

## THE BACKGROUND OF THE ROOM



MICHIGAN STATE COLLEGE  
OF AGRICULTURE AND APPLIED SCIENCE

EXTENSION SERVICE  
R. J. BALDWIN—DIRECTOR  
EAST LANSING, MICHIGAN

# THE BACKGROUND OF A ROOM

By MARION RIDER HOFFMAN  
Home Furnishing Specialist

*"Its walls shall be the quiet background  
for the loveliness of life."—William W.  
Price.*

---

The background of the room is of great importance. It does much to give a feeling of restfulness or confusion to a room. In this discussion the background of the room includes the ceiling, walls, woodwork and floors. It should be remembered that these parts of the room are the background and, therefore, their coloring should be subordinated to that in the rest of the room. The ceiling of a room corresponds in value to the sky of a landscape, the walls to the value in the middle distance and the floor to the ground.

## THE CEILING

Since the ceiling corresponds to the sky it should be the lightest value in the background; a dark sky is forbidding and a dark ceiling has the same effect on a room. A light value in the ceiling color will also make the room appear lighter and higher. However, the ceiling should be of the same hue as the walls. It should be remembered that the ceiling receives only reflected light, that the light first strikes the walls and is then reflected to the ceiling. Care must be taken in selecting a color light enough in value to overcome the light lost through this reflection.

A room with an extremely high ceiling does not give the sense of repose that a room with a low ceiling does. The proportions of a room with a high ceiling can seemingly be changed by bringing the ceiling color down on the wall.

## THE WALLS

The walls are the background for the furniture in the room and should be related to the color of the furniture, the furnishings and the woodwork. Bright colors or strong contrasts of colors should never be used; they take the attention away from the furnishings. Unity in color will be obtained if the hue decided upon for the walls is used as the dominant hue in the color scheme of the room.

To obtain unity where several rooms connect, harmonious wall colors

should be used. Related hues which differ in value may be selected. The variance in value and hue will depend upon the lighting of the different rooms. The same color, or but very slightly different colors, in connecting rooms will give a feeling of added space.

### FACTORS TO CONSIDER BEFORE CHOOSING WALL COLOR

**Exposure and number of windows:** In south rooms which have many windows and are sunshiny and light, cool colors, grayed in intensity and medium in value, may be used to soften the light.

North rooms, or rooms with few windows, usually need light, warm colors. Grayed colors with yellow in them will give cheer and light to these rooms.

**Uses of the room:** Since the living room is the room which must be shared by a number of people and is the most impersonal room in the home, inconspicuous wall color will give the most restful background.

The dining room is used only for short periods at a time and the wall should not be quite so grayed in intensity as the living room.

The purpose of the bedroom is rest; therefore, the colors of the wall should be light in value and grayed in intensity.

Light colors are suitable for the bathroom. They give the appearance of cleanliness.

For the kitchen, wall colors light in value and less grayed in intensity than in the living room, may be used.

**Size of the room:** If the rooms are small yet comfortably lighted, colors light in value for the walls will give the appearance of greater size.

If rooms are too large, warm colors of medium value give a friendly feeling to the room. If the value is too dark when cool colors are used the effect will be one of gloom and coldness.

**Design of furniture, and main color of furnishings:** If the lines of the furniture and the proportions of it are good the furniture will be emphasized by a wall color grayed in intensity and light of value. If the furniture is not particularly interesting, and there are too many pieces, it will be less noticeable against a wall nearer its own value. The wall color should harmonize with the main color in the furnishings. It is well to have the walls repeat, in a grayed intensity, some of the dominant hue of the room.

### TEXTURE OF THE WALL FINISH

The texture of the wall finish should be considered. Textures that are somewhat rough reflect light in such a way as to give the appearance of a vibrating color. Such a finish blends the colors and is more pleasing than a shiny, glossy finish. This is also true of finishes for the woodwork and floors.

## KINDS OF WALL COVERINGS

Beautiful furniture of lovely lines and proportions and beautiful pictures will be lost if unattractive and inappropriate wall covering is chosen.

Very lovely soft colors may be obtained in **paint**. The dull finish gives the most pleasing effect. Interesting effects may be obtained by stippling. However, care must be taken that the walls are not made too prominent with such treatment.

**Tints** are mixtures of colored powder and water and may be obtained in pleasing colors.

On smooth, plastered walls, canvas, burlap and grass cloth are some of the **textiles** used.

**Paper** is the most commonly used covering because of the large variety of colorings, patterns and textures available at reasonable prices. Wallpapers in slightly rough textures are satisfactory. The silk fibered ones are lovely in color but are more expensive. When choosing wall paper it is wise to hold two or three rolls together to get the effect that it will have on the wall.

**Waterproof wall fabrics** can now be obtained in pebbled and dull surfaces as well as in the glazed surface fabrics. They come in soft, lovely colors and good designs.

## COLOR AND DESIGN IN WALLPAPER

If the wallpaper is to make a background for the furniture of the room, the following characteristics should be kept in mind when selecting it. Walls are flat, solid surfaces. The designs chosen should be flat so that they do not express depth or roundness. If the contrasts in values in the colors are slight this desired effect will be produced.

Patterns of realistic flowers or fruit or landscape, of festoons and



Figure I.—These designs would not make a background for the furniture.

garlands of flowers, of knots of ribbons and of trellises and vines should be avoided. The more realistic the figures are, the poorer the design. The designs in Figure I, are not only very realistic but show sharp contrasts in value.

