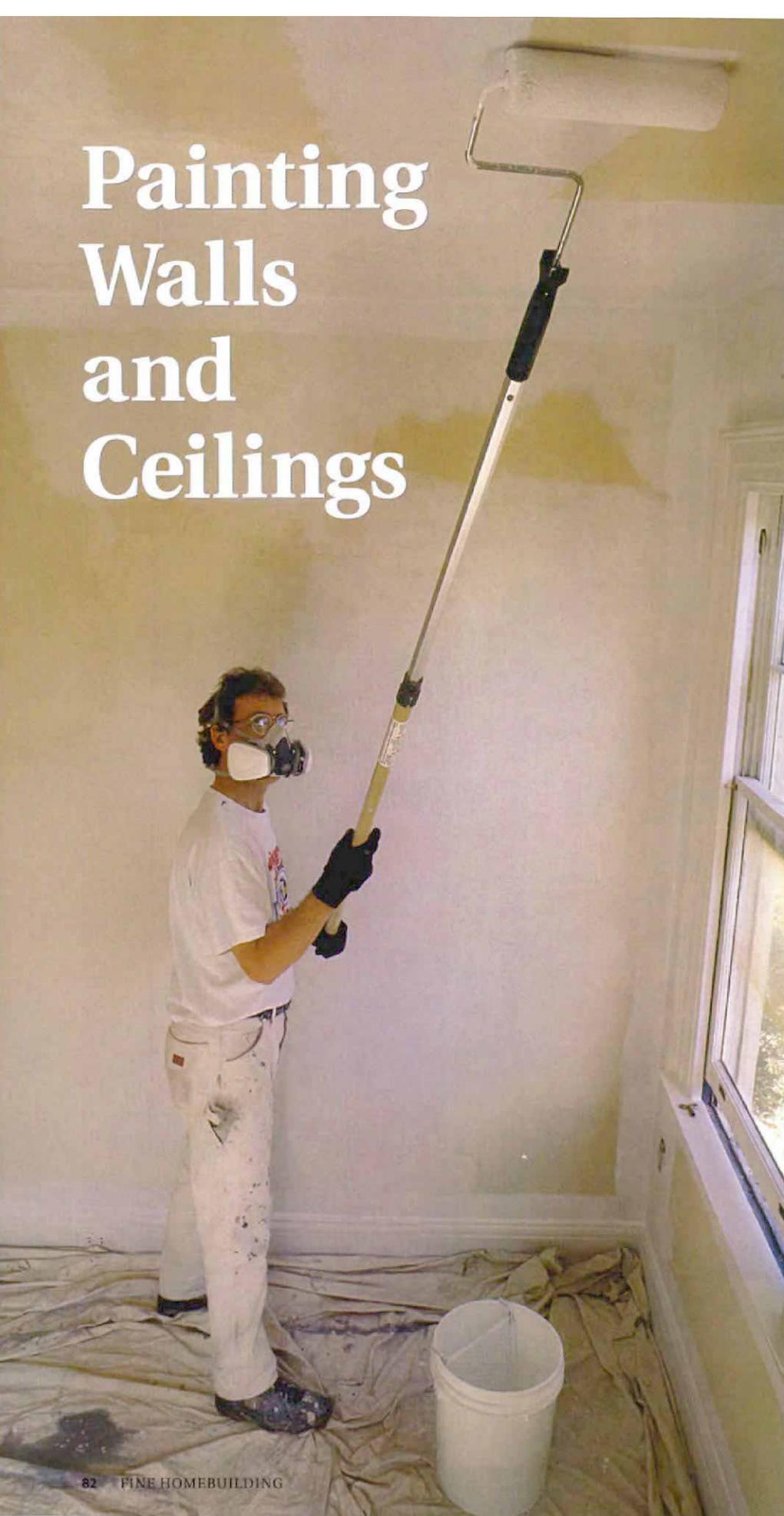


Painting Walls and Ceilings



A professional's tips for rolling and edging paint as efficiently as possible without making a mess

BY BRIAN J. DOHERTY

Most of my friends think I've got the easiest job on the planet. After all, anybody can paint walls and ceilings, right? The truth is that anybody can paint if they go about it in the right way, with the right paint and the right tools. Proper technique for cutting in and rolling is not the stuff of national secrets, but there is a lot more to it than you'll get in the free pamphlets handed out at paint stores.

