

# parodi on paperhanging

## Deep Six Deep Tint

by Jim Parodi

Who says residential paperhanging is a lonely job? Sometimes even the solitary paperhanger experiences a job site bustling with human activity.

I'm referring to a recent job for Mrs. G in Franklin Lakes, NJ. As I started to prime the wall for a Zoffany deep-red grasscloth, she came into the room and asked why I wasn't priming the walls with a deep red primer. She had the instruction sheet in hand and read to me Zoffany's authoritative statement on the subject, "We recommend using a pigmented primer/sealer. The pigment should be the same color as the background of

your wallpaper." Before even starting this job we were off on the wrong foot. Quickly I had the customer, the decorator, the decorator's assistant, the customer's husband swirling in a beehive, everybody in on my act giving their opinions.

I could have sworn this deep-tint wall priming thing was as discredited a "common sense" theory as dunking witches in the river to see if they float. Like the Liquid Metal Guy in Terminator II, the concept seems to reanimate itself just when you thought that a liquid nitrogen bath followed by smashing him into a million frozen pieces would do the trick.



Figure A: Plain Non-Woven. Maybe there is a future for nonwoven "romantic" see-through boudoir wear.



Figure B: A Plain Paper. Paper is densely woven by comparison. Once it is covered with dark ink, ain't nobody looking through it.

First of all, let's suppose I had followed the directions on Zoffany's instruction sheet, which I didn't. Where exactly does one go to get a wallcovering primer tinted to a deep burgundy? I checked out the "tint load ratings" of a basket of popular white pigmented "universal" wallpaper primers. UTC (Universal Tint Colorant) load per gallon ranged from four to a maximum of 12 ounces among some national brands. This begs the question: Have you ever tried to get a gallon of white tinted to deep burgundy with a small juice glass full of red tint? It usually makes pink.

One major primer company recommends using their clear wallcovering primer with maximum four ounce tint and then applying two or more coats for deepness of color. That's a good one. Anybody reading this magazine ever waited for two to three coats of deep tint to dry and harden under even good drying conditions? How about when it's humid in the summer? How many paperhangers prime three weeks before the paper job-raise your hands?

That aside, the other problem here is the assumption that all "universals" are created equal in terms of film strength and resistance to rewetting. They are not. The name of the game in hanging high shrink paper materials is all about the primer maintaining its ability to hold onto the wall after several hours of water exposure—particularly in areas of joint compound. Some of these "universal" products have trouble complying with these standards when used straight out of the can. Applying the practice of maximum tint loading across all the brands of "universal" pigmented primers to see what happens would be an interesting experiment—but not near my jobs.

One paint company lab technician I contacted for this column said that since wallcovering primers by their very nature must

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be resistant to rewetting (reemulsification) and maintain film strength during these extended soak times, he could think of no worse idea than loading up a "universal" water-based wallcovering primer with lots of tint. Another paint company lab tech I spoke with at a different paint company indicated that the film surface of such a full-bore tint cocktail would suffer under extended water soaking and that strippability would likely be compromised.

With further brain picking I inquired about the common fear many paperhangers have about deep tints, i.e. that they are so tint-loaded the paste will have no tooth on the surface. I also mentioned another concern about the greasy quality of many UTCs and whether they could leach out of the film to stain the wallpaper. Both lab techs agreed that UTCs should not cause a problem with color leaching after film drying. Both paint folks said they would be more concerned about film integrity than the tooth of the paste onto a weakened film. As indicated above the question becomes, "Why worry about the tooth to a deep tint film when the film integrity itself is compromised by tint?" This might be akin to worrying if the deck chairs were safely secured to the Titanic.

Then I called Zoffany. When I asked how these instructions came into being nobody seemed to know for sure. Memory was hazy and one of the Z-folks offered that the deep-tint thing was probably suggested to a Zoffany bigwig at a convention by a primer company marketing guy. I was assured that no one at Zoffany had actually tested the deep-tint primer theory in either a lab or a real world situation. How comforting.

