

A white-painted mirror frame and white flowers combine to create a simple vignette, while pale decorative objects add layers of interest



PALE & INTERESTING

WHETHER YOU WANT TO FRESHEN UP YOUR INTERIOR THIS SUMMER, CREATE A BLANK CANVAS AGAINST WHICH TO DISPLAY YOUR RECLAIMED AND ANTIQUE FINDS OR GIVE YOUR HOME A LAID-BACK, BEACHY VIBE, WHITE CAN BE TOTALLY TRANSFORMATIVE

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White creates a feeling of light and space, uniting disparate elements while subtly highlighting original period features such as floorboards, fire surrounds and plasterwork. It's easy to live with, calming, cool and clean and it never goes out of fashion – so it's no wonder it's the go-to colour for walls and floors in many of the most stylish and sophisticated of homes and is so often favoured by artists, designers, architects and stylists. Strictly speaking, white is achromatic and has no hue as it fully reflects and scatters all the visible wavelengths of light, but it's generally considered a 'colour' when it comes to home decorating.

Of course, white is hardly ever just 'white'. The ancient Indian language of Sanskrit has specific words for the white of stars, the white of teeth, bright white and the white of an autumn moon. Similarly, white paint comes in a plethora of hues, from greenish whites to greyish and pinkish tones – and the white you choose to use can have a huge impact on your space. Finding 'the right white' for a room can be tricky.

Samples and swatches look different in particular light, in differing spaces and at various times of day. White spaces can easily feel too harsh and cold, especially in our north European climate, where the sun is low for most of the year.

Taking tips from the experts can make using white a little easier. Stylist and author Emily Chalmers of caravanstyle.com found the perfect white a few years ago and has since used it in several homes. 'It's 1002Y in the Dulux paint-mixing system,' she reveals. 'I'm addicted! I've just literally covered a Margate seaside flat in it. I've seen it being mixed and it has tiny amounts of grey, turquoise, coral and yellow ochre in it, which gives it just a touch of warmth.' Emily uses white as a canvas against which to arrange her vintage finds. 'White is absolutely brilliant as a background colour to display all my favourite things against – both at home and in my studio – so I've painted ceilings, walls, doors, woodwork and floors with it,' says Emily. 'I've always been a bit of a magpie for gold and I find that gold accents sit particularly well on white.'

Perhaps this is the key to the enduring appeal of white in interior design – it creates the ultimate backdrop, upon which you can style and re-style your home as your look evolves over the years. ➔



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Cool, off-white floorboards reflect the light and create an illusion of space in smaller rooms

The floors

White-painted floorboards can hide a multitude of sins in an older property, brighten up a gloomy room and lend a breezy, almost coastal feel to even the most dingy of spaces. They're a great way to bring character to a newer home, too. Painted floorboards are slightly high-maintenance to live with – it's true that you can see every cat hair, ball of fluff or muddy mark – but they're super-easy to clean compared to carpets and can be repainted to refresh them when the chips in the paint start to look more shabby than chic.

Start by ensuring your floorboards are sound and fixed firmly with all nails hammered fully in, then sand them to remove surface dirt and any old varnish or paint residue. You'll need a large sander for the main areas and a small edging sander for the perimeters of rooms and tight corners. After sanding, vacuum and wipe your boards, then leave the dust in the air to settle for a few days before vacuuming and wiping them again, and allow to fully dry before painting. Choose a tough floor paint product that will have anti-slip properties and won't easily chip or get scratched. Using a brush takes longer than a roller but will give you a better finish. Two or three coats creates a durable surface but don't apply the paint too thickly, or you will lose the woodgrain texture.

If you don't want to commit to painted boards but still want a whiter, lighter finish, you could consider sanding back, bleaching and oiling your boards with a lye and oil system. This is a great way to remove unwanted pink or yellowy tones from floorboards and creates a calm and soothing, Scandinavian-style interior.



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A Scandinavian-style lye and oil floor is the ideal base for rustic chic, using reclaimed pieces



Hints of gold on vintage picture frames add warmth to this pale scheme, while glass chandeliers reflect the light

To consider

- If you're sanding floorboards, follow instructions carefully as sawdust is highly flammable and be sure to wear protective eye goggles and a dust mask throughout.
- Painted staircases can look stylish, but ensure you use specialist non-slip paint or fit a central stair runner instead for safety.

Sourcebook

- Little Greene, littlegreene.com, 0845 880 5855: for a range of 200 tough oil-based floor paints.
- Woca, wocashop.co.uk, 01952 727899: for Danish lye and oil products.
- HSS Hire, hss.com: for DIY floor-sanding systems.

