

How to choose a painter

What you are actually paying for at the top of the range, and the questions that expose a thin quote

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Painting quotes look comparable because they all say walls and ceilings, two coats. What they do not itemise is the preparation, and the preparation is where both the money and the result live. On a weatherboard house that has been painted twice in fifty years, the gap between a \$6,000 job and a \$14,000 job is almost entirely sanding, filling, priming and access, not paint.

What it should cost

Interior painting runs about \$20 to \$60 per square metre of wall area and exterior about \$30 to \$80, with timber weatherboard at the top of the exterior range. Ceilings are \$15 to \$45 per square metre, doors \$80 to \$200 each, skirting and architraves \$8 to \$15 per linear metre, window frames \$50 to \$150 each, and an hourly rate around \$50 to \$80. Whole jobs: a three-bedroom interior lands at roughly \$4,500 to \$11,000, a four-bedroom interior at \$6,500 to \$18,000, a single-storey exterior at \$5,000 to \$15,000, and a double-storey exterior at \$9,000 to \$25,000, with scaffolding adding \$1,500 to \$3,500.

What pushes a job up the range: failed and peeling previous coatings, bare timber that needs priming, two storeys or high ceilings needing scaffold, colour changes needing extra coats, and Tasmanian weather. Exterior work on the West Coast will lose days to rain, and a professional builds that into the schedule and the price rather than blaming it afterwards. If the quote does not have a preparation line, you are not paying less - you are buying a coating that will fail early.

What the law requires

Tasmania does not require painters to hold a dedicated painting licence. Painting that forms part of building work needing a permit - a new dwelling, an extension - sits within the building services framework, so the painter is usually working under a licensed building services provider. Ask who holds the licence on the job. For a straightforward repaint on an existing house, no licence is required, which is exactly why you have to do the checking yourself: references, insurance and a written scope.

Ask for public liability insurance, commonly \$5 million to \$20 million, and check the certificate of currency. Work at height and overspray onto a neighbour's car are the real risks, and they are covered by insurance or not at all. If the painter employs anyone, workers compensation insurance is compulsory for Tasmanian employers. If the house was built or renovated before 1990, sanding and scraping can disturb asbestos in fibro sheeting, eaves and textured coatings, so no dry sanding of suspect material; a licensed assessor should test it and a licensed removalist should handle any removal over 10 square metres of non-friable material. Lead paint on pre-1970s timber is a hazard to the people removing it and to your garden and pets, so ask how they control dust and where they wash down.

Red flags

Quotes per room without inspecting the condition of the surface.

No preparation line at all - just two coats and a total.

Offers to dry-sand a pre-1990 house or to scrape pre-1970s weatherboard without asking about asbestos or lead.

No insurance, or a certificate of currency that expired last year.

Wants half the money up front for an ordinary repaint.

Cannot name the paint system, or intends to paint over flaking, damp or bare timber without priming first.

What good looks like

Inspects the surface and checks for moisture before quoting.

Itemises preparation separately and states the number of coats.

Names the primer and the topcoat and can say why they suit your substrate and climate.

Talks about weather windows and how they schedule around Tasmanian rain and cold.

Leaves a written scope that states what is not being painted - gutters, roof, inside of wardrobes.

What to ask

- "What is your rate per square metre, and exactly what does it include - sanding, filling, priming, and how many coats?"
- "What primer and topcoat products are you using, and what warranty comes with them?"
- "How will you handle lead paint if this is a pre-1970s house?"
- "Will you check for damp, rising damp or flaking before you start, and what happens if you find it?"
- "What is your public liability cover, and can I see the certificate of currency?"
- "How will you protect windows, paths, garden beds and the neighbour's property?"
- "If it rains for a week mid-job, does the price change?"

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