### Faulty Logic From The Get-Go:

When you have a white or off-white residential paper nowadays it is almost certainly thin and translucent to a degree. It is necessary to tint the wall uniformly white because you will see a dark-color painted wall through the paper when it dries or the spot priming of spackled areas. The

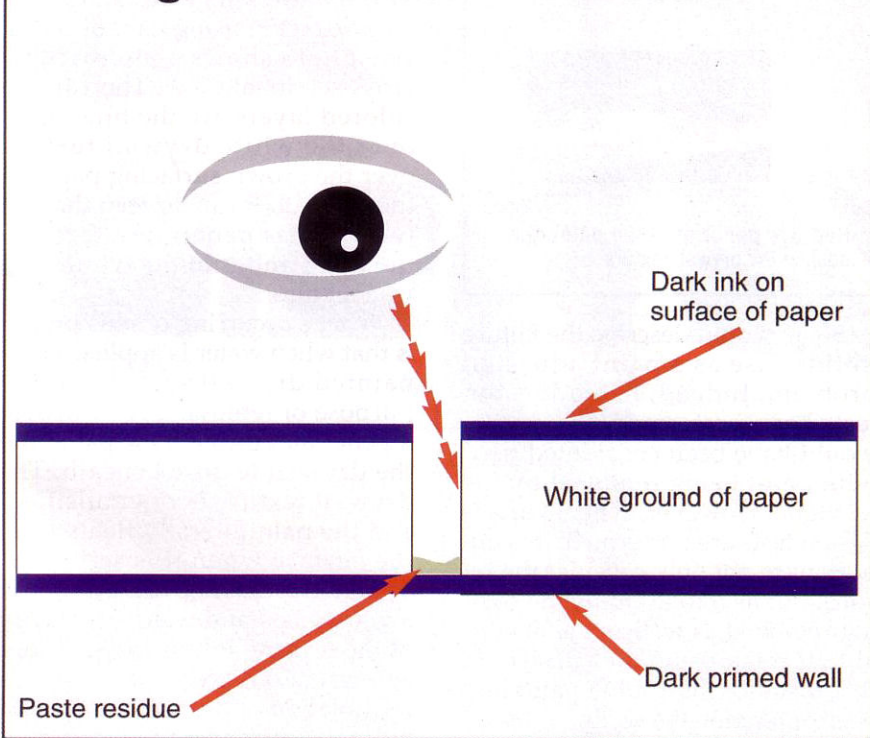
converse is not true. A dark paper does not show the underlying color of the wall because the dark-colored paper itself is loaded with deep, dark, opaque pigment. In other words it is completely opaque all by its lonesome.

The only exception to that I can think of does not apply to a traditional paper — it concerns the newer industry twist of unsealed nonwovens. These materials, even when dark colored, can have very large gaps between fibers which let light through and can show the color of the underlying wall. The unsealed nonwovens should be tested for opacity before hanging

film strength and water resistance two coats of clear would make me rest easier at night.

So let's get to the real nitty gritty here—i.e. the problem of white seams with traditional dark papers. That's what this is really all about, isn't it? The old wives say that deep-tint priming will prevent white from showing at the seam area after drying. However, you know and I know that the main reason for whiteness at the seam is simply that the white edge is already there when it arrives on the UPS truck. Perish the thought that most manufacturers would address the actual material problem

**Fig. C: Cross section of seam**



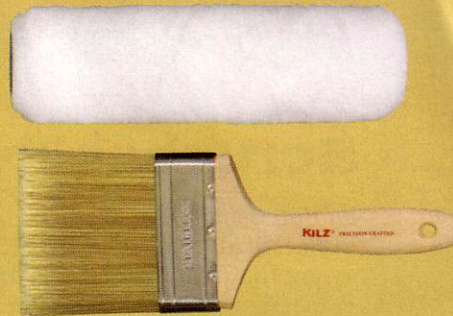
because you may get a color surprise after drying—so yes, in the one instance of the nonwovens, it may be necessary to deep-tint color the wall for a dark colored material. (See Figures A&B)

When you've got one of these materials and you opt to deep-tint prime, the most sensible suggestion comes from Steve Ballesteros at The Ridgewood Paint Store in NJ. Steve says that in this case he gives the customer a regular deep tinted wall flat and then recommends a hard, clear acrylic to go over that. Not bad Steve. To that I would only add that for increased

itself. Instead we get goofy instruction sheets.

With some manufacturers the issue is that their seam cutters are roller cutters—much like a rotary pizza cutter. The beveled point of the blade makes for a beveled seam cut so that even if the seam is butted perfectly together the white of ground paper will still show—white walls, red walls, purple walls notwithstanding. Sometimes this cutting equipment can actually be retrofitted for a 90 degree cut. The good news here is that over the last two decades a

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few manufacturers have had meetings about the problem.

