Color Symbolism & Psychology

Osher Life Long learning institute
Genius and virtue are to be more often found clothed in gray than in peacock bright.”
— Van Wyck Brooks

The pivotal moment in the development of the arts in Western civilization occurred in Greece. From literature to architecture, the ancient Greeks provided the foundation for all the art that followed. Of interest with respect to color is, that triumphant architectural monument, the Parthenon was polychromed. Today only the raw stone surfaces linger as evidence.

The technical analysis of color began with Sir Isaac Newton’s discovery in 1666 that sunlight contains all the colors of the rainbow as presented in the Color Harmon lecture last week. He developed the first modern color circle. Other early color pioneers were Goethe, Schopenhauer and Chevreul.

In the early twentieth century, several members of the Bauhaus School of art and industrial design dedicated themselves to a formal analysis of color. The work of Johannes Itten and Josef Albers continues to form the foundation of most of color theory as we know it today,
Meaning of color

Red means stop and green means go. Traffic lights send this universal message. Likewise the color used for logos, business, products, packaging, interior design, architectural elements or clothing cause powerful reactions.

Color sends a subliminal message, one which plays a critical role in success or failure. It will either attract or distract.

Nature provides a starting point for universal color symbolism. Nature references, such as fire and water, play a powerful role in the symbolic meaning of those colors in all cultures. This symbolism can be considered timeless and cross cultural.

Meanings are often linked to politics, fashion, religion, myths, gender and age. AND to culture.
How Does Color Get Meaning?

- religious and mythological association
  - Celtic Green Man = god of fertility
  - green M&M mythology and advertising character

contemporary uses and fads
green = go; red = stop
How Does Color Get Meaning?

- cultural associations
  - green = Irish

- political and historical associations
  - color of flags
Changing Meaning = Interpretation
The culture of a group of people is the things that they believe in and the traditions and rituals that they have.

The same thing can have different meanings to different people from different cultures. One person can be fine with something another person would find offensive.

The Culture of a group of people is the things that they believe in and the traditions and rituals that they have. The same thing can have different cultures. One person can be fine with something another person would find offensive. Color makes no difference in how we interpret our traditions and rituals. Think of for example red and green for Christmas in Christian cultures. And is it a specific red and a specific green?

For example clearing your plate in England means a compliment to the host and that you enjoyed the food. In China clearing your plate means you question their generosity if you do.
In addition to the symbolic meaning, color schemes should also be balanced harmonies, pleasant combinations of color that successfully communicate symbolic meanings.

Defining harmony is not an easy task. Perhaps the best definition is something that is pleasing to the eye.

If colors don’t coordinate, the effect is confusing.
If colors are too similar, the effect is monotonous.
Successful color schemes require a good balance of light and dark, vivid and muted colors.
In many situations a cool color is needed to offset an excessive amount of warm colors.
Most color schemes are more powerful with contrast.
What does the color red mean in different cultures?

Red is the most common color on national flags from around the world. It has many different meanings from across different cultures.

In many cultures, red shows danger. Many road signs around the world have a red surround to show a warning.

In China, red means good luck. A child will be given a red envelope with money in for their birthday.

In China, red is also the colour worn by a bride at her wedding.

In many western cultures, red also represents love.

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What does the color blue mean in different cultures?

Blue is a color that promotes a calming feeling that is linked to the sky and the oceans. It is the most common color used to paint a bedroom.

In most forms of Christianity, the color blue is a sign of holiness. The Virgin Mary is often shown wearing a blue world.

In almost all parts of the world, police uniforms are made in blue as it represents trust and authority.

In Iran, blue is color worn by people in mourning over the death of a loved one.

In France, deep blue is associated with royalty.

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In most forms of Christianity, the color blue is a sign of holiness. The Virgin Mary is often shown wearing a blue world.

In most all parts of the world, police uniforms are made in blue or have parts of blue, as it represents trust and authority.

In Iran, blue is a color worn by people in mourning over the death of a loved one.

In France, deep blue is associated with royalty.
What does the color yellow mean in different cultures?

Yellow is a color that makes people feel happy. It is an optimistic color and is a color that grabs attention.

For Buddhists, the color yellow symbolizes wisdom.

In Asia and China, the color yellow is a sign of royalty and importance.

Hindus believe that yellow is a sacred color.

Yellow can also represent cowardice and betrayal.

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Yellow can also represent cowardice and betrayal. (the Wizard of Oz and the yellow brick road.)
What does the color green mean in different cultures?

Green is the color most associated with nature, springtime and new life. It also represents environmental issues.

In the USA, green is a color associated with wealth and money. All notes in the USA are printed in green ink.

Some people associate the color green with bad luck. Others associate it with good luck.

In China, the color green is linked to disgrace.

Green is also the most important color for people who are Muslims and the color for respect and the prophet Mohammed.

