

## Well-adjusted walls

*Victoria Maw*

He will change the colour of your wall; not a statement but, rather, the name of a paint colour, a pale ochre from the new collection of Simon March, a partner in Dutch eco-friendly paint brand Dofine. March recently opened a zany and technicolour paint shop, Colour Makes People Happy, in Dulwich, London. His intention is to have fun with paint – he runs workshops where customers can use the paints to make a “flying Dutchman”, a clog with neatly made wooden wings, or experiment with lithographic printing – and to laugh at some of the pretensions involved in choosing paint colours.

His 60 signature colours are displayed on wooden clogs that hang from the walls and ceiling and he says the clogs also serve the purpose of enabling customers to see the colour in both light and shade. Many have jokey (although not always telling) names: Old Towel, a greying white; Red Stewart, a rusty brown; and I Resent That Snide Remark, a pure grey and March’s favourite. “You could paint the whole of your cottage in I Resent That Snide Remark, which I think would be quite funny,” he says. His latest line is called Cannon and Ball, “our little joke” at the expense of Farrow & Ball, whose paint colours now coat the walls of Liberty – a contract March used to have. There is also a purple in his collection called Taking the Liberty.

It is undoubtedly more upbeat than the Dulux aisle at Do It All but can the colours actually make people happy? The shop’s name, rather than making any serious psychoanalytical pronouncement, was lifted from March’s favourite pancake shop in New York, Pancakes Make People Happy. March is, in fact, fairly sceptical about colour psychology and not really concerned about “scientific rigour” in terms of colour. “Lots of it is quite shaky,” he says, “because there are so many contrary colour theories.” His own approach is more relaxed: “When someone comes in and says, ‘We’d like to paint it blue but we know that is going to make the room cold’, I just don’t subscribe to that at all. It will be cold if the temperature is cold. It’s a fun thing choosing a colour but it is only a pot of paint so you may as well enjoy it rather than turn it in to pseudo science.”

However, there are experts who believe that why we like or dislike a certain colour goes beyond the simple matter of taste. Leatrice Eiseman, a Seattle-based colour consultation expert and executive director of the Pantone Colour Institute, says colours do affect us both physiologically and psychologically. She carried out a colour association study for Pantone, where subjects were asked to look at colours and relate their feelings. “We ask them simply to write the first word that comes to their head and there are certain responses to colours again and again.”

Certain generalisations can be made, she says, “primarily on the way that colour is used in nature” and our associations with those colours as a result. For example, her findings show that people react “very positively” to sky blue, usually due to childhood associations with playing outdoors whereas electric blue is “connected with excitement because a gas flame burns blue, the hottest stars are blue and that presence of excitement is inherent in it”.

“If you are inclined to get depressed on grey days, the last thing you would want to do is paint your walls grey because then you are repeating what is outside on a very grey colourless day in the room.” So what colour does Eiseman think will make people happy? Yellow. Not necessarily a “bright dandelion yellow” but a colour that has a “golden undertone such as apricot or peach”. She says any variation of yellow is related to sunshine and “ever since childhood we know sunshine is a good thing as it makes us feel warm and cosy”.

Angela Wright, a colour consultant, studied psychotherapy and the dynamics of colour before developing the Colour Affects System, which links patterns of colour and patterns of behaviour. Her system has its roots in the basic colour wheel, which shows relationships between primary, secondary and complementary colours. The colour wheel was fundamental to Isaac Newton’s theories on colour and Goethe wrote about it in his *Theory of Colours* (1810): “The chromatic circle . . . [is] arranged in a general way according to the natural order . . . for the colours

diametrically opposed to each other . . . are those which reciprocally evoke each other in the eye. Thus, yellow demands violet; orange, blue; red, green; and vice versa.”

Wright’s system builds upon this theory. She says it is a balance of colours that will make us feel content, rather than one colour: “It is disharmony that upsets people, like a warm red and a cold blue together. The most important thing is to relate the colour choice of the predominant colour to the activity within the room (working, sleeping, eating etc).”

March remains unconvinced: “Great minds have tried to organise colours into some systematic order with very little practical benefit.” He says it is “stuffy” and “hyper-rational” when someone tells you that a particular colour simply doesn’t go, or blue and green should never be seen together. “My advice to people is that if you’ve got a broad idea of a colour you’d like to paint it and you already like that colour, then paint it that colour – that’ll.

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