

# Inside the complex world of white paint

Even the tiniest drop of pigment can alter the look and feel of a color's hue, shade and feel.

By Chris Moody  
October 19, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT



(Illustration by José L. Soto/The Washington Post; iStock)

Listen 9 min Share Comment Save

Buying a can of white paint seems like a straightforward task. It's just white, right?

But talk to any designer or paint expert and you'll quickly learn that there is nothing simple about white paint. It is a color — or a non-color, depending on your view — with the capacity for extreme subtlety in its sheer number of shade and texture options. Sherwin-Williams alone offers nearly **200 shades of white**. That makes choosing, naming and even creating a white paint far more involved than meets the eye.

It's precisely that complexity, though, that makes white a go-to for many designers. The effectiveness of white lies in its undertones, which can range from warm — think soft and cozy with a gentle yellow beneath it — to cold white, which typically hues blue. And of course, there's pure white, like a sheet of office paper.

[ 7 white paint colors that interior designers love ]

After **gray shades** have dominated most of this century's paint market in the United States, good old-fashioned, reliable white is having something of a moment. To meet the demand, paint companies are working hard to come up with creative shades to develop and name.

"White is really making its run right now. It's coming back," says **Jodi Macklin**, a designer based in Chevy Chase, Md. "We are definitely using much more white than color than we were over the last years."

## What is white, anyway?

Contemplating the complexities of white is nothing new. For centuries, white has vexed and enchanted philosophers, poets, artists and novelists the world over. In his groundbreaking "**Theory of Colours**," 19th-century German philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote that white "excites" the eye, describing it as "representative of light."

**William Morris**, the British socialist activist and textile designer, urged his countrymen to "choose honest whitewash ... on which sun and shadow play so pleasantly."

[ Tired of beige? Designers share their go-to bold paint colors. ]

Herman Melville devoted an entire chapter of "**Moby-Dick**" to the color. "Whiteness," Melville mused in his 3,600-word aside, "is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows ... [?]"

As intriguing as it may be, white has not been without its critics. Louis Cheskin, the 20th-century psychologist and marketing analyst, called white walls "an optical strain and psychological hazard."

The late Frank and Rudolf Mahnke, a father-son environmental design duo, devoted a chapter of their 1987 tome "**Color and Light in Man-made Environments**" to railing against it, calling it "a bleak and emotionless hue" that can induce "anxiety, tension, fear, and distress."

The use of white in mid-century reached what the Mahnkes called "epidemic proportions" starting in 1955 and peaking in 1975. They called for "an immediate halt to white and off white interiors." White walls in a children's hospital, they wrote, "would hardly lessen the patients' mental anguish." Non-white colors would help in "drawing attention outward and away from inner distress."

"Environments that are predominantly neutral in appearance are beyond any positive value and will always appear static, boring, and tedious," they wrote in their chapter entitled, aptly, "The Case Against White." "White need not be used as a predominant color; there are too many better alternatives."

But modern supporters of white in design point to its power as a color that contains multitudes in subtlety and range, and that can transcend short-term trends.