Extremely dark colors should be avoided. They give a dark and gloomy appearance to the room. Figure III gives an illustration of this.



Fig. II.—The design is not connected and there are sharp contrasts in value.



Figure III.—Colors are too dark. This paper would give a gloomy effect to a room.

Inconspicuous stripes may be used. If they give an up and down effect rather than a crosswise or diagonal effect they are more restful. Stripes are especially good in a low room because they make the room appear higher.

Plain or nearly plain paper, if the colors are grayed, make good backgrounds. Notice in Figure IV that the plain wall covering makes

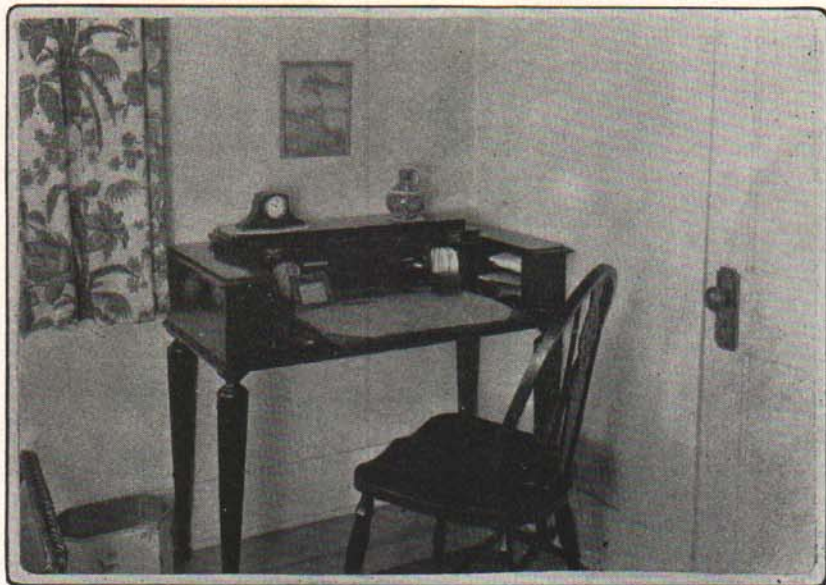


Figure IV.—The plain wall makes a splendid background for furnishings.



Figure V.—This wallpaper makes a poor background for the furnishings.

a splendid background for the furnishing, while in Figure V all the accessories are lost against the wallpaper.

If the wall is uneven a plain paper sometimes shows up the roughness. Then a paper with a soft, self-toned foliage pattern may be used. A pattern with dots or slight variations to give a vibrating effect is good. Such wallpapers give a restful effect to the room and will make the walls a background. The pattern should be in scale with the size of the room and the furnishings. If figures are used they should be connected in some way and should not be too widely separated. They will then make an all-over design.

In some cases, wallpaper with a decorative design, if it is a good design and of pleasing colors, may be used to good advantage. It may be used in a hall or a corridor where few pieces of furniture are used. Or it may be used in an extremely large room where colonial furniture



Figure VI.—A decorative design which does not have sharp contrasts in values; the figures are connected and the colors are grayed.

is used. Sometimes it is attractive in a dining room. It will help furnish such a room. If it is chosen, the contrast in values should not be sharp or the colors intense. See Figure VI. The colors should be much grayer than the furnishings in the room. With patterned paper, plain upholstery and hangings should be used. Pictures or decorative wall objects should not be used.

### THE USE OF BORDERS

In the average room borders are usually not needed. Picture molding may be placed at the intersection of the ceiling and walls in low rooms or rooms of average height. If the ceiling is too high, the ceiling paper may be brought down on the side walls and the molding placed at the intersection of the two colors.

If borders are used they should be of inconspicuous designs and

colors which do not attract attention. Conspicuous ornaments and large flowered cut-out patterns are not pleasing or restful in a room.

### THE WOODWORK

Since the woodwork of the room is part of the background, it should be quiet in coloring and blend into the color scheme of the walls. Painted woodwork permits the matching of the color of the wallpaper. "If a patterned paper is used the woodwork should be painted the same color as the background of the paper."\* Very often the desired effect will be obtained by using the same color as the wall in a darker or lighter value; about two tones different from the walls is pleasing. This is especially good for the small room, for the room that is cut up by many doors and windows or in which the design of the windows and doors is poor. These irregularities will be less conspicuous with such treatment. If the woodwork and the walls are of different hues it is best to have their values the same. A dark woodwork with a light wall is too strong a contrast, especially if the woodwork is of a highly polished or varnished finish.

It is best to have the woodwork of rooms which open into each other of the same color or of different values of the same hue. This treatment gives a feeling of more space.

### THE FLOOR

The floor should be the darkest in value of the background colors; however, it should harmonize with the rest of the background. "The most generally useful color for floors—one which tones in most agreeably with woodwork, rugs and furniture—is a dark, grayish brown."\* The floor should be dark enough to give a feeling of stability. If the walls are light then the floor may be relatively light, and if the walls are dark or medium in value the floor will need to be darker.

Note: See Michigan State College Extension Course Notes, "Color and Design in Floor Coverings," for a more complete discussion on design and color in floor coverings.

\*From—"The Ross Crane Book of Home Furnishing and Decoration," by Ross Crane.