



**THE
RIGHT
COLOR**

Finding the Perfect Palette
for Every Room in Your Home

EVE ASHCRAFT

A Historic House in Charleston

When architect Gil Schafer first contacted me about a project in Charleston, South Carolina, it was already under way. Built in 1840, the grand brick house had survived the Civil War, an earthquake, several hurricanes, and tenants known for their wild parties. Now the house was being transformed through a distinguished renovation. I've worked with Gil on many projects and appreciate

his tireless energy and elegant perfectionism. This project would also introduce me to Charleston-based contractor-restorer extraordinaire Richard Marks.

When I first arrived at the house in the heart of the city's historic district, I was greeted by a swarm of skilled workmen—plasterers, wood carvers, stonemasons, electricians, plumbers, painters, and landscapers—all crisscrossing from room to room and passing one another on the many flights of stairs, carrying buckets, pipes, lumber, stone, tile, tools, panes of glass, ladders, and lunch. My first meeting with Richard was at a dusty Formica-topped caterer's table that had been set up in the middle of the grand dining room. Beige folding chairs were scattered around, and boxed lunches

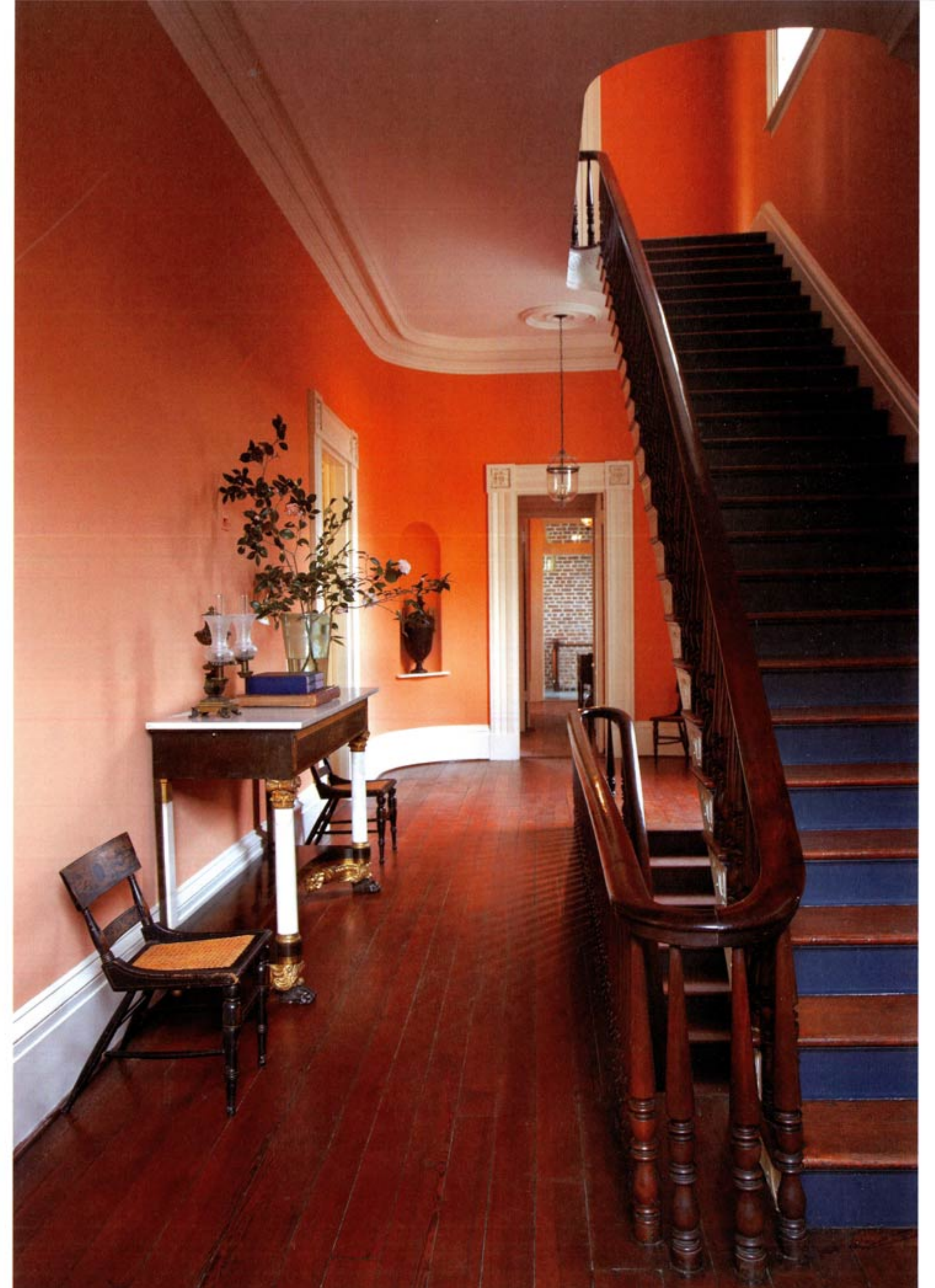
sat in stacks next to floor plans and paint decks. Richard introduced himself as "Moby" and began outlining the project's scope in his congenial Southern manner. In addition to being a repository of local lore, Moby possessed a mind-boggling amount of information about history, materials, and methods. We discussed how homes age, the "expiration dates" of the parts and pieces, and how to go about the task of bringing new life to an old house.