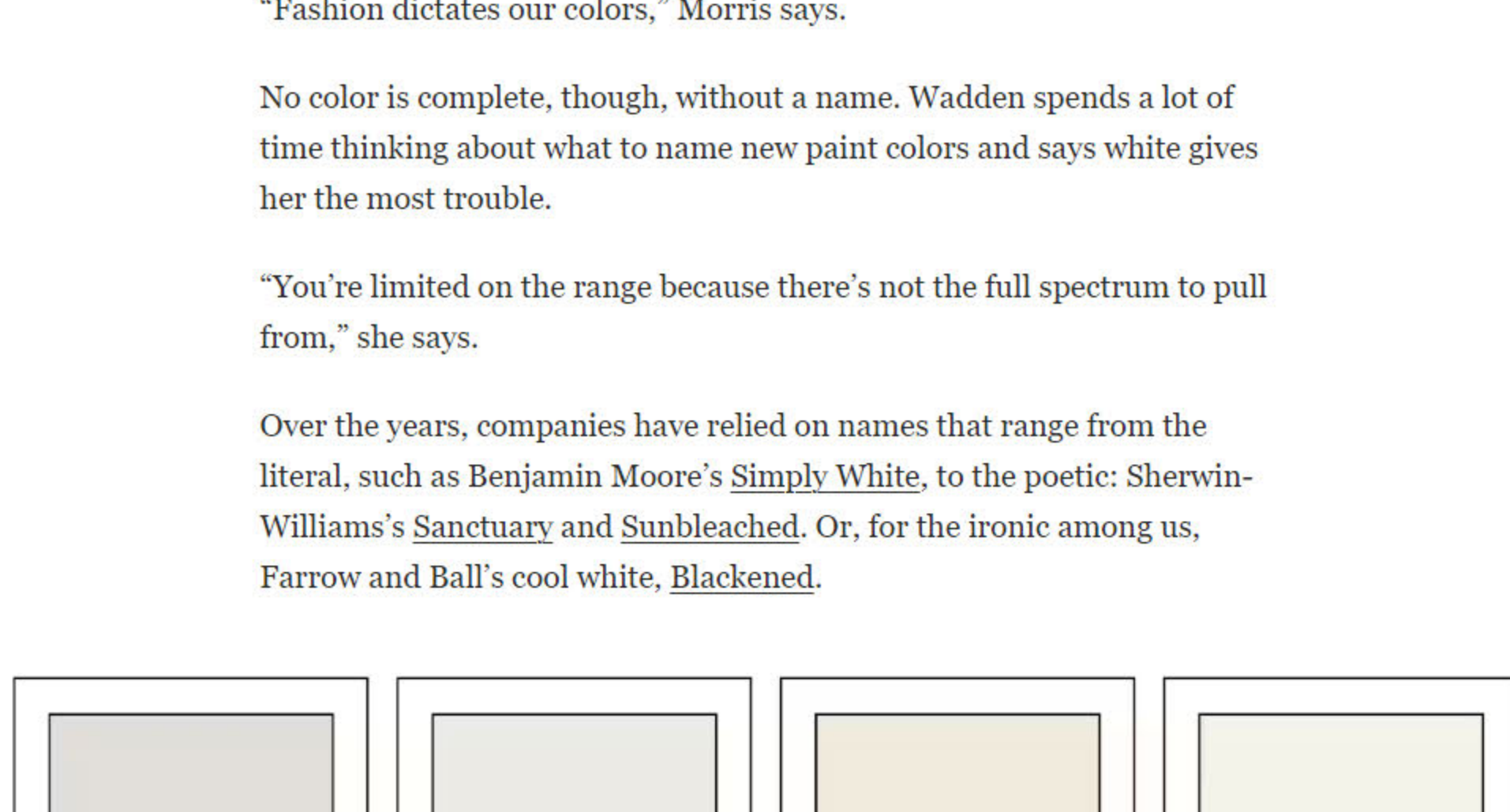
"I love white," says **Joanne Rodriguez**, an interior designer in Rockville, Md. "It's timeless. It's clean and versatile. With white, you can create different textures just by the finish."

## Creating and naming white paint

Whites can pose a particular challenge in terms of texture, sheen and light reflection, says Sue Wadden, the director of color marketing for Sherwin-Williams. Achieving the perfect look requires painstaking experimentation with the company's color lab. Even the tiniest drop of pigment can alter the look and feel of a color's hue, shade and feel.

"Whites have to hide. They have to cover," Wadden says. "They have to resist scratching, marring and smudgy fingers and all those things. There's so much that goes into whites that you wouldn't think when you're just rolling it on the wall. There's a huge variability between whites. So it presents its own challenges."

To develop new shades, paint companies rely on teams of experts in fashion and design to scour the globe in search of the next "it" color.



(Illustration by Chloe Meister/The Washington Post)

As a former member of Benjamin Moore's Designer Alliance, **Tracy Morris**, an interior designer in McLean, Va., has traveled the world to spot trends that might influence new paint color designs. Companies rely on input from designer trade shows, such as Milan's Salone del Mobile, Decorex in London or Paris Déco Off. Innovations in textiles, wood style preferences, flooring, furniture — even clothing — all influence the direction of color trends.