Before I open the paint can

The room I worked on for this article is one of several that needed complete refinishing in an existing home. The first thing I do when painting a room is spread professional-quality canvas drop cloths to cover and protect the floor. Spilled paint doesn't soak through canvas as it does a bed sheet or other lightweight cloth, and canvas is safer to walk on. Working on a plastic drop cloth can be like painting on roller skates.

The plaster walls in this room needed some fairly extensive patching work. In this type of situation, I start by fixing all the questionable areas, taking care not to create a lot of dust that might get into fresh paint. Next, I caulk all gaps between the trim (baseboard, window and door casing) and the walls with a high-quality paintable caulk (photo top left, facing page). I smooth the caulk with a damp rag. Caulking always makes the finished paint job look better.

I also make sure that the room I'm painting has adequate lighting. Even if there is a lot of natural light, I always have halogen work lights and clip-on parabolic lights handy.

The next step is prepping and priming the trim. Painting trim is a different kettle of fish, but I make sure that the trim paint overlaps the wall about $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (photo far right). When the trim is primed, I begin work on the walls and ceiling, letting the finish coat on the trim cover any stray paint from the walls.

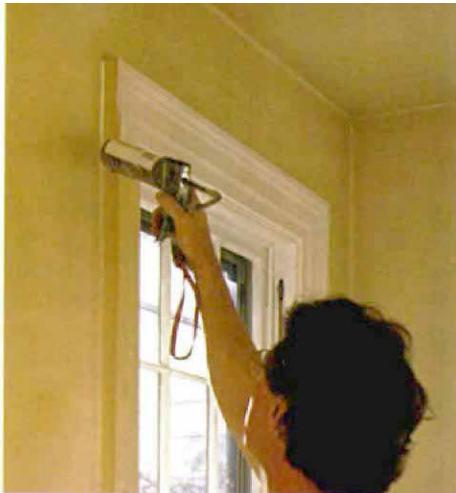
Painting: prime time

The walls and ceilings in this room had water stains from an old roofleak that had been fixed; also, the former owners of the house were heavy smokers, which left the walls and ceilings stained. So I decided to cover everything with an alkyd-based primer/stain blocker. By the way, a respirator should always be worn when applying oil-based paint.

Even if a room has no damage, I recommend using a primer under the finish coat. It not only helps to seal the surface, but it also makes the finish coat go on more evenly, critical if I'm applying a gloss finish paint.

The two steps to painting a large area are cutting in and rolling. Cutting in is brushing paint onto areas the roller won't reach.

Painters naturally start at the top and work down; I stand on a ladder and paint everything I won't be able reach comfortably from the floor. For cutting in, I never work out of the paint can but instead use a cut bucket. You can buy one or make one (*FHB* #112, p. 82). I cut in with a 3-in. brush to give me a 3-in. band to roll into. Because the walls and



Caulk before you paint. Before the walls or trim is painted, a bead of paintable caulk is applied to fill the gap between the trim and the walls.

ceiling are being painted with the same primer, I cut in the corners without being too careful, using the flat part of the brush on both sides of the corner.

Where the primer meets the prepped trim, I paint up to the edge of the trim using the narrow side of the brush, overlapping the wall primer onto the trim slightly but not being overly accurate with my line at this point. Overlapping coats at the edges of the trim creates a less stark line between the trim paint and the wall paint. When I've finished cutting in the upper parts of the room from



Overlap each layer of paint. Beginning with the primer on the trim, each coat of paint should extend slightly onto the adjacent surface, producing a cleaner line.

the ladder, I work from the floor cutting in the rest (top photo, p. 85).

Staying out of the paint rain

Once the entire room is cut in, it's on to the rolling. The first thing I need is a roller frame, which is the handle and holder for the roller pad. Roller frames come in an amazing array of widths and shapes, but I usually stick with the standard 9-in. model. I avoid cheap roller frames because they don't hold up well.

