

PAINTING THE CRANE HOUSE

Color makes this 1886 Queen Anne Victorian home come alive with the spirit of the Gilded Age.

This highly ornate Victorian Queen Anne style home is located on a corner lot and anchors an entire street of historic homes. Originally built in 1886 by Eugene Crane, it was converted into apartments during the 1960s. The current owners rescued the home and returned it to a single family residence. During the restoration they uncovered hidden stained glass windows, pocket doors, and had to realign the main staircase to again open up the large entry hall. The house had, over its long history, received many different colors of paint, from a light yellow, to the traditional (even if incorrect) white, to medium brown. Most of these paint “schemes” failed to take advantage of the wonderful Victorian details that covered the building. Virtually unnoticed were the half-timbering on the gables, the third story sleeping porch and the wonderful wrap-around verandah.

The goal of the owners was to use “period colors” (colors that would have been available when the house was built) and to make the home stand out on its prominent corner lot. It was the verandah that caused the most concern. As it was painted white against the darker body of the house it seemed to fly off the building rather than act as part of



the entire package. The solution was to first place a dark color “cap” on the porch to tie it down to the first floor. Secondly, color was used to highlight the ornate spindles and posts. Lighter colors were used on the middle of these items to provide a sense of space between the top and bottom of the porch. The railing cap was painted a dark green, but below that was done in a light yellow to keep the porch from having a “too heavy” look. The main body was considerably lightened to a yellow (in keeping with the color of a neighboring home). This also allowed the use of darker colors to highlight the architectural details of the two main street facades. Corner boards were painted dark green as was the window trim to define the outline of the structure. The roof dormer and front pavilion top were likewise done up in shades of darker green to cap the front facade. The owners took every chance that the architect of a hundred years ago gave them to enjoy the house through its detailing. This was done by using multi-colors of light and dark to provide a three dimensional feeling.

Since this Queen Anne house was such a happy, vibrant building it seemed best to take advan-



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tage of all that energy with the colors used to emphasize that cheerfulness. The latter part of the 19th century saw a wide variety of exterior building materials made available to the public at a low cost. Lumber was being harvested in more parts of the country than ever before. The newly completed transcontinental rail lines provided easy shipment to almost every town in the nation. Improvement in woodworking equipment provided more types of shingles, clapboards and surface lumber than at any previous time. Improvements in paint manufacturing and color preparation allowed homeowners to choose from a wide range of palettes. In the case of the Crane house, an 1888 paint catalog from Coffin, Devoe & Company was consulted, choosing the colors just as the original owners might have. Since modern paint technology can now computer match colors it was an easy task to reproduce those 1888 paints in modern form. The end result was as pleasing to the owners as it was

to the many neighbors who stopped by to admire the finished product.

When painting your own Queen Anne home remember to not be scared by all the gingerbread, spindles and ornate woodwork. For it is just these items that make this type of late 19th century American house come alive with the spirit of the Gilded Age, as Mark Twain called it. The paint colors you choose should speak to that spirit and try to enliven it!

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN KOSMER

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