Paperhangers for years have sponged the white roll ends with a myriad of coloration products like gouache, stencil paint, tempera, and ink, all performed at their own risk, mind you. My personal attack method has been to wait for the whole installation to dry and then to use a pin striper brush with diluted stencil paint to color the Three Planes of Whiteness, i.e. the white edge on the left sheet, the white edge on the right sheet and the white primed wall should there, God forbid, be a hairline split in a seam area. (See Figure C)

And what are the major causes of seam areas showing the white wall underneath, in other words, of seam separation during the drying process? At the risk of being redundant in these Parodi on Paperhanging columns, I opine that the number one cause of seam separation is faulty wallpapering practices, such as wrong choice of paste (no tack, high slip), improper "book time", wrong amount of paste application (too much paste underneath the sheet allowing for slipping as the paper contracts), wrong choice of primer type (primer softens up and stretches when it should remain hard), or senseless adulteration of an otherwise good primer (see deep-tinting above).

The name of the game here is that you, the paperhanger (not the customer, the customer's husband, the decorator, or the useless in-

struction sheet etc.), should find a way to get the material on the wall with a good seam butt and then find a way to make the material stay put as it dries, all the while ensuring the primer film remains sturdy and unmoved by moisture.

The first place to begin this quest is with a stable, starch adhesive accepting, non-moisture-reactive primer—not a stretchy, water sensitive, month-to-dry-out-completely, fun house colored deep-tint film.


Remember that in many ways high shrink papers have a useful attribute—they are mostly porous and dry faster than the more dimensionally stable vinyl sheet types. Since all wallpaper adhesives are at their tackiest at the time immediately before they are dry, it follows that you must plan for the quickest dry time to help your cause. (Another old wife's tale that "paper shrinks more when it dries fast" is, according to Parodi basement testing, simply not true.)

Planning for rapid moisture dissipation means that you can even use the higher moisture, lower tack powdered types like wheat, cellulose, or potato starch. These pastes have the advantage of easier surface cleaning and less chance of later "parchmentization" or what I call "dry staining" of porous materials, which can occur with some premixed pastes. If you don't like these powdered pastes, because you're hooked on the high tack of pre-mixed, you can also mix adhesives types together to get just the paste you want. Personally I like to

hang the high shrink dark papers with a 50/50 mix of a premixed clear and a powdered potato starch. Don't expect to find recommendations like this on instruction sheets—mixing one product or brand with another can cause marketing people to swoon.

And how do you get these materials to quickly set up and dry so that the seam stays where you put it? The best (and more expensive) way is to use a paper pulp blank-stock liner paper. This also has the advantage of making seams areas as strong as a Kevlar vest. The second method is to "paste size" the wall and let it completely dry before hanging. A variation on this theme is what some paperhangers call "velcroing" the seams which means to lay down a paste stripe where the seams are going to fall and letting the pasted stripe dry before hanging.

A well primed wall with a layer of dried paste size on it does wonders to dissipate moisture quickly from the sheet and let the material freeze in one spot. Take a paste, any paste. A sheet of paper with high moisture paste, let's say 90 percent water, which is smoothed onto a dry paste sized surface immediately "sucks in" and blends with that dry paste so that the effective water content in the "paste system" drops by half and tack increases dramatically—almost instantly. OK, I apologize about using the term "paste system" which is a marketing phrase usually reserved for the people who sell these paste products, but I hope you get the drift. With dark papers, "slip" is for "drips."

To sum up: nix the UTCs, get a good, water-stable primer, think a bit, then play around with the paste a little. After that, escort the magpies out of the work area and start hanging. 

*When not offering penetrating commentary on all aspects of the wall-covering industry, Jim Parodi is a second-generation paperhanger based in Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY. An NGPP member since 1987, Parodi is a member of The Bergen County Mastercraftsman Paint and Paper Association in the suburbs of New York City.*

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across the surface. If a heavy chalk is transferred to the cloth, then that surface is likely to be trouble. Wet a cotton ball and rub gently on the texture, if texture is easily removed, then the texture is sensitive to moisture. As we've stated in previous articles, it's always wise to do a "patch test" prior to full scale production.

If marginal texture is encountered, then treating the surface like a chalky exterior repaint and priming with a penetrating primer can yield good results. Check with your paint manufacturer to determine a suitable primer.

Even though the cause of the problem was not created by the painting contractor, whenever a coating failure occurs, you are going to be involved. It's far better to predict and prevent failures, even if it means changing the specifications and renegotiating your contract.

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