The next-most-important tool for painting walls and ceilings is a telescoping extension

Choosing a roller pad



There are several factors I consider when choosing a roller pad (photo above). The first is the surface I'm going to paint. For smooth surfaces, a roller pad with a short nap ($\frac{1}{4}$ in. to $\frac{1}{2}$ in.) is fine. But if you're covering a heavy stucco, you may

need as much as a $1\frac{1}{2}$ -in. nap. Light ceiling textures usually require a nap that's somewhere in between.

Next, I look at the type of paint I'm applying. Most roller pads are made with synthetic fibers that work fine with all

paints, latex or oil. But for applying a finish coat of oil paint, I recommend using a natural-fiber roller pad.

Another factor is how smooth I need the finish coat to appear. Gloss paints tend to show off the stippled finish from the roller really well, so I usually opt for a fine-nap pad that leaves a smoother finish. Flat paints are much more forgiving, so having a fine nap isn't as critical.

Roller pads come in a lot of different lengths and diameters, but the standard 9-in. roller pad and frame works well for 95% of my painting. However, when I need to roll paint in a really narrow spot, I reach for my "hot-dog" roller.

The pad for a hot-dog roller is 6 in. long with a diameter of less than an inch. Mounted on a long-handle frame, it's perfect for rolling places such as the wall behind a radiator.

A brief word about quality. I won't use cheap paintbrushes, and I never, ever use cheap roller pads for applying flat latexes. If I need the pad to last only for one room and if I plan to toss it out after I'm done, an inexpensive pad is just the ticket.

I never use a cheap roller pad for applying an oil paint. Oil paint pulls the fibers out of the pad and leaves walls with an incredible koalalike finish. -B.J.D.

pole. I use SherLock poles (Wooster Brush Co.; 800-392-7246). These poles come in various sizes, but for most rooms with flat ceilings, a 4-ft. pole that telescopes to 8 ft. or so works great. I avoid screw-together extension poles; they're a lot of trouble.

The extension pole has a broom-handle thread on one end that screws into the roller frame. This tool keeps me from running up and down a stepladder to paint ceilings. If I paint a ceiling without an extension pole, I end up working directly under the roller, getting splattered as I paint.

Working out of a 5-gal. pail

Next, I need the correct roller pad for the job and paint I'm applying (sidebar p. 83). For the oil-based primer that I'm using for the job in the photos, I chose an inexpensive 3/8-in. nap roller pad good for any kind of paint.

The two most common ways to get paint onto the roller are a standard paint pan (bottom photo), which I use for the finish coats, or a 5-gal. bucket with a roller ramp hung on the rim (top photo). For the primer on this project, I needed about 2½ gal. of paint, so I poured that amount into the pail, inserted the roller ramp and got to work.

The 5-gal. bucket should be no more than half full, leaving most of the ramp exposed. I dip the roller pad slightly into the paint—about one-quarter of the way—and draw it up onto the ramp. Dipping the roller into the paint any deeper can make it drip all over the place.

I dip the pad several times while rolling it up and down the ramp until the pad is completely saturated. Most ramps are made of expanded metal that distributes the paint evenly on the roller pad while allowing excess paint to drain back into the pail. When the roller pad is fully loaded, I place it near the top of the ramp and give it a quick downward push off the roller ramp to spin off any excess paint.

