



Colour Symbolism - Emotional Values of Colour

KEYWORDS

Colour, history, religion, profession, Colour Symbolism.

Kashyap Parikh

Department of Applied Arts, Faculty of Fine arts The M. S. University of Baroda.

ABSTRACT

There is no specific law of Colour Symbolism but research findings show that men show a higher preference for pain, deep shades while women have a higher preference for light. Bright colours are preferred by children. Colour preference also varies with geographical, national, cultural, and economic factors. The collective colour association is more likely to be influenced by cultural convention and established tradition. Association with and preference for colour can be expected to vary from nation to nation and culture to culture. Different individuals have different preference for colour. Some people believe that individuals react to different colour in different ways, and that their physiological reaction to colour has a psychological effect as well.

Colour may have two meanings, one its plastic content—its pure hue, its wavelength—and the other a meaning derived from the culture in which we live. This meaning is shaped by the forces of history, plan, and accident, and has a bearing on the way we think about color, the way we react to it. Black is associated with death and mourning, yellow with cowardice, red with sin, white with surrender, green with jealousy, purple with pomp, blue with improper language, brown with a bad taste, and as for pink, it might well do with some connections but it wouldn't suit a ball club. This then is the changing aspect of color, an aspect which we must study in order to gain a rounded view.

SOME HISTORICAL NOTES

In earlier history there seem to be curious gaps in man's knowledge of colour. There is no way of knowing what they saw but identification and significance can be judged from references in literature Black and red were probably the first colours recognized by a name, with yellow, blue, green, and purple coming later. The ancient Rig-Veda Indian hymns feature black, red, and gold but makes no mention of green, although there are references to nature, and fail to note blue, although the sky is mentioned often. There is no yellow but there is golden. Colour in ancient Egypt centered around black, red, and gold.

Biblical Hebrew contained a few words to express colour. Only white, red, and green could be designated with a special word. Mention of yellow or blue is absent in early Hebrew literature. There are 430 passages in the Bible mentioning the sky, but there is no mention of its colour. White was available to the ancient Hebrews in wool. They obtained scarlet from the insect coccus. The ancients got purple-red and purple-blues from shellfish. White, red, and purple all acquired early symbolic meanings. Green, blue, and true yellow were harder to come by in the natural environment. The Greeks mentioned all the colors, but again red, black, and gold appears most often. Yellow, green, blue, and purple are often in vague reference. Some references are indeed hard to explain. Homer calls the sky black. Homer describes the sea as wine-dark, black, or gray, never blue or green. Yellow is a pale ochre. Alcaeus over a hundred years later wrote: "Pure, sweetly smiling Sappho of the violet hair." The Romans, too, seemed to be in some confusion about colour, confounding blue, violet, and gray. In Roman times brides wore yellow, but the garments are described as red. In the 6th century Cassiodorus compared green to spring, red to summer, white to autumn, and blue to winter. Roman writers stated that Greek painters used only those colours mentioned by Democritus: black, white, red, and (weak) yellow. Here one might ask, how did they know?

Ellis selected a list of important pieces of literature from several cultures and noted the number of references to color. It

is possible that his list was not long enough to support a correct statistical approach but it included the Bible and works of Homer, Chaucer, Wordsworth, and Whitman, to mention a few of the many. In the Ellis tabulation, black, white, and red are most frequently mentioned, with red retaining strength in all periods. Roman writers used white profusely (reflecting its status as the favorite color of the Romans). Green reached a high point in Wordsworth, not surprisingly, after a slow start in ancient times. In Wordsworth, Ellis noted 100 references to color, with 35 to green. Blue until recent times received a small mention except in north European primitive works, giving rise to the thought that consciousness of blue may have reached our culture from northern Europe. Blue comprises 14 percent of Coleridge's references to color. Yellow is completely absent only in Icelandic sagas and is mentioned most frequently by Poe. Gray is mentioned often by poets of northern climates but pink is scarcely noted. (One wonders how Ellis noted Homer's "rosy-fingered dawn.") There are so few references to orange that Ellis did not include a category for it. In ancient times anything resembling our version of orange would have been described as golden, since the names were quickly found in the colors of important metals, gold, silver, and bronze.