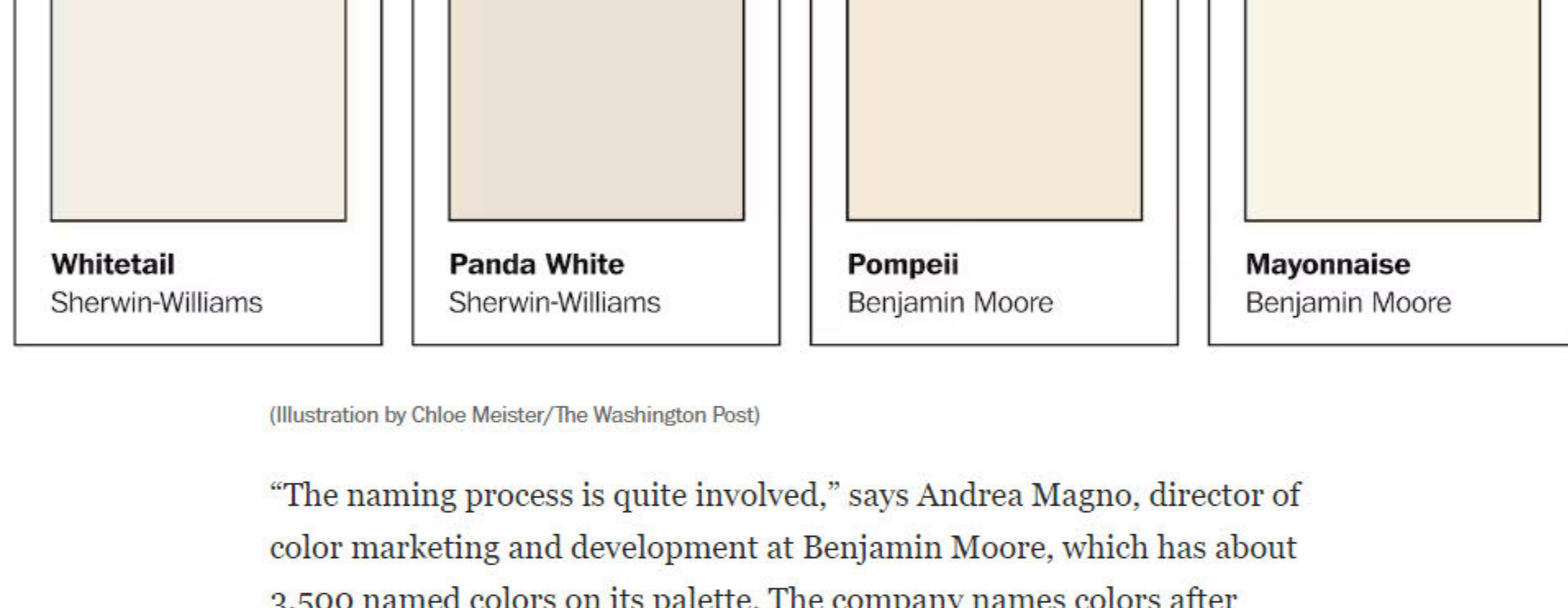
Share this article

"Fashion dictates our colors," Morris says.

No color is complete, though, without a name. Wadden spends a lot of time thinking about what to name new paint colors and says white gives her the most trouble.

"You're limited on the range because there's not the full spectrum to pull from," she says.

Over the years, companies have relied on names that range from the literal, such as Benjamin Moore's **Simply White**, to the poetic: Sherwin-Williams's **Sanctuary** and **Sunbleached**. Or, for the ironic among us, Farrow and Ball's cool white, **Blackened**.