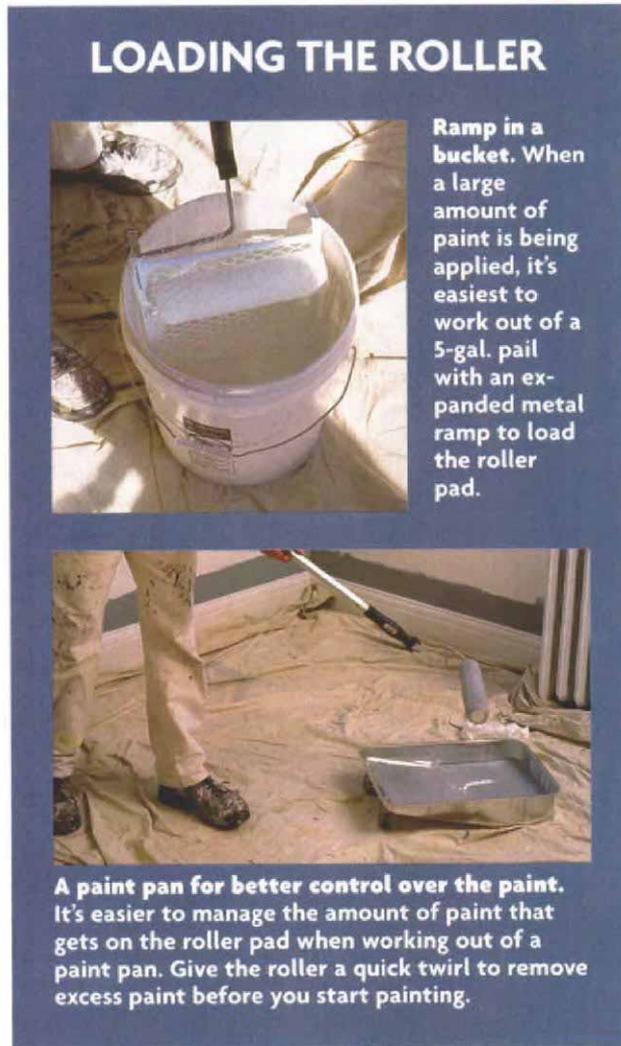
Ready to roll

I start rolling in one corner of the ceiling, working down the short side of the room first. I roll the paint in 3-ft. squares with each square overlapping the next slightly (photo p. 82). (A 3-ft. by 3-ft. area is about what a properly loaded roller ought to cover.) For each square, I roll the paint on from side

to side in compacted *W* or *M* formations: down straight, back up on a slight diagonal, then straight down again, overlapping each down stroke with the one before. But remember you're painting, not spelling. Overlapping gives you even coverage and keeps you from missing any spots. Where the squares overlap my cut-in band, I try to keep the roller about 1 in. from the corner.

Once the ceiling is finished, I start on the walls. I first work my way along the top of each wall in similar 3-ft. squares (photo bottom left, facing page). The small sections

much paint from working with an overloaded pad. But it helps to get rid of the excess paint on the roller that is causing the ropes in the first place. When ropes begin to appear, I tilt the frame and pad slightly at an angle to the wall with just the end touching and roll it for a couple of inches (photo bottom right, facing page). I repeat the process with the other side of the roller and then work the drips that have squeezed out into the area I'm painting. When I'm finished with a section, the paint should be a consistent thickness over the entire area.



LOADING THE ROLLER

Ramp in a bucket. When a large amount of paint is being applied, it's easiest to work out of a 5-gal. pail with an expanded metal ramp to load the roller pad.

A paint pan for better control over the paint. It's easier to manage the amount of paint that gets on the roller pad when working out of a paint pan. Give the roller a quick twirl to remove excess paint before you start painting.

Mix all your cans of finish paint for consistent color

Because I use a fast-drying primer, I can apply the finish coats almost immediately. For this room, I gave the ceiling one coat of white finish paint, and the walls two coats of teal.

For the finish coat, I roll the ceiling first so that any drips or spatter that I get on the walls will be covered with their finish coat. When cutting in the ceiling, I again overlap the finish paint slightly onto the walls. It's still not necessary to be extremely tidy; I just try not to leave any globs of paint on the walls.

Next is the final coat on the walls, and I don't want to be short on paint. I also want a little paint left over in case I need to touch up or repair a wall in the future. But custom-mixed colors usually vary from can to can, which can be obvious if I have to buy an extra quart to finish a job.

The trick is to overbuy and then mix all the cans of paint together thoroughly before I start. Most paints cover around 400 sq. ft. of flat surface per gallon, and I knew that the walls in this room would need two coats. So after a little mental math, I bought six quarts—or a gallon plus two quarts. I figured this amount would leave me with about a half-quart after I was done.

I've seen painters pour half of a gallon can into a container and then pour half of a second can into the first. They continue this process around until all the cans have been blended completely. Mixing paint in this manner is known as *boxing*, but I find it easier just to pour all the paint into a 5-gal. bucket (photo top left, p. 86).

