what order. It's pretty scary at first."

Cuje employs an oil primer with an acrylic cover coat, but other than that, he refuses to reveal his secrets. The cost of repainting a house may range from \$- 10,000, but as he points out, "Many Victorians don't need restoration carpentry work, just painting."

Repainting your house, especially if its old, can also have ancillary benefits. "In today's housing market," says Cuje, "I feel very strongly that the cost of a paint job can double the resale value of a house." He admits that this splurge of restoration has removed older houses from the reach of young couples.

So the mansions that were reserved for the affluent 100 years ago have ironically returned to their position of glory, as usually the well-to-do of today are the only ones in a position to buy and restore them.

But there is one big change, and that's visible on most any street in Santa Cruz. The houses may be old, but the colors are brand new.