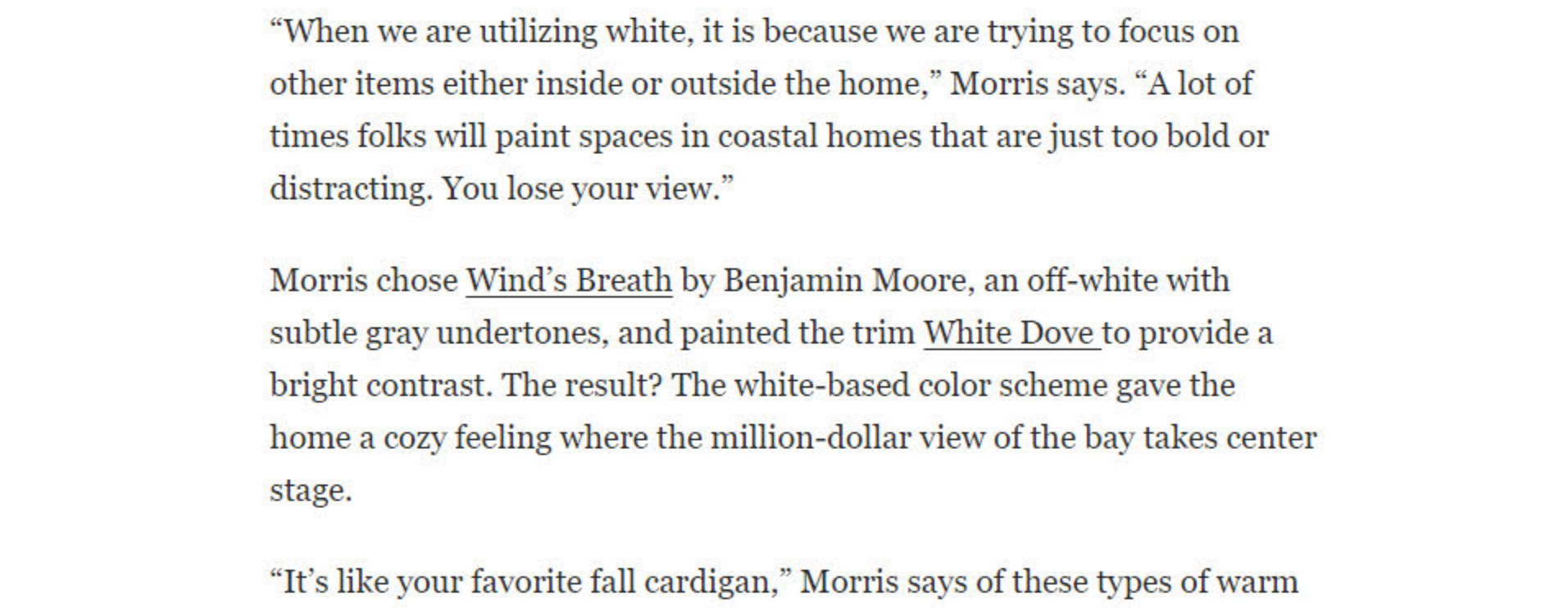


(Illustration by Chloe Meister/The Washington Post)

Wadden and other experts often look to the natural world for inspiration. What to name the new palette of cool whites with gray undertones? Behold, **Eider White** (as in the duck) and **Snowbound** (obviously). There are warmer tones, such as **Dover White** (see the cliffs of) or **Cheviot** (the sheep); and bright shades, such as **Whitetail** (after the deer's rear) or **Panda White** (after that animal you have to wait in line for hours to see at the zoo).

"Everyone has an association with nature," Wadden says. "It's what we see through our window every day, so usually that's a strong connection to color."

To make the task more daunting, Sherwin-Williams has a database of some 35,000 color names over its 157-year history. Employees aren't allowed to replicate a name that's been used before. Marketers have tricks to overcome that hurdle: They include an ampersand, spell it a little differently or add an extra word, Wadden says.



(Illustration by Chloe Meister/The Washington Post)

"The naming process is quite involved," says Andrea Magno, director of color marketing and development at Benjamin Moore, which has about 3,500 named colors on its palette. The company names colors after places (**Pompeii**), food (**Mayonnaise**), and feelings (**Calm**). "The inspiration for color names is endless," Magno adds.

And now **PPG Paints** is seeking help from technology; the company recently started using ChatGPT. "It helps with the initial brainstorm," says Erin Lageman-Louies, marketing manager at PPG Industries. "It's definitely something we're using on a daily basis."

## The case for white in design

Far from merely serving as a default paint color while in the throes of decision paralysis, whites serve specific design purposes that an untrained eye can easily overlook.

For instance, whites can be exceptional for highlighting other colors, such as in nature outside windows or furniture inside, Morris says.

For a dream home for a client in St. Michaels, a charming colonial village on Maryland's eastern shore, Morris was concerned that a darker color on the interior might take away from the world-class, 360-degree views of the Chesapeake Bay. The charming wood siding on the quintessentially coastal Cape Cod-style home was painted with a taupe-based green that complemented the maritime surroundings. So she proposed a warm shade of white.

"When we are utilizing white, it is because we are trying to focus on other items either inside or outside the home," Morris says. "A lot of times folks will paint spaces in coastal homes that are just too bold or distracting. You lose your view."

Morris chose **Wind's Breath** by Benjamin Moore, an off-white with subtle gray undertones, and painted the trim **White Dove** to provide a bright contrast. The result? The white-based color scheme gave the home a cozy feeling where the million-dollar view of the bay takes center stage.

"It's like your favorite fall cardigan," Morris says of these types of warm whites. "It envelops you, it makes you feel cozy, but yet it's clean."

Choosing the right shade can be daunting for non-experts just trying to make their home nice, particularly because white has a way of transforming depending on the time of day and time of year.

To help clients, **Gillian Rose**, a California-based color scientist and designer, asks her clients to participate in a neuroscientific polarity test to discover the color that works best for them. Rose says, is not merely a design choice that needs to match a space. It has to speak to the person, too. Clients choose from words they want to experience when they enter the space, such as "welcoming," "dynamic," "open," "subtle," "timeless" or "secure," which helps narrow their choices.

People drawn to whiter shades in their walls are usually more introverted, requiring less stimulation in the spaces around them than extroverts, she says.

"When people come to me, they're coming to discover themselves," Rose says. "The colors we're drawn to are about us. They're telling me. I'm not telling them."

For the more tech-savvy, large paint manufacturers are developing technologies to help people choose just the right shade. Benjamin Moore recently introduced a virtual assistant, "Betty," to assist consumers with the selection process. PPG, which manufactures Glidden paints, now offers a mobile program — pulled from dating apps — in which users are presented with shades and asked to swipe left for "no" and right for "yes." Think of it as Tinder, but for colors.

Picking any shade "can feel really overwhelming," says PPG's Lageman-Louies. "But if you're swiping through and asked to make a choice, sometimes you just have to go with your gut."

Chris Moody is a writer based in Boone, N.C., where he teaches journalism at Appalachian State University. He is colorblind.