Be finicky on the final cut in

The time has finally arrived to take the extra effort to cut in neatly. I start at the ceiling

above windows and doors are done in shorter, smaller strokes.

Ropes, drips and runs

The biggest concern when rolling paint is that excess paint tends to build up on the outside edges of the roller pad and frame. Paint buildup leaves behind *ropes*, or heavy lines of paint, in the wake of the roller.

Going back over a section with the roller smooths out any ropes or areas with too

"Even if a room has no stains or damage, I recommend using a primer under the finish coat. It not only helps to seal the surface, but it also makes the finish coat go on more evenly."



Cutting in from the floor. The author first cuts in the upper part of the room from a ladder, then works his way around the room, standing on the floor and cutting in.

Painting Ms and Ws. To apply an even coat of paint, the roller is drawn down straight, back up at a slight angle and then straight down again, overlapping the previous downstroke in the shape of an M or a W.



The end of the ropes. Ropes, or heavy lines of paint, show up when there is too much paint on the outer edges of the pad. Running the edge of the roller on the wall squeezes out the excess paint.

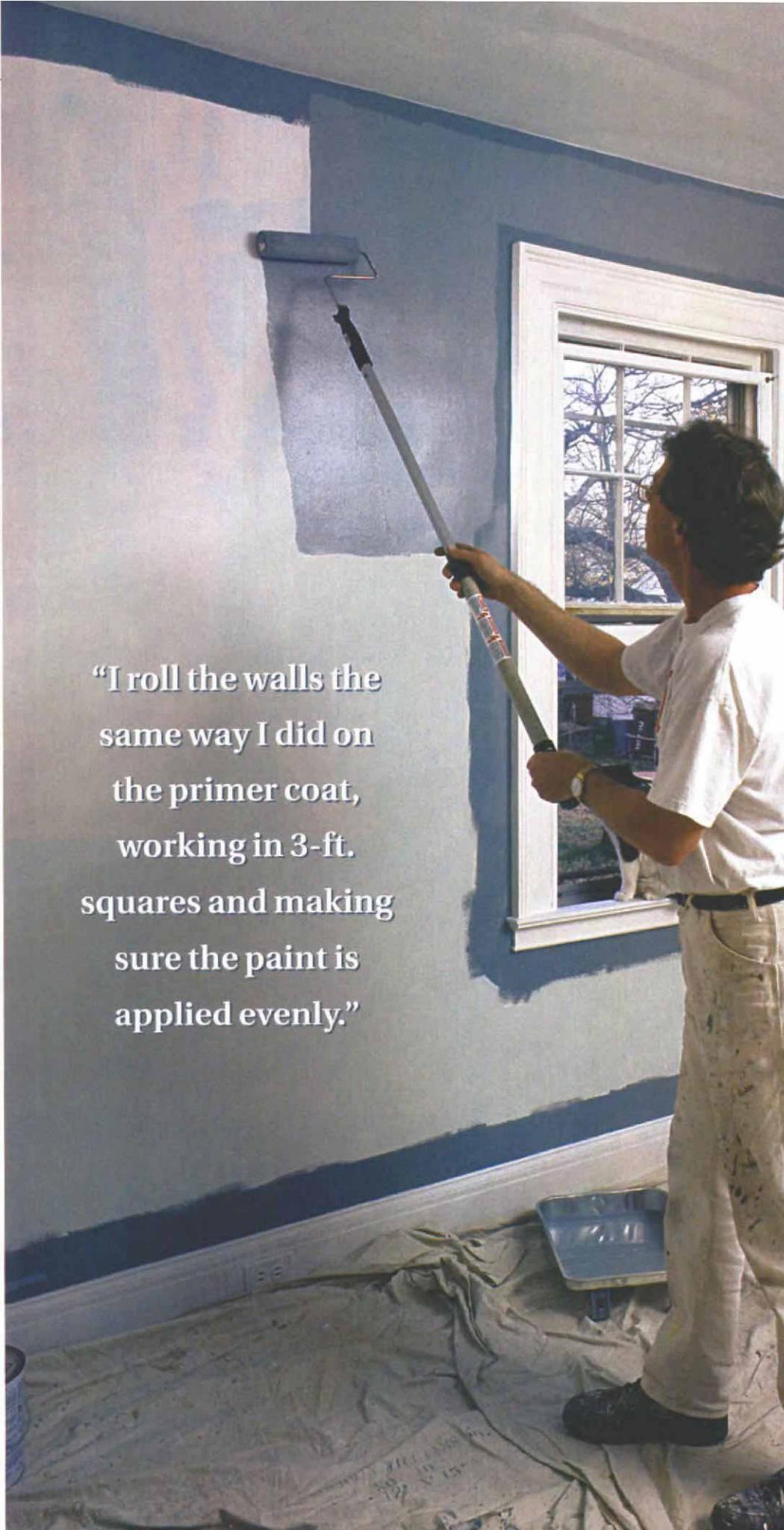


Blend all the finish paint together. Custom-mixed paint can vary in color from can to can, so all the paint is mixed together in a 5-gal. pail before it goes on the walls.



You're getting paint on the trim. Overlapping paint between adjacent surfaces continues as the wall paint is extended onto the trim slightly. The finish paint on the trim will create the final line.

Rolling on the finish coat. Applied with the same rolling pattern, the finish coat is rolled onto the walls.



"I roll the walls the same way I did on the primer coat, working in 3-ft. squares and making sure the paint is applied evenly."



Smoothing the walls between coats. A work light helps to find any lumps or debris in the first coat. A light sanding smooths everything out.

line of one wall and cut it in as neatly as possible. It's still okay if it's not absolutely perfect; I'll fine-tune the line on the final coat.

Again, I create the first horizontal line with a high-quality 3-in. brush turned on edge. I then complete the band using the full 3-in. width. I also overlap onto the trim slightly (photo bottom left, facing page), but I don't go crazy. For the project featured here, the trim was to be white, which wouldn't cover the teal wall paint well.

A paint pan minimizes ropes

