

COLOUR IN CONTEXT

THORVALDSENS MUSEUM, COPENHAGEN

The Danish sculpture museum's Mondrianesque blocks of earthy colour take their cue from a classical palette

'Museum fatigue' was first described in 1916 in an article in *The Scientific Monthly*. The authors had clearly never visited Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen (it wasn't the best time for European travel). If they had, their feature wouldn't have bothered about the width and height of displays, but instead would have prescribed bracing, graphic punches of colour to keep the pep in visitors' steps. After all, who could fail to feel energised walking through rooms of yolk yellow, lapis, forest green and rust-red, punctuated with jet woodwork, like a Mondrian painting with the white sucked out?

Although this palette retains its strikingly modern feel, it was nearly 80 years old when that issue of *The Scientific Monthly* hit the stands, and was itself based on a scheme many hundreds of years older. It was dreamt up by Michael Gottlieb Bindesbøll, an architect who, in 1839, was commissioned to design a space to house the collection of Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. Because of the publicity and expectation surrounding the project – Thorvaldsen was a national hero – Bindesbøll wanted this building to make an enduring statement. And it was perhaps this impulse that led him to examine palettes from the classical past. At the time, the western world was in uproar over the recent discovery that Roman and Greek statuary had often been brightly painted. The classical ideal had always, in the popular imagination, been sculpted in pearly pale marble, and people were initially horrified to find traces of vibrant pigments clinging to graceful columns and impassive white limbs. But when the excavation of Pompeii revealed countless bright frescoes, there was no longer room for doubt: the Romans had possessed a rich, brazen and playful sense of colour. Bindesbøll, who had visited many archaeological sites and sketched their palettes, wanted to breathe new life into this family of saturated tones, and the Thorvaldsens Museum would be his canvas.

Although many of Copenhagen's residents were unconvinced at the time, today it is beloved, retaining its freshness and element of surprise. And now, bold juxtapositions of dusty jewel tones are experiencing something of a revival. A similar palette – called 'Classico' – was put forward by Pantone home and interiors for 2019. A representative for the firm lauded its 'warm, enduring style' and it seems to be finding favour with designers. New York architects Carpenter & Mason used geometric shapes of cobalt, green and tan to decorate a newly opened sake bar in Brooklyn, and a similar graphic energy and palette, as well as the use of doorways as frames, can be seen in Pierre Yovanovitch's boutique for the Villa Noailles art centre in the south of France. In Copenhagen itself, popular new restaurant Yaffa daubed soft washes of forest green on its walls and umber, sienna, pale terracotta and navy around the bar. An invigorating place for a drink, even if you aren't suffering from museum fatigue. thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/en



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PAINT PALETTE

'Chinese Emperor', £49.50 for 2.5 litres, Paint & Paper Library (paintandpaperlibrary.com)

'Aquamarine – Deep', £45 for 2.5 litres, Little Greene (littlegreene.com)

'Etruscan Red', £35 for 2.5 litres, Craig & Rose (craigandrose.com)