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Standard Guide for Forensic Paint Analysis and Comparison¹

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1. Scope

1.1 Forensic paint analyses and comparisons are typically distinguished by sample size that precludes the application of many standard industrial paint analysis procedures or protocols. The forensic paint examiner must address concerns such as the issues of a case or investigation, sample size, complexity and condition, environmental effects, and collection methods. These factors require that the forensic paint examiner choose test methods, sample preparation schemes, test sequence, and degree of sample alteration and consumption that are suitable to each specific case.

1.2 This guide is intended as an introduction to standard guides for forensic examination of paints and coatings. It is intended to assist individuals who conduct forensic paint analyses in their evaluation, selection, and application of tests that can be of value to their investigations. This guide describes methods to develop discriminatory information using an efficient and reasonable order of testing. The need for validated methods and quality assurance guidelines is also addressed. This document is not intended as a detailed methods description or rigid scheme for the analysis and comparison of paints, but as a guide to the strengths and limitations of each analytical method. The goal is to provide a consistent approach to forensic paint analysis.

1.3 This guide cannot replace knowledge, skill, or ability acquired through appropriate education, training, and experience and should be used in conjunction with sound professional judgment.

1.4 The values stated in SI units are to be regarded as standard. No other units of measurement are included in this standard.

1.5 *Some of the methods discussed in this guide involve the use of dangerous chemicals, temperatures, and radiation sources. This guide does not purport to address the possible safety hazards or precautions associated with its application. This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility*

of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety, health, and environmental practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.

1.6 *This international standard was developed in accordance with internationally recognized principles on standardization established in the Decision on Principles for the Development of International Standards, Guides and Recommendations issued by the World Trade Organization Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Committee.*

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards:*²

[D16 Terminology for Paint, Related Coatings, Materials, and Applications](#)

[D1535 Practice for Specifying Color by the Munsell System](#)
[E308 Practice for Computing the Colors of Objects by Using the CIE System](#)

[E1492 Practice for Receiving, Documenting, Storing, and Retrieving Evidence in a Forensic Science Laboratory](#)

[E2808 Guide for Microspectrophotometry and Color Measurement in Forensic Paint Analysis](#)

[E2809 Guide for Using Scanning Electron Microscopy/X-Ray Spectrometry in Forensic Paint Examinations](#)

[E2937 Guide for Using Infrared Spectroscopy in Forensic Paint Examinations](#)

3. Terminology

3.1 *Definitions*—For definitions of terms used in this guide other than those listed in 3.2, see Terminology [D16](#).

3.2 *Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:*

3.2.1 *additive (modifier)*—any substance added in a small quantity to improve properties. Additives can include substances such as driers, corrosion inhibitors, catalysts, ultraviolet absorbers, plasticizers, etc.

3.2.2 *binder*—a non-volatile portion of a paint which serves to bind or cement the pigment particles together.

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² For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact ASTM Customer Service at service@astm.org. For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

3.2.3 *coating*—a generic term for paint, lacquer, enamel, or other liquid or liquifiable material which is converted to a solid, protective, decorative, or combination thereof, film after application.

3.2.4 *discriminate*—to distinguish between two samples based on meaningful differences; to differentiate.

3.2.5 *discriminating power*—the ability of an analytical procedure to distinguish between two items of different origin.

3.2.6 *known sample*—a coating sample of established origin.

3.2.7 *meaningful difference*—a feature or property of a sample that does not fall within the variation exhibited by the comparison sample, considering the limitations of the sample or technique, and therefore indicates the two samples do not share a common origin. The use of this term does not imply the formal application of statistics.

3.2.8 *paint*—commonly known as a pigmented coating (see 3.2.3).

3.2.9 *pigment*—a finely ground, inorganic or organic, insoluble, dispersed particle. Besides color, a pigment can provide many of the essential properties of paint, such as opacity, hardness, durability, and corrosion resistance. The term pigment includes extenders.

3.2.10 *questioned sample*—a coating sample whose original source is unknown.