Instead of working out of a 5-gal. bucket, I use a roller pan for the finish coats on both the ceiling and walls. Loading the roller out of a paint pan gives me better control over ropes and drips. When filling a roller pan, I pour in just enough paint to fill the deep end of the pan. And again, I don't let the entire roller submerge in the paint. When the roller is saturated, I give it a light twirl to spin off excess paint from the ends.

I roll the walls the same way I did on the primer coat, working in 3-ft. squares and making sure the paint is applied evenly (photo right, facing page). When the first coat is dry, I go over the walls with light sandpaper using a work light to illuminate lumps or debris that might need to be smoothed out (photo top left).

Cutting in the second coat gives me the chance to fine-tune the line between the ceiling and walls (photo top right). Working in an older home, I often find myself having to invent a straight line because the corners are uneven. I take my time and fill in any small gaps left from the first coat.



Final finicky cut in. The final cut in is the most crucial to make sure the line between ceiling paint and wall paint is perfectly straight.

Don't use masking tape to create a straight corner line, which can make an even bigger mess than you're trying to prevent. Instead, take your time and trust yourself with the brush. You can't do any damage that can't be easily fixed with either wall or ceiling paint.

The roller pad I used for the first coat still had plenty of life in it after one coat, so I didn't want to throw it out. But I couldn't let it sit out overnight either, so I stuck it in the fridge. I just double-wrapped the roller pad (still on the frame) in old plastic grocery bags and set it next to the eggs and milk. Paint dries slowly at refrigerator temperatures. The next day, I let the roller come to room temperature and was ready to roll the next coat.

When I'm finished with the final coat, I use the curved part of a painter's 5-in-1 tool to scrape most of the residual paint out of the roller, and then I throw the roller pad away.

There are gadgets on the market that are supposed to help with cleaning rollers. But cleaning a roller pad can shorten its limited life span and can even destroy a cheaper pad that has a cardboard core.

Throwing pads away may not be frugal, but besides being a pain, cleaning roller pads is inefficient. Every time I try cleaning a pad, there always seems to be a bit of residual paint that spoils whatever I try to paint next.

To store leftover paint, I secure the lid and store the can upside down. The next time I need it, the tint that settles to the bottom naturally mixes back into the paint. □

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