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LEFT Mix warm and cold white together for a layered, welcoming look

BELOW This narrow landing has been painted in brilliant white to reflect as much light as possible



PHOTOGRAPH: RACHEL WHITING/STYLING; ELLIE TENNANT, ELLIETENNANT.COM

FARROW & BALL, FARROW-BALL.COM, 01202 876141

The walls

When choosing white paint for your walls, it's important to first assess the aspect – whether it's north- or south-facing, for example – and the light levels of your room. Darker rooms can benefit from a slightly warm white, such as Wimborne White from the Farrow & Ball palette which contains a tiny amount of yellow pigment. Rooms that are flooded with natural light can take cooler whites, such as Shirting No. 129 from Little Greene's range, a 'pure' white with a slightly greyish undertone, based on natural minerals without optical brighteners, to give a pleasingly heritage look.

Don't be afraid to use several different shades of white in the same scheme. As long as they are complementary, or varying depths of the same white, you can use different whites on walls, floors and woodwork for a more layered effect than if you use the same colour on every element.

Exposed brick walls can be painted white for a textured, raw look, but be sure to clean the bricks well first with a stiff brush and wipe the wall with a damp cloth, then allow it to

completely dry for 24 hours before starting to paint. Brick is very porous, so apply a primer first that's suitable for brick, then two to three coats of water-based acrylic interior paint. For a more subtle, old-fashioned look, you could limewash your internal brick walls instead. Limewash is breathable, and can be distressed with water after application to create a rough-luxe look.

If your walls aren't appealing (perhaps they're pitted or covered in old Artex), a speedy way to give them a fresh but vintage look is to clad them with tongue-and-groove panelling and paint it white. If your walls are even and straightforward (without lots of sockets, switches or features) and you're a skilled DIYer, you might be able to do this yourself, as the process is pretty simple. You need to fix two horizontal timber battens to the wall, one at skirting level and one higher up at dado level, then screw your boards to the battens, working from left to right. If your walls are uneven or complicated, it's best to call in a professional carpenter to tackle the job. ♦♦



To consider

- Don't apply paint to tongue-and-groove boards too thickly or it will gather in between the boards and spoil the effect.
- Ensure you use knotting solution to seal any knots on wooden tongue-and-groove boards before you paint them, or unsightly yellow stains will appear over time, which are impossible to disguise with topcoats.

Sourcebook

- Wickes, wickes.co.uk, 0330 123 4123: for primed beaded MDF tongue-and-groove effect panels and real timber cladding panels.
- Valspar, valsparpaint.co.uk, 0344 736 9174: for in-store paint-mixing, so you can select or create your perfect white paint.
- Lime Stuff, limestuff.co.uk, 01794 884294: for limewash, primers and paints suitable for internal brick walls.

Tongue-and-groove panelling provides a textural contrast to whitewashed brickwork

WHITWASHED OAK TABLE, RUST COLLECTIONS AT VINTERIOR, VINTERIOR.CO



LEFT Give white-painted furniture a distressed finish for a warm, lived-in look

BELOW A mirror with an imperfect patina adds texture to this white space



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Texture

All-white interiors can sometimes feel a bit flat, so it's crucial to introduce plenty of texture to give your look layers of interest. Woven rugs made of natural grass fibres or sheepskin can instantly warm up a white room, while textured accessories such as cushions and seat pads made from vintage grain sacks can also help. Knitted throws, reclaimed wood elements and objects with rustic, imperfect patinas are good choices, too. The aim is to avoid too sleek or clean a finish.

If you plan to paint a piece of furniture, or have done so already, consider distressing it afterwards using sandpaper and wax, to give it a more interesting finish that looks time-worn and textured. If you live in a newer build or your home is lacking interesting textures, you can introduce free-standing elements to create the same feel – a pair of old shutters with peeling, flaky paint look chic leant up against a wall, while an old mirror with an ornate, white-painted frame can also add interest.

Period features such as cornicing and ceiling roses can add texture and decoration to all-white schemes. If you live in a newer property, you can easily introduce faux or real plaster mouldings for a vintage look – a ceiling rose is easy to fit (once you've found a ceiling joist!). Paint ceilings in bright brilliant white to maximise light and to highlight features. 

To consider

- Experiment with reclaimed objects to create your own textured artworks – even the side of an old tea chest can be whitewashed and propped up as a vintage feature.
- White flowers in simple clay jars or glass jugs look lovely in all-white rooms. Get a luxurious look for less by gathering cow parsley from verges or growing white hydrangeas in your garden.

Sourcebook

- Annie Sloan, anniesloan.com, 01865 803168: for chalk paint and waxes to create distressed finishes on painted furniture.
- Hide Rugs, hiderugs.co.uk, 020 7474 3411: for sheepskins, cow hides and reindeer rugs.
- Stevensons of Norwich, stevensons-of-norwich.co.uk, 01603 400824: for a great selection of Victorian, Georgian and art deco-style plaster ceiling roses.