When we look at paintings in a museum we are aware of relationships of color in a single painting, and if we are careful we may even make memory notes on these relationships. But museum study doesn't seem to reveal the color preferences of a whole culture, let alone those of individual artists. If it seems curious that the cultures of a few thousand years ago lacked nomenclature to deal with color phenomena. Rarely will an answer be given. Colour discrimination in our own culture is vague enough.

ASSIGNED MEANINGS IN COLOR

In Brahmanism yellow is a sacred colour. In India, brides wear yellow, as they did in Roman times. In China yellow was connected with royalty and deity and the Chinese show a marked preference for it. Here a sharp distinction must be made between yellow and gold leaf. According to George Ferguson, yellow crosses were used to identify plague in the Middle Ages. Green was significant to the ancient Egyptians, who referred to them as the "evergreen one." In the Christian. Tradition green means eternal life, spiritual initiation, and is used during the Epiphany season. Green is the colour of the Irish national party. References to green in the sense of untrained go back to 1548.

In ancient Egypt red was used to protect the dead. In China it is a sign of longevity and a favorite color. Red was the color of sovereign power in Rome, and has a similar meaning in the dress of church officials. Red is the color of war and battle and, as noted, also signifies political radicalism. The ancient Hebrews wore a fringe of purple-blue on every garment as a

sign of the high dignity of membership. Purple-red has long been associated with royal power. In literature a purple passage is one excessively ornate.

Besides Thomas Carlyle's "rose-pink hue of sentimentality," references to pink center on its effeminate quality. Girl babies are given pink garments. In the Jewish religion white is a symbol of man's mortality. White connotes death of a Japanese but in Roman times white was a joyous color. Candidates for office wore white as a sign of integrity, and vestal virgins wore white to signify innocence and purity, a custom which still prevails. In early Christian times white was worn by church officials. It is the color worn at baptism. If white gets dirty, it can be noticed. Blue has some connections with the aristocracy. It also has meanings of faithfulness, quality, and innocence. In the church, blue symbolizes heaven and is the color of truth. Black is the color of mourning, justice, formality, evil, magic, humility, the devil, death, and disaster. Gray, the color of ashes, also has a rather solemn countenance in symbolic meaning.

Thus we see that traditional meanings attached to colors vary from time to time and from place to place. In design there are times when these traditional values must be respected. Nations have colour signs through flags. States too list identifying colors. Here color is used as an instrument of group identity. Political parties have been identified through color as having fleets of ships, criminal syndicates, and cocktail rooms.

COLOR IN POPULAR REFERENCE

It will be noticed in the list of color references derived from daily experience that the colour usually occurs with some other factor of graphic potential. It is the handling of these

two elements that establishes the connection and gives the impact. It may also be noted that a great many of the references are inconsistent. Our habits in using colour are rather strange, too. Pink may be its proper colour for a girl's room but it is seldom used in buildings. Yellow seems to be a good colour for farm machinery and moving equipment but is not often to be found on automobiles. Why must railroad conductors wear black like a badge? And why do some refuse to eat or drink from colored vessels? Is green correct for a go sign? Why is white fine for a house but not red? In short, does colour make any sense at all?

Conclusions: Color acquires meanings in passing through the culture. These shape our attitudes and actions concerning color. Peoples have not always had full recognition of color. Black and red seem to have been the first colors named. Gold followed. Through Roman times, black, red, and white seem more stable in the description, with blue, green, purple, and gray often confused. In literature black, white, and red are most frequently mentioned. Green and blue are mentioned most often in northern countries. Institutions of church and government are most influential in the development of the color symbol. All colors have acquired meanings from these sources. Color is used in daily expressions to heighten and clarify meaning. This use has resulted in a large mass of traditional material at the designer's disposal. The use of color symbol has been often inconsistent, although red seems to denote action, white cleanliness, and black is rather consistently associated with misfortune. Outside of this, color seems to mean exactly what a culture says it means. The color symbol is rather strongly imbedded in the fabric of the culture, and the designer will not be able to change attitudes about color.

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