



# color me FOURSQUARE

Painting up a favorite 20th-century house type. *by Patricia Poore*

**TOP:** A new stuccoed Foursquare in typical Prairie School coloration; coloring-book possibilities; a body-plus-trim scheme for a simple box; a classical Foursquare in “colonial” butter yellow.

**T**HIS HOUSE TYPE of the first quarter of the 20th century is a common one. Though some examples are grand, the American Foursquare is more often straightforward, a square box neatly placed in an early suburb. It’s easy to overlook the period appeal of such a house if it’s painted in a lazy scheme—or worse, slathered in white from top to bottom. But you can bring back its glory with a little thought to paint colors. Good placement of color breaks will restore its architectural integrity.

The bungalows and Tudors that are Foursquare contemporaries are relatively easy to color. Bungalows are best in earthy or grayed tones; upright Tudors are often brick or done up in brown-and-putty half timbering. The Foursquare is more like a coloring-book

house, its big square walls a blank canvas.

Complicating matters, “foursquare” is more a type than a style, even as they were built during this period. A Foursquare can have Craftsman elements; it may look rather like an Arts & Crafts “bungalow in a box.” Others have decidedly Prairie School-derived rooflines, porches, belt courses, and ornaments. Then again, many are “Free Classic” in style or have Colonial Revival elements, like round porch columns.

Let’s do a quick review of opportunities for color placement. Consider five basic breaks:

**Body** is the main color used on clapboards, shingles, or stucco. **Major trim** is usually painted in a contrasting color, creating an “outline” for the building. Major trim includes corner boards, gable trim boards, door and window

trim, and often porch railings. **Minor trim** might include doors, shutters, porch parts, and decorative trim related to major trim, like brackets. **Sash** is the moveable part of the window. The Victorian preference for darker sash—brown, black, bottle green, and dark red—continued during the first quarter of the 20th century, even as the use of trim lighter than the body color came into fashion. **Accent** refers to optional colors—or tints and shades of your basic colors—used to highlight elements such as door panels and porch parts.

Not every house needs five colors. Depending on its size and ornamentation, you may choose a monochromatic scheme, or a classic three-color scheme of body, trim, and accent. Choosing tints or shades of

the same color, or using just one secondary color on shutters or front door, can be elegant. Remember that having five color breaks doesn't have to mean five different hues; the scheme can include two shades or tints of the same hue. For example, "major trim" and "minor trim" might be the same color, but in closely related shades (one darker, one lighter). The door might be done in the trim color or the sash color.

Consider "given" colors before selecting paint, including your foundation, roofing, any brick or stone, and landscape features. Look at the neighborhood, too. In general, it's a good idea to keep it simple. Don't use a very dark, unusual, or saturated color for the body. Don't go overboard with accents, or "pick out" details to

the point where the architecture has been reduced to a bunch of colorful but unrelated elements. And don't think you have to pick a color you don't like because it's "historical." Choose colors that please you; use their tone and placement to create a period look.

IT'S HARD TO summarize paint colors popular in this period, as taste shifted tremendously in the years 1890 to 1940. Paint was available pre-mixed and in many color choices. The old advertising in magazines may not be typical, since kit companies and paint companies liked to present bright, cheerful houses in their ads. The truth is, some variation of gray and white was probably most common in the real world.

## COLONIAL revival

Many, many Foursquares around the country were detailed with the simple, classical elements of the Colonial Revival, which began in the 1880s and was a major influence by the 1920s.

Look for round porch columns or pilasters at the entry or building corners; Federal Revival window sash or a Palladian window; balusters and urn-topped posts. By now, paint colors had begun to moderate back to lighter and softer tones. Houses were painted in pale or soft yellow, or in light green and gray tones. Porch columns were white or a light neutral. This is the period when it became more common for the trim to be painted in a lighter value than the body, reversing the dark outlining of earlier times.



The Colonial Revival-style elements of this American Foursquare are enhanced by the cream-color trim paint on columns, balustrade, and pilasters at the corners. The body color, a soft olive green, lends interest without high contrast.