4. Quality Assurance Considerations

4.1 A quality assurance program must be used to ensure that analytical testing procedures and reporting of results are monitored by means of proficiency tests and technical audits. General quality assurance guidelines may be found in “Trace Evidence Quality Assurance Guidelines” (1).³

5. Summary of Guide

5.1 Paint films are characterized by a number of physical and chemical features. The physical characteristics can include color, layer sequence and thickness, surface and layer features, contaminants, and weathering. Chemical components can include pigments, polymers, additives, and solvents. These features can be determined and evaluated by a variety of macroscopical, microscopical, chemical, and instrumental methods. Limited sample size and sample preservation requirements mandate that these methods be selected and applied in a reasonable sequence to maximize the discriminating power of the analytical scheme.

5.2 Searching for differences between questioned and known samples is the basic thrust of forensic paint analysis and comparison. However, differences in appearance, layer sequence, size, shape, thickness, or some other physical or chemical feature can exist even in samples that are known to be from the same source. A forensic paint examiner’s goal is to assess the significance of any observed differences. The absence of meaningful differences at the conclusion of an

analysis suggests that the paint samples could have a common origin. The strength of such an interpretation is a function of the type or number of corresponding features, or both.

5.3 An important aspect of forensic automotive paint analysis is the identification of the possible makes, models, and years of manufacture of motor vehicles from paint collected at the scene of a crime or accident. The color comparison and chemical analysis of both the undercoat and top coat systems requires knowledge of paint formulations and processes, collections of paint standards, and databases of color and compositional information.

5.4 The test procedure selected in a paint analysis and comparison begins with thorough sample documentation. Some features of that documentation are described in Practice E1492. Analysis generally begins with appropriate nondestructive tests. If these initial tests are inconclusive or not exclusionary, the examination may proceed with the selection of additional tests based on their potential for use in evaluating or discriminating the samples of interest, or both.

6. Significance and Use

6.1 This guide is designed to assist the forensic paint examiner in selecting and organizing an analytical scheme for identifying and comparing paints and coatings. The size and condition of the sample(s) will influence the selected analytical scheme.

7. Collection of Suitable Samples

7.1 The potential for physical matches between known and questioned samples must be considered before selecting the method of paint sample collection. Care should be taken to preserve the potential for a physical match.

7.2 Questioned Samples:

7.2.1 Questioned samples should include all loose or transferred paint materials. Sources of questioned samples can include tools, floors, walls, glass fragments, hair, fingernails, roadways, adjacent structures, transfers or smears on vehicles, or transfers to or from individuals such as damaged fabric with paint inclusions. Whenever possible, items with paint transfers should be appropriately packaged and submitted in their entirety for examination. If sampling is necessary, the procedures listed in “Trace Evidence Recovery Guidelines” (2) can be used. When paint evidence is recognized, every effort should be made to manually remove it before using tape lifts to collect other types of evidence. If paint is collected with tape lifts, one should be aware of the possible difficulty encountered when attempting to manipulate paint samples bearing adhesive residues. In addition, components of the adhesive could contaminate the paint sample and change its apparent chemistry.

7.2.2 Smear transfers can exhibit mingling of components from several layers or films that could preclude application of some of the analytical methods discussed in this guide. Due to the difficulties associated with collecting smeared or abraded samples, the entire object bearing the questioned paint should be submitted to the laboratory whenever possible.

³ The boldface numbers in parentheses refer to the list of references at the end of this standard.

7.2.3 When contact between two coated surfaces is indicated, the possibility of cross-transfers must be considered. Therefore, if available, samples from both surfaces should be collected.

7.3 *Known Samples:*

7.3.1 When feasible, known paint samples should be collected from areas as close as possible to, but not within, the point(s) of damage or transfer. Due to the possible presence of cross transferred materials, these damaged areas are usually not suitable sources of known samples. The collected known samples should contain all layers of the undamaged paint film. Substantial variations in thickness and layer sequences over short distances can exist across a painted surface. This is particularly true in architectural paint and for automotive films where the curves, corners, and edges are often impact points subjected to previous damage, sanding, or over-painting. If necessary, several known paint samples should be taken to properly represent all damaged areas because different areas of the painted surface can contain different paint systems. Known paint samples collected from different areas should be packaged separately and labeled appropriately.

