

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Painting a Masterpiece

Even if you're one of those folks who isn't "handy" around the house – can't hammer a nail without banging your thumb or tighten a pipe without flooding the kitchen – I'll bet you think you can paint. And guess what – you're right. Anybody who can pick up a brush can paint a wall.

Painting is all about preparation. If you do a good job of preparing, the odds are your paint job will come out well. And if your preparation is poor, you could be a Da Vinci with a paint roller and you'll still get poor results.

The most important thing to prepare is the surface you're painting. Make sure you've got a solid, uniform foundation for the new paint to adhere to – if it's an old wall, scrape off the worst of the old paint, sand the rough spots, patch any holes and apply a layer or two of primer if necessary. If you're not sure whether a spot needs prep work, paint that spot and see how it looks after it dries. If it's not smooth or the paint doesn't stick properly, you'll know.

Prep step two is to cover up everything you don't want to paint. Spread dropcloths over the floor and nearby furniture – plastic tarps, not newspapers – and use tape to cover any adjacent woodwork. Be aware that tape can peel the finish right off the woodwork if it is left in place too long, and that's where the quality of the tape becomes important. Plain old masking tape is okay if it will only be on there a few hours, but if you'll need to leave it in place for days, ask your hardware guy for high-quality painter's tape. It's worth a couple of extra bucks to not have to refinish a door frame.

With paint and brushes, you get exactly what you pay for. It's weird, but paint designed to last 20 years really does cost twice as much as a paint that's intended to last ten. If you're doing a small touch-up job, an inexpensive paint and a couple of disposable 40-cent foam rubber brushes will suffice. But if you're painting the main wall in the living room, go for the good stuff and a quality brush – if properly cleaned afterwards, it can last a lifetime.

Every painter has a favorite paint – some will tell you that there's no beating the old oil-based enamel, and some insist that a water-based interior latex will work just fine. I really like the new acrylic enamel paints – they dry more quickly, smell better, are easier to clean up and are more environmentally friendly than oil-based, and I think the quality and durability are comparable.

For a smooth coat, take your time and don't rush it, and don't worry too much about your brushstrokes. Just be generous. It's theoretically possible to use too much paint – if it's dripping down the wall, for example – but almost everybody errs on the side of using too little, not too much. Insufficient paint will show up as dull patches on the wall – we call them "holidays" – so apply that extra coat.

Make sure the area is free of drafts, so dust and debris don't ruin your paint job. Just close up the room and let it dry. And don't worry – painting is a no-risk proposition. Unlike other household jobs, if it doesn't come out right, there's nothing to fix. You can just do it again.

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