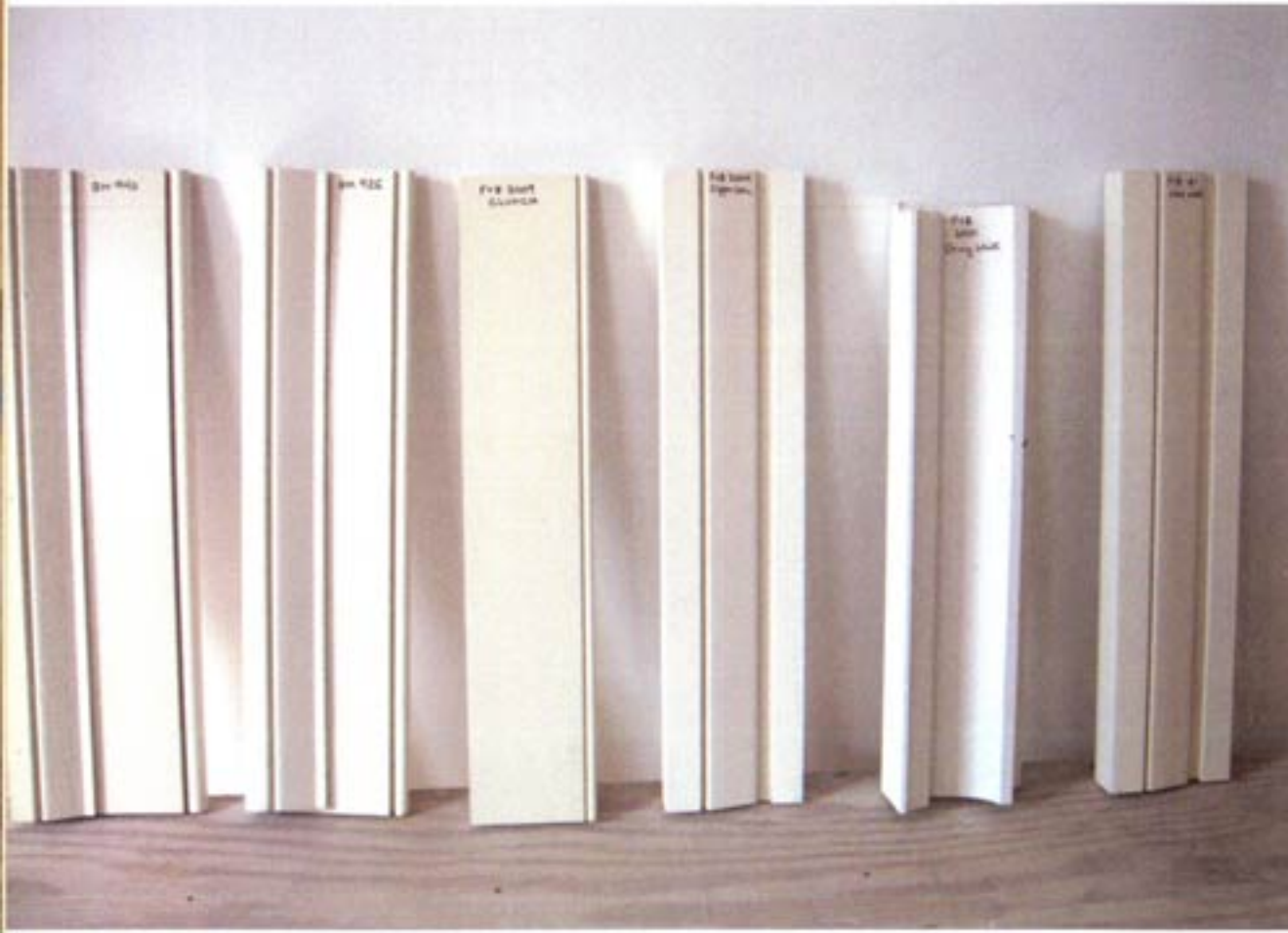
In addition to specifying color, my role was to advise on the methods used to restore the walls and wood surfaces, making them ready for paint. I took the time to learn the house, floor by floor, room by room, to think about how the spaces would be used, which parts of the house would be



Left: While the exterior of this historic brick house doesn't seem too driven by color, there were numerous color considerations involved in the restoration. We discussed and selected colors for mortar, flashing, shutters (Charleston Green), porch floors and ceilings, hinges and downspouts.

