RED 101

"When people walk into a red room, they immediately respond," says New York City interior designer Scott Sanders. Color experts describe red as a stimulating shade. It grabs focus (think stop signs and fire engines) and, on walls, becomes the defining element of a space. High-octane orange-tinted tones (see right) make you feel energized and alive, while subtler, old-fashioned purplish shades—burgundy, maroon, brick—can evoke the cozy, insular vibe of, say, an 18th-century library. Either way, "red is a statement color," says New York City interior designer Janine Carendi MacMurray. So choose your reds carefully, and if you're risk averse, get your infusion through objects rather than paint.

no-fail reds

It's not just the tone but also the finish that can make red paint perfect or problematic. Carendi MacMurray offers her top picks.

LIVING ROOM
"With chocolate brown furnishings, this will make a space feel instantly inviting."
Currant Red 1323, $41 a gallon, benjaminmoore.com for stores.

FOYER
"It's great for a small area or a pass-through, but let it be the only red in the room."
Red Obsession SW7590, $49 a gallon, sherwin-williams.com for stores.

ALCOVE
"A traditional color, it pairs well with mahogany pieces."
Dinner Party AF 300, $50 a gallon, benjaminmoore.com for stores.

DINING ROOM
"Gorgeous with a brass chandelier and particularly beautiful by candlelight."
Picture Gallery Red 42, $80 a gallon, farrow-ball.com.

BOOKCASE INTERIOR
"A matte coat can add flair to a unit that's glossy white on the outside."
Ravishing Red 2008-10, $50 a gallon, benjaminmoore.com for stores.

FLEA-MARKET FIND
"In a glossy finish, it will make a grannyish chair look cool and modern."
Habanero Chile 7589, $49 a gallon, sherwin-williams.com for stores.

Quick reminder: The colors you see on this page might look different painted on your walls. Please test them before committing.

red furniture

Because the color is so visually arresting, "even one red piece can transform a bland room," says Carendi MacMurray. Red furnishings work well with pale and dark neutrals—white walls, wood floors, natural stone—or as a rich matte counterpoint to metallics (see left).

COTTON ARMCHAIR
Offset its masculine, angular lines with a round area rug.

LACQUER CREDENZA
A sleek dining-room buffet or a pedestal for that fancy widescreen.

STACKABLE UNIT
Use it to stash DVDs in the living room or toiletries in the bath.

STEEL CABINET
Makes that Hummel collection look hip.

POLY-COTTON SOFA
Tailored and slightly retro, a steal of a statement piece.

WOODEN SIDE TABLE
Top it with a pretty bowl to complement its curves.

A cherry red bureau gives an alcove, which typically doesn't get much play, a reason for being.

WHERE TO BUY
From top right: Humboldt chair, $549, westelm.com. Halogen credenza, $499, cb2.com. Componibili storage unit, $160, kartell.com for stores. Biby glass-door cabinet, $80, ikea.com for stores. Karlstad sofa with cover, $499, ikea.com. Jacqui tea table, $713, Bungalow5, 201-405-1800.

red accessories

As punctuation in a room of neutrals, red is an instant-makeover color capable of enlivening large areas with little effort. A rule: Pick one red and stick with it—competing tones can feel chaotic. And exercise restraint. Sprinkle reds here and there (not everywhere) for hits of color, rather than wallops.

GALVANIZED BIN
A whimsical touch in an all-white kitchen, or a cute kids' hamper.

COTTON-BLEND PILLOW
Perfect for making a formal sofa look a little less stiff.

MIDCENTURY-STYLE CLOCK
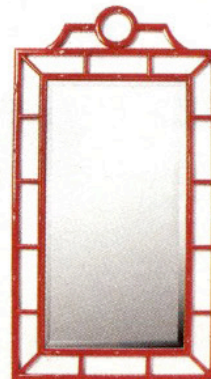A look-at-me classic that makes wall art unnecessary.

LACQUER LAMP
A pair of these puts a youthful spin on a dark, traditional sideboard.

WOOL RUG
The flowy botanical pattern is graphic without being cold.

WOODEN MIRROR
This chinoiserie piece is an entryway showstopper.

In a white room, bright colors and bold shapes (like the coral tones and motifs shown) act as focal points.

WHERE TO BUY
From top left: Classic bin, $59, conranusa.com. Double Concentric pillow (24 by 24 inches), $178, jonathanadler. com. Vitra Sunburst clock by George Nelson, $385, nova 68.com. Vine Red tufted rug (five by eight feet), $634, dashandalbert.com. Strawberry lamp, $280, lotusbleudesign. com. Chloe mirror, $575, Bungalow5, 201-405-1800.