

COLOUR IN CONTEXT

VIALE
GORIZIA,
MILAN

This façade features a palette loved by Renaissance painters and mid-century architects alike

Italy (and Italians) have history when it comes to earthen colours. The Roman author Pliny claimed in *Natural History*, a book written after a prolonged period of political turbulence, that truly great art was created with just the basics. He openly scoffed at new-fangled colourants being imported from far-flung countries, believing they were no match for the necessities: white, yellow, red and black – most of which could be gleaned from the local soil. We are talking, after all, of the country that gave the world the deliciously red-and yellow-tinged sienna and umber ochres still used today; the mossy Verona green; and the pinkish reds from Pozzuoli, near Naples.

Pigments like these occur naturally in the earth. Artists loved them for their thick, clay-like texture, reliability and low cost. The astonishing range of colours available mostly come from complex mixtures of iron oxides, hydroxides and silicates, and the presence of trace

**ITALY'S EARTHEN
COLOURS SOFTEN
THE DESIGN AND
MESSAGE OF THIS
BUILDING'S FAÇADE**

elements, such as manganese. Because they were cheap and plentiful, they were also widely used. Renaissance painters reached for them when it came to creating preparatory sketches. Michelangelo, Raphael and da Vinci all favoured reddish clay crayons for such work. And when, in 1944, the frescoes in Pisa's Piazza dei Miracoli were so badly damaged they had to be stripped off the walls and taken to be restored, the surfaces underneath were found to hold a tracery of previously hidden artistic genius, all done in lines made of earth.

But far from remaining in the shadows of greater works, this naturalistic palette of soft pinks, yellows, greens and browns became a touchstone of Italian design. It can clearly be seen in the stonework and, again and again, on the walls of the country's plaster-clad buildings, with their contrasting shutters.

Perhaps this legacy was what the 30-year-old architect Marco Zanuso had in mind when he began his plans for this building (above) on Viale Gorizia in Milan in 1946. The façade's jagged abstract design – it's impossible not to see it as a nod to the rending of the social fabric caused by World War II – is softened by the use of Italy's time-honoured colour scheme. Zanuso, incidentally, would go on to become one of Italy's premier architects and designers. Some things change. Some things, like this colour palette, remain the same.



PAINT PALETTE

'Bleu Turc', £49.50 for 2.5 litres, Edward Bulmer (edwardbulmerpaint.co.uk)

'Dorchester Pink', £45 for 2.5 litres, Little Greene (littlegreene.com)

'St Martins', £51 for 2.5 litres, Mylands (mylands.com)