Opposite: It's hard to beat Charleston for grand old houses that sit cheek by jowl in the historic part of town. This house emanates history as you walk its gracious rooms. I chose a color called Rhetta Pumpkin for the generous stair hall. It's the first thing you see when you open the front door, and it winds its way up to the top, setting the tone for the whole house.





Above left: I asked the painters to make samples of trim in our test colors, which I then clearly labeled with a marker.

Left: The trim samples allowed us to freely move through the house, examining test colors in concert with wall colors and wallpapers. Here, I am trying out a trim color in the dining room.

Above: Knowing that the dining room would be lined in a wallpaper mural guided our color choices for the adjacent rooms. Three large blocks of color painted on a wall of the middle parlor helped us determine which was the best complement to the wallpaper sample tacked up in the distance.

Opposite: The freshly painted parlor rooms look elegant despite the minimal furnishings. The slight shift in color, with the lighter room in the distance, helps create a greater sense of space.



public and which private, and most important, how color could be used to support the history, architecture, and attitude of the house. Working closely with Gil, I started to develop a concept for the main parlor floor. Gil presented three versions of a pattern of hand-blocked scenic wallpaper under consideration for the dining room. We chose one variation, which made selecting colors for the adjacent rooms much easier. We tested several versions of a rich, golden yellow, a color that related to the warm tones in the wallpaper, before we settled on the right hue.

As the color plan unfolded for the interior spaces, it became clear that the house held color well. Bold colors felt appropriate and provided striking backgrounds for the owner's impressive collection of antique American furniture. Even though serious research had been done about the

materials used to build the house and careful attention was being paid to the methods of restoration, we did not feel hemmed in by the real or imagined constraints of historical precedent with regard to color. After all, this project was a private residence, not a collection of period rooms.

Yet sometimes historical colors can be striking. One of the biggest decisions was what color to paint the entry and stair hall, which was four stories tall. I could just hear the noble house begging for something distinctive, and it must have been speaking loudly because Gil tossed out the idea of orange. Moby gave us a copy of the Historic Colors of Charleston paint chart, and there was the perfect hue: Rhett Pumpkin. Not a color for the timid, this deep grayed orange gave the house a distinct character—bold, warm, and inviting—as it wound its way up the stair hall.

My role as color consultant extended well beyond the walls, as it often does on a project of this complexity. On the exterior, I weighed in on the colors for gutters, chimney flashing, shutters, porch floors, the loggia ceiling, and the mortar for repointing; inside, I worked out a palette that took in the stairs risers, pieces of handrails, cabinets, even the grout between tiles. Slowly, with skill and thoughtfulness, the Charleston house came together, reborn as a twenty-first-century beauty with great respect for the past.

The Relevance of Historic Colors

Historically significant, antique, or vintage houses pose an interesting issue with respect to color selection, both inside and out. How important is it that we adhere to a historically accurate color palette? Should we approach our homes as if they were sacred archaeological sites, carefully chipping through the layers to determine whether the hallway was originally green or brown? Despite all our technical advances, we still can't always determine what historical colors actually looked like. Many paint companies' lines of "historic" paints are only interpretations of true period colors.

Just as we don't wear eighteenth-century frocks in our Colonial house or prepare kettles of stew from historically accurate recipes, we shouldn't feel pressured to re-create the past when it comes to color. The modern world has brought us brighter lighting, endless color options in paint and materials, larger windows, and better insulation. All of these factors influence how we use and decorate our homes. My process when choosing colors for an old house is the same one I use for a new house—listen to the environment, look at the architecture, study how the light affects the spaces, and consider how the occupants use the rooms. Though my choices for a historical house respect the past, they are always firmly rooted in the here and now.



Opposite: The finished house has open, spacious rooms on the parlor floor. I wanted to support the wonderful mural and let it steal the show in the main part of the house, so I chose warm, subordinate colors for all the adjacent rooms.

Left: All of the trim in the main part of the house is the same color—a soft white that's neither too bright and new-looking nor too creamy—because I wanted a degree of contrast with the warmer wall colors.

Below: The large kitchen sits in the original service wing of the house, at the back of the property. Here, I changed direction with the color palette, shifting from warmer colors in the main rooms of the house to cooler ones that seemed appropriate for a kitchen in a southern climate. The cabinetry and paneling are all satin-finish sage green, while the walls are a soft white with sage and cream undertones.

