

THE HOME YOU OWN

# 7 ways to get a colorful home without going gaudy

There's plenty of middle ground between all neutrals and a clown's fever dream.

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Design by Nick Olsen (Reid Rolls)



By Jennifer Barger

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Gwyneth Paltrow's beige-on-white California mansion. Cream-colored bouclé chairs for sale at big-box home stores such as CB2 and Pottery Barn. Taupe and gray on, well, everything in home makeovers by the Property Brothers and Chip and Joanna Gaines. So far, the designs of the 2020s seem stuck in neutral.

“People fear making expensive decorating mistakes or being judged by others, like someone coming over and saying, ‘Wow, you upholstered your sofa in acid green?’” says New York City interior designer Nick Olsen. “It pushes them toward softer colors, neutrals or no color at all.”

Studies show that using color in residential environments can improve people’s moods and make them function more effectively. But you don’t have to paint all your walls bright blue or buy a hot pink sectional sofa to liven up your space. Here’s how to add color to your home without making it look like a funhouse.



Annie Elliott green chest (Jenn Verrier)

## Go soft

Ballet pink ceilings, pale green walls and whisper blue ceilings all bring more life to rooms than basic white. “When people say they don’t like color, I think what they mean is screaming color: red, traffic-light yellow,” says Annie Elliott, a D.C.-based interior designer.

Instead, try less intense shades. (Think the bottom or second-from-the-bottom hues on paint cards.) Test any color you’re considering by tacking up painted pieces of poster board — or larger sample stickers (available from many paint makers or [samplize.com](http://samplize.com)) — on the walls.

Look at the samples on every surface you are considering covering at different times of day (and night) to see how natural and electric light affect them. Some interior designers or paint store experts will do in-person or video paint consultations; expect to pay \$100 and up per hour for a home consult or \$50 per hour or so for a video consult from representatives at brands such as Farrow & Ball and Benjamin Moore.



A design by Nicole Lanteri (Jared Kuzia)

## Take cues from a print or piece of art

You can pay thousands of dollars to have an interior designer come up with a subtle color scheme for a space. Or you can do it yourself by taking cues from a “hero” fabric, rug or piece of art.

“Start with something that has multiple colors to pull from: a vibrant upholstery fabric, a multicolor carpet,” Olsen says. “That sets your palette, and it does the work for you. Then pull colors out from that, maybe getting lamps and pottery in one shade and a lampshade or a slipper chair in another.”

“I often push clients toward a bright painting or print, even if a space is more neutral,” says Nicole Lanteri, an Arlington, Va.-based designer. “Art isn’t the largest piece in your home. You don’t sit on it. It just pops, and you see it for what it is.”

## Use color in unexpected spots

Lesser-seen, lesser-used areas of your home can be great places to experiment with bright touches. (Think blue metallic tiles in a powder room, a rainbow-striped duvet on the guest room bed.) “If neutrals are safe comfort food, then color is the spice, the thing that brings flavor and life to a home,” says Charles M. Boggs, associate chair of interior design at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

“I like to paint ceilings and interior doors in colors that contrast with the walls,” Olsen says. “I’m currently putting Tiffany blue inside one client’s closet, which will make her shoes look great.” Wall and window trim are also ripe for a dash of color.



Annie Elliott red cabinet (Angie Seckinger)

## Add a touch of wallpaper

For many homeowners, a whole room of wallpaper can feel too dramatic. But pasting a pale-colored toile to a single wall adds drama and interest without looking too madcap. You can also use wallpaper to cover the back panels of a bookshelf or hutch.

Elliott steers clients toward grass cloth, a woven, often solid-colored wallpaper. “It brings way more texture than paint, but it’s still pretty subtle,” she says.

## Look to the great outdoors

Natural surfaces and hues are back in style in home remodeling. (Think warm-wood kitchen cabinets or unpolished stone floors.) Part of the reason? Materials found in the wild essentially go with everything. “I love to use green houseplants to add color to a room,” Lanteri says. Or fill a vase with pastel dried flowers.



Design by Nick Olsen (Reid Rolls)

## Go beyond a single ‘pop’ of color

Though a solo strand of turquoise beads looks beautiful against a simple black or white blouse, adding one jolt of a saturated hue to an otherwise neutral room can seem jarring. “It’s easy to have an all-gray living room and just throw some royal blue pillows on the gray sofa,” Elliott says. “But it’s more fun — and less broken-up feeling — to bring in a rug with some blue in it, too, or to maybe reupholster an accent chair in fabric with some similar shades.”

## Paint your furniture

Buying a smaller piece of furniture in a cool color — or painting a bookcase or end table in your favorite hue — jazzes up a space. “I’m a big fan of painted furniture in a room full of dark wood,” Elliott says. “You can hire a pro who’ll use a sprayer to give furniture a glossy coat. I use [Unique by Ruth](#). Or you can also DIY, especially if you’re applying a matte finish or visible brushwork.”

In rooms with colorfully painted or upholstered furniture, keep the wall paint subdued. “If furniture is more vibrant, it will pop better if it isn’t competing with strong, saturated wall colors,” Boggs says. “Choose wall colors that complement the pieces but which are less saturated.”