

Design

# Dead Salmon and Elephant's Breath: How a British paint maker's oddball colors redefined luxury

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"The wall col-ouur is 'Lulworth Blue,'" declares Aidy Bryant during the "Saturday Night Live" skit, "New Paint." Leaning into a bizarre British pronunciation of "color" she continues, paint-splaining that the shade is named after the, "swirling British mists of the beautiful Lulworth Cove."

"What a col-our!"

After discovering that Bryant's beloved "Lulworth Blue" costs \$110 a gallon, fellow comedian Beck Bennett -- who plays her visiting brother -- is aghast. He can't fathom why anyone in their right mind would spend so much on a pot of paint, but his sister is adamant:

"It's not just paint," Bryant cries. "It's Farrow and Ball!"

Famous for its outlandish shade names ("Rangwali," "Elephant's Breath" and "Dead Salmon" among the most hauntingly eccentric) and lavish price tags, Farrow & Ball is ripe for parody. Yet, it is also hugely successful.



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The prestigious British brand, founded in 1946, has had its paints splashed on countless high-profile walls, from New York's Museum of Modern Art to Queen Elizabeth II's weekend residence, Windsor Castle. Despite being headquartered in Dorset, on the UK's south coast, Farrow & Ball's rural operation has an undeniably cosmopolitan appeal.

It's been used on the sets of acclaimed TV shows like Netflix's "Sex Education" and has been name-dropped by celebrities from Padma Lakshmi to Shay Mitchell. In 2014, "Mad Men" star January Jones was photographed leaving a Farrow & Ball showroom in Los Angeles, her latest purchases looking more like designer handbags than one-gallon cans of paint.

The company has an annual turnover of over 100 million euros (\$118 million). In May, Farrow & Ball was acquired by Danish coatings manufacturer Hempel for £500 million (\$692 million), according to the Financial Times, though the firm would not confirm the reported sum.

So how did a gallon of unusually named paint become the ultimate aspirational statement?

"They pioneered the 'chalky' matte look for walls and a soft eggshell look on woodwork (that) is less 'plastic'-looking and shiny than modern paints," said Victoria Wormsley, an interior designer and owner of London-based French-Brook Interiors, in an email interview.

But it wasn't until the 1990s that Farrow & Ball achieved the commercial success it enjoys today. The Dorset paint firm got its big break in 1992 when Tom Helme, an interiors advisor to the National Trust -- a not-for-profit organization that conserves historic buildings and beauty spots across Britain -- took control of Farrow & Ball with corporate financier Martin Ephson.

"Farrow & Ball are seen as the original designer paint," Wormsley said. "They were one of the first companies in the UK to market paint as an aspirational product by connecting it to Britain's wonderful architectural heritage."



A room painted in Farrow & Ball's "Sulking Room Pink." Credit: Courtesy of Farrow & Ball

## Country club cachet

Farrow & Ball has become ubiquitous in well-to-do neighborhoods (the brand has 61 showrooms across the US and Europe and over 220 stockists in London and Manhattan alone) while still making customers feel as if they are part of an exclusive coterie.

"It's the sort of stuff that is discussed over dinner party tables," said interior designer Sophie Richardson in "Inside the Posh Paint Factory," a documentary about the company's operations. "And I think if you can say you've got Farrow & Ball it means you're in with the cool club."

But not everyone sees Farrow & Ball as the epitome of luxury. The prestigious paint manufacturer even found itself on an infamous tongue-in-cheek list, created by high-society interior designer Nicky Haslam, detailing the world's most unbearably "common" (a snobbish British term for something that is unrefined or unsophisticated) things. Haslam confidently, if not arbitrarily, placed Farrow & Ball among entries including self-pity, ATMs, swans and hedge funds.

Nonetheless, Farrow & Ball has a loyal customer base. One of the Facebook groups dedicated to the paint brand boasts 55,000 members and is used to share application tips, color advice and proud photos of users' own handiwork.

The peculiar shade names help foster a sense of community, said Wormsley, helping to create a sense of being in-the-know. "I think (the eccentric color names) gives Farrow & Ball customers a sense of being cognoscenti," she added, "as the colours can't be picked from the names."

But as well as capitalizing on its cultural cachet the brand is also developing a sense of humor to offset its reputation as the market's poshest paint. The seemingly self-aware Farrow & Ball now embraces jokes made at its expense, as demonstrated in the company's first ever TV commercials, first aired in 2020, in which neurotic decorators go to extreme lengths to protect their expensive and delicate paint work.

In response to the Saturday Night Live sketch, the paint manufacturers took out an ad in the New York Times unveiling a special edition col-ouuuur, "English Roast No.30."

"A rich and good hum-oured hue with subtle hints of bone-dry satire and a lingering aftertaste of charred British beef," read the description. "It's not just paint, it's Farrow & Ball."