## select PALETTES

- **BENJAMIN MOORE** benjaminmoore.com  
*Historic Color collection; Color Makeover Program offers customized color selection by professional designers*
- **BIOSHIELD PAINT CO.** (800) 621-2591, bioshieldpaint.com *VOC-free and clay paints; color pigments*
- **CABOT STAIN** cabotstain.com *Stains for exterior surfaces*
- **CALIFORNIA PAINTS** californiapaints.com *Historic Colors of America palette*
- **DURON PAINT & WALLCOVERINGS** duron.com *Traditional colors of the South in their Historic Charleston & Carolina Low Country lines*
- **FINE PAINTS OF EUROPE** finepaintsof europe.com *High-performance paints with high concentrations of pigment*
- **HOMESTEAD HOUSE PAINT CO.** homestead house.ca *Craftsman Collection, also Victorian palettes*
- **MARTIN SENOUR** martinsenour.com *Williamsburg line suitable for Colonial Revival homes; online Palette Match*
- **MYTHIC PAINT** (888) 714-9422, mythic paint.com *Non-toxic, ultra-low-odor paints*
- **OLD VILLAGE PAINT COLOURS** old-village.com *Traditional paint palette in oil or latex*
- **PRIMROSE DISTRIBUTING/OLDE CENTURY COLORS** oldecentruycolors.com *Oil- and acrylic-based paint in a Craftsman/Prairie palette*
- **SHERWIN-WILLIAMS** sherwin-williams.com *Historical Preservation Palette, interactive Color Visualizer*
- **STORM STAIN BY CALIFORNIA PAINTS** storm stain.com *Stains, sealers, cleaners*
- **VALSPAR** (800) 845-9061, valspar.com *Historically documented color line*
- **WOLMAN WOOD CARE PRODUCTS**, wolman.com *Wood stains*

Now for some color-scheme advice specific to Foursquares: **1.** Monochromatic paint schemes relied on the roof (often a colorful asphalt product) as the cue, or as a second color.

**2.** The typical homeowner used a two-color scheme: body and trim. You'll achieve a different effect depending on whether the trim is lighter in value than the body, or vice versa. Victorian schemes favored darker trim, outlining the structure—which can have the effect of lowering the house or making it seem smaller. Later schemes favored making the trim lighter, even cream or white. This opens up the structure and can make it seem larger.

**3.** A stuccoed, Prairie-style Foursquare was already two-tone with cement stucco and wood trim: The



## SHIRTWAIST houses

A Foursquare variant has a belt course dividing the house horizontally; different cladding materials were sometimes used, such as clapboards on the first floor with shingles above. Especially in the Midwest, a “high-waisted” version had the second floor hemmed by a belt course below and cornice above. These were popularly called Shirtwaists. Such houses beg for a scheme with two body colors. Go darker over lighter for that grounded period look, and to emphasize horizontality that balances the tall pyramidal roof. Color consultant Rob Schweitzer notes that stained shingles are often finished in a dark and naturalistic brown or green; the first floor, whether clapboarded or stuccoed, may be painted in sand, yellow, or an off-white. Trim is often the lightest color or value.

Earthy brown over earthy green is an ever-popular scheme for Arts & Crafts Foursquares; dark sash was still popular (red here to echo brick), but the white trim alludes to Colonial Revival classicism.

Chicago's Greene & Proppe Design specified this new exterior paint scheme as part of an extensive restoration and remodeling. **BEFORE (BELOW):** Conjuring up barbers' poles and peppermint sticks, the old scheme broke apart the architecture, though just two colors were used. **AFTER (RIGHT):** A scheme partly keyed to the red roof recalls the deeper, late Victorian colors still popular early in the 20th century.



**BELOW:** The medium green and butter yellow are bright neutrals, very nice for this artistic Foursquare with Craftsman and Prairie elements. Picking out the brackets and using an accent stripe nudge this treatment into the "boutique" school of the polychrome revival. [Courtesy artfirst.com]

## VICTORIAN and BOUTIQUE

Before 1917, certainly, what we think of as Victorian color schemes continued to be popular. If you prefer stronger, more colorful or saturated hues, you won't be out of line using them on a house built before the full flowering of the Colonial Revival—especially if the house calls for two body colors. Medium greens (olive and drab in particular), dark gray and taupe, and dark pumpkin were popular. The ubiquitous chocolate brown body with French-vanilla trim also was used on Foursquares.

Unlike earlier and heavily ornamented Stick and Queen Anne houses, Foursquares would not normally have been treated to a complex polychrome scheme. Three colors sufficed. Today's revival of multi-color schemes is more ambitious; some fall into "the boutique school" of exterior paint schemes. If your house is in good shape and has the architectural detail to warrant it, splendid! Do take into consideration its style antecedents, though.



cement might be tinted or painted in tan, gray, or yellow; belt courses and window trim were painted in the dark trim color. **4.** Occasionally a color scheme—then or now—is chosen to highlight a particular element, such as architectural ornaments, an unusual window, or classical columns.

Whatever your colors, don't forget to test all of them in large patches on the house, to be viewed together in changing light. Even if you're dissatisfied with your first choices, you've learned where to go next: often it's the same hue, but two shades darker and two degrees grayer! ■

## consults

Color consultants can be found across the country; ask around at paint stores or knock on the door of a house you admire. Some people who work nationally: **Art First Colors for Architecture**, Oregon: (503) 287-4354, art-first.com ■ **CJ Hurley Century Arts**, Oregon: (503) 234-4167, cjhurley.com ■ **The Color Doctor** (John Crosby Freeman), Pennsylvania: (804) 648-1616, oldhouseauthority.com ■ **The Color People**, Denver: (800) 541-7144, colorpeople.com ■ **Historic House Colors** (Robert Schweitzer), Michigan: (734) 668-0298, historichousecolors.com