

A new paint collection based on a modernist's favourite palettes incorporates the finest natural ingredients – and has an equally impressive price tag

## Colour as Le Corbu saw it



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What could possibly make paint that costs about \$6 a square foot – or \$600 to \$1,000 to cover one wall – a bargain?

What could make the three weeks it takes to ship it over from the foothills of the Swiss Alps worth the wait?

And how might a range of 130 colours seem like enough?

Colour usually comes almost free with a can of paint and buying it is supposed to be a form of instant gratification. Colour choices, meanwhile, usually consist of almost 2,000 off-the-rack hues.

So it might seem like either a brave or a foolish idea for Toronto retailer Klaus Nienkamper Jr. to carry the new Le Corbusier paint at Klaus, his downtown contemporary-furniture store (www.klausn.com). The 63 colours in the line make up the modernist Swiss-French architect's original 1932 and 1950s palettes for the Swiss wallpaper company Salubra. In 1999, the Le Corbusier Foundation in Paris gave kt.COLOR the exclusive licence to produce these colour keyboards. Under the guidance of chemist and colour aficionado Katrin Trautwein, the Swiss-based company uses original recipes involving up to 100 artist pigments combined with environmentally safe binder to produce what it calls "artists' colour for walls."

These aren't colours that can be knocked off. Industrial paint cannot mimic the effect of natural ingredients such as burnt ochre, madder lake or ground gemstones and minerals such as lapis lazuli (once the most expensive colour in the world because it came only from Afghanistan, was hard to process into usable form and was consequently more precious than gold). Trautwein likens these colours to food. When you are used to a home-cooked meal carefully made with good ingredients, take-out just doesn't cut it any more.

I always liked the black wall in my kitchen, for instance, until I held a sample of Le Corbusier's black up to it. Mine suddenly looked washed out, while his looked like velvet. I asked Trautwein about the difference and she explained that most blacks are made with the same carbon black of car tires and industrial products. Le Corbusier's Ivory Black – the one artists used for centuries – is made from charred bones and is very difficult to grind into usable pigment. The colour – yes, black is a colour and a great one at that! – is so rich that it becomes a limitless void. Trautwein agrees that it makes a beautiful ceiling colour, akin to a night sky.

Her apartment, incidentally,



The specially blended colours that Le Corbusier used in projects such as this private residence in Germany have been reproduced by Swiss-based kt.COLOR for a boutique commercial paint line. The handmade fan decks showing 106 of the hues, top, cost \$295.

is painted Champagne White, which is made from the chalky limestone soil of France's Champagne region. The lime pigment that gives the wine its special flavour is what makes this white paint, in Trautwein's words, "dry, flavourful and textured." Industrially produced titanium whites are far too bright to her eye and not as tactile as this velvety white.

Also included in the collection is the famous Yves Klein Blue. The French artist formulated it in the 1950s and loved it so much that he patented it as International Klein Blue (IKB). Because its beauty transcended materiality and entered a spiritual realm, he painted numerous blue monochromes – canvases filled with this blue and nothing more. Outside France, a patent cannot be taken out on a process or a formula so IKB, as well as the pink and gold he used to complete his famous Holy

Trinity monochromes, can be purchased for walls – and cheaply by comparison with an original Klein work.

Le Corbusier called his first, thirties-era palette his grande gamme (or big-scale) colours for big areas. These easy-to-live-with hues are all light and atmospheric. His goal was to give modernist architects a way of using colour to add warmth, texture and atmosphere to white spaces without it being too active or in-your-face.

His later palette is stronger and more saturated (the more he used colour, the more colour he wanted) and includes black and the most grassy green ever made. These colours are for accents and are to be juxtaposed with white and with raw materials such as concrete and wood.

All of Le Corbusier's colours are complex ones. When colour is made from a mixture of many pigments, it has a spe-

cial luminosity and depth.

Kt.COLOR mixtures include no black, the tint that most industrial paint companies use to soften colours. This is a trick that artists have used for centuries to make colours that don't just look good but that also mix well with each other.

Le Corbusier realized almost 100 years ago that industrial colour produced by the chemical industry was scary and could lead to colour "misadventure." His solution to fool-proof colour choices was to create colour the way it had been made before the 1870s – that is, by using nature's pigments and by applying them according to nature's rules, the ones we call colour psychology. People in every part of the world would know and understand them.

For example, blue on a floor is wrong because blues in nature are air and water and not solid. Light-blue floors, therefore, produce an uneasy instability. On the walls, they dissolve solidity and open up space. Brown, moreover, anchors things and so is perfect for floors or on walls to suggest structural strength, while reds bring space in but (when made from natural pigments like cinnabar) aren't tiring. Le Corbusier thought mauve was inappropriate for any kind of use because he felt its frequency was too high to be comfortable. He also never used yellow in dark rooms because it was the colour of sunlight and needed sunshine to be energized, to glow and to be itself. (This is not true of regular paint.)

Klaus Nienkamper thinks that, once people have experienced the beauty and quality of Le Corbusier paint, they will be willing to wait for it, just as they do for a sofa or light fixture. And because this is not the kind of paint for slathering over every surface but is rather to be used for a judiciously chosen wall or block of colour, it can be applied by the square foot as decorative art.

In medieval times, an artisan who used one of these pigments had to find a patron to buy it, travel great distances to get it, spend months preparing it and store it in a pig's bladder when he wasn't using it. By comparison, we are getting it at a comparatively great price, at lightning speed and ready to go.

» Handmade fan decks showing 106 of Le Corbusier's hues cost \$295; the decks are registered so the manufacturer can refer to the paint colour recipes as raw materials may change. A sampler bottle covering approximately two square metres costs \$65, while a 1.6-gallon bucket ranges from \$600 to \$1,000. I recommend springing for Le Corbusier: Polychromie architecturale, a multi-volume set that is written in English, French and German and includes a book of Le Corbusier's colours for Salubra, a book of his colour combinations and a book of his ideas about applying colour to architecture; it costs \$278 and up. » Janice Lindsay is a Toronto colour and design consultant. 416-961-6281, pinkcolouranddesign.com

### Colour according to Le Corbu

**BLUE**  
Taking his cues from the natural world, the iconic Swiss-French architect felt that blues, which colour sea and sky in nature, should never be used on floors, where they might seem liquid and unstable.

**BROWN**  
By contrast, brown evokes earth and terra firma, making it ideal for floors. Le Corbusier also liked the colour for walls, where it suggests structural strength.

**YELLOW**  
Since yellow is the colour of sunshine and needs natural light to glow, Le Corbusier never used the hue in dark rooms, preferring it for well-lit spaces or outdoors.