

ASK TOM

The unbearable whiteness of painting

By Tom Mrakas

This week, I was asked a question that I have been asked a number of times when I was painting, so I thought I'd do my best to give it an answer.

It's not a technical question, or a renovation question, but it crops up quite a lot.

So, what's the question? Why do painters wear white?

It's a pretty good question, because, really, wearing white doesn't make sense when you think about it. Consider the last time you painted your house ? or anything for that matter. I am pretty sure you got paint somewhere. Or maybe everywhere; probably even wiped some on your face (I know I have).

Chances are, when you are painting, you are going to get some on you, so white is pretty much the worst thing you could wear ? besides black, I guess. Coloured splotches are inevitable, so why wear what amounts to a painters' canvas?

I didn't have a good answer, so I did a little bit of research. It seems that there is no definitive answer as to why painters started to wear white, or when, but as with everything else in life there are some theories about how it all started ? and, lo and behold, some even make some sense.

One common theory singles out non-unionized workers of the early 1900s.

Looking to make some extra bucks, non-unionized workers (that is, trades that were not in the painting union or recognized as ?real? painters?) often tried to get work on the side.

A paintbrush and a tray was all that they thought was needed to do the job. But, these workers gave themselves away as they wore the clothes of their own trades ? usually blue coveralls.

Unionized, or ?professional painters? wore whites, and by whites, it was generally a somewhat formal looking combination of white overalls, white jackets and even black bow ties. Think gas station attendants from the fifties and sixties ? bow ties and crisp white shirts while pumping gas and washing your windshield. You get the picture.

The whites set them apart from other trades.

Many professions wear whites. Why not? It looks very clean and professional.

Personally, I think this theory sounds nice but there's a more practical and common sense reason for painters to wear white?because they usually paint with white!

New builds are always white. Apartments when ?cleaned up? for the next tenant? Always painted white. Galleries, public spaces ? usually white. And white on white can't be seen, now can it? So really, wearing white makes sense.

Well that's my theory anyway.

So until next week, remember a good job, is a job well done! Also if you have any questions you can reach me at www.facebook.com/anastasisdesign or on twitter, @ADesign_build and email of course Anastasis@anastasisdesign.ca.