7.3.2 When possible, the surface underlying the suspected transfer area should be included for analysis. Sections adjacent to a suspect transfer area can be valuable for assessing questioned and known sample differences and evaluating the possible cross transfer of trace materials. Wall and ceiling, door and window, implement handle and automobile door, and fender and hood are examples of adjacent items.

7.3.3 Paint flakes can be removed from the parent surface by a number of methods. These include, but are not limited to, lifting or prying loosely attached flakes, cutting samples of the entire paint layer structure using a clean knife or blade, or dislodging by gently impacting the opposite side of the painted surface. When cutting, it is important that the blade be inserted down to the parent surface. It should be noted that no one method of sampling should be relied upon exclusively.

8. Procedure

8.1 Discussions of forensic paint analysis are provided in dated but detailed form by Crown (3), and more recently by Nielsen (4), Thornton (5), Maehly and Strömberg (6), Stoecklein (7), Caddy (8), and Ryland and Suzuki (9).

8.2 A reasonable scheme for forensic paint examinations is outlined in Figs. 1-4. Potentially useful techniques for the discrimination of paint binders, pigments, and additives are listed. For any given comparison, not all the techniques listed in the same area in Fig. 1 are necessarily required. Sample size, condition, and layer structure complexity should be considered when determining which techniques to use. The forensic coatings examiner should always use the more specific and least destructive tests prior to those that require more sample preparation or consumption. A review of the general technique descriptions, listed in 8.8 – 8.15, will provide guidance for the selection of appropriate methods.

8.3 Fig. 1 does not imply that other examinations should be excluded or that the order of the procedures in the chart is irrevocable. Samples that are neither constrained by amount

nor condition should be subjected to analyses that will determine the color and texture of the paint as well as the number, order, colors, and textures of the layers in a multi-layered sample. In most cases, instrumental techniques should be employed to analyze and compare both the pigment and binder portions of the sample. A combination of techniques, which provide discrimination between as many types of paints and coatings as possible, should be used. These techniques should also be selected to provide classification or component identification information, or both, to be used in significance assessments. For samples that are limited in layer structure complexity, techniques for the comparison of both the binder and pigment portion of the coating must be used. The choice of techniques can change depending upon sample characteristics. For instance, pyrolysis-gas chromatography (PGC) may be utilized for identifying and comparing the binder portion of samples that exhibit a low binder concentration. Likewise, scanning electron microscopy-energy dispersive X-ray analysis (SEM-EDS), X-ray fluorescence (XRF), and X-ray diffraction (XRD) may be used for identifying and comparing the pigment portion of samples that exhibit a low pigment concentration.

8.4 The flow-chart in Fig. 5 is a guide to the determination of the possible origins of a motor vehicle paint. It is usually possible to differentiate a motor vehicle repaint from the original equipment manufacturer (OEM) paint by microscopical examination of the layer structure. If no OEM paint is present, then only the vehicle color (or partial vehicle color) can be reported. For OEM paint, both the topcoat and undercoat layers can be useful in identifying manufacturer, model, and year. Both finish coat colors and primer colors can provide complementary information, since not all finish coat colors are used for the same period a particular primer system was employed. Many of the techniques shown in Figs. 2-4 can be used for chemical analysis of the individual paint layers. Reference collections and databases include books of color chips produced by automotive refinishing paint manufacturers for use by body shops and automotive repair facilities, manufacturer topcoat and undercoat color and chemical standards, “street” samples collected from damaged motor vehicles, OEM information on paint formulations and collections of infrared spectra or pyrograms of known paints. Examples of these include the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Paint Data Query (PDQ) database and the National Automotive Paint File (NAPF) which is maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In most cases, regardless of the references used, a range of possible makes/models/years will be generated by the search.

8.5 *Sample Description:*

8.5.1 The initial evaluation should begin with a critical review of each samples’ chain of custody, package sealing, identification markings, and any potential cross-contamination between samples. If the items are found to be suitable for further evaluation, a detailed accounting and description of the paint sample and any co-mingled material should be documented.