What does the color green mean in different cultures

Green is the color most associated with nature, springtime and new life.
Is also represents environmental issues and sustainability (a “green” product, the green party) in the Western world

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Some people associate the color with bad luck, others associate it with good luck (the color of a four leaf shamrock)

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Color research is a tricky business because of the many variables and the difficulty to empirically measure impact.

Color research usually relies on historical references and preferences people have.

Color research is often done in Marketing to investigate how people react positively or negatively to certain colors, shades, tones and tints.

Sometimes such research can measure brain waves, blood pressure, eye movement, skin temperature, sweat.

Often it is based on survey answers from participants.

While people often respond to colors in similar ways, it is important to remember that the psychology behind any color can depend upon many different factors.

Past experiences, cultural influences, personal taste, and other factors can all impact how a person feels about a particular color,
**Psychological Symbolism**
Energy, warmth, impulse, dynamism, activity, aggression, passion, security (deep reds)
dominance, rebellion, sexuality, prostitution

**Contemporary Culture Use**
Traffic lights, fire engines, hearts, Christmas, Love, power, associated with communism in
the 20th century.

**Other**
Means luck in China. Red is an important color in China and Japan
Reds are classified as yellow based or blue based.
Yellow based (tomato) appeals to male, blue based (raspberry) appeals to female
Egypt: color of the sun, evil,

Using red in Baby Rooms has been found to stimulate learning and development
Creative Ideas often come easy in rooms with shades of red
Red is the warmest of all colors, but if it goes unchecked, the color can display anger or
disgust.
Red is associated with fiery heat. It can also mean danger and signify intense burning,
either real or imagined.
Red is the color of blood, and as such has strong symbolism for the vitality of life and the
human instinct to survive.
Dark red is also the color of passion and lust.
Red advances and is creating the impression that red objects are closer than they are.
**Psychological Symbolism**
Spirituality, magic, faith, dignity, inspiration, death, mourning, passion (light purples),
mystery, creativity

**Contemporary Culture Use**
Purple Heart (as a military award in the U.S)

**Other**
Imperial color
Purple is the color of people seeking spiritual fulfillment. It is said if you surround
yourself with purple you will have peace of mind.
Purple has also been used to symbolize magic and mystery,
Purple is used to represent royalty.
Purple is a color of ancient Rome, associated with mourning and death in many cultures,
the same way black does for American culture. Symbolizes crucifixion in Catholic Europe.

Purple is the hardest color to discriminate for the eye.

Purple may be a symbol of creativity for art and as a symbol of the extra terrestrial for
science fiction,
but it’s a polarizing color, people either love it or hate it.
Psychological Symbolism
Femininity, caring, nurturing, romance, charm, politeness, sensitivity, tenderness, sweetness, childhood,

Contemporary Culture Use
Valentines day

Other
Girly (though that is changing in men’s fashion)
Joyful

Some people have described pink as a color that evokes feelings of joy and happiness.
This is what people say: "Although green used to be my favorite color, pink has the strongest and deepest emotional influence to me," "The color pink to me has a deeply joyful vibe to it. Like being "home." A familiar friendly place deep within everyone’s heart where there are no worries, you are never lonely, you have everything in life that you ever wanted. You are loved and accepted by everyone."

Creative
For other people pink gives off a creative and artistic vibe. This is what people say: "I do not wear pink but I am drawn to it for my study where I do not have to compromise with my husband," "It is a happy color and it makes me feel creative. For the first time in my life, I am decorating with pink, hot pink."
**Psychological Symbolism**
Spirituality, trust, cleanliness, masculinity, coolness, depression, communication, peace, security, authority (business suit), cold.

**Contemporary Culture**
uniforms, denim,
The color of immortality in China
The color of holiness for Hebrews
The color of god Krishna in Hinduism

**Other**
Signifies spiritual and pacific virtue in Christian art, Immorality in China, Holiness for Hebrews, color of god in Hinduism
Blue objects appear to be further away.
Europe: faithfulness,
Blue is the calming color, but it also gives a feeling of distance. It recedes and creates the impression that blue objects are farther away than they are. It can indicate sadness and depict horrible loss. But through the tears, it gives way to clarity, allowing an increase in outward perspectives.
The color of robes representing the station of philosophers in ancient Rome. Signifies spiritual and pacific virtue in Christian art.
**Psychological Symbolism**
Growth, hope, youth, health, peace, good luck, coolness, wholeness (cool greens), empowered and assertive (warm greens) nature, truthfulness, renewal, freshness,

**Contemporary Culture**
Ecology, conservation and sustainability, traffic lights, Christmas, greenback (money)

**Other**
The most restful color to the eye, very broad range of hues. Eye lens focus green light right on the retina.
Green is the color of nature and fertility.
The color contains the powerful energies of growth, desire to expand or increase.
Out of this desire come the all-too-human traits of jealousy and greed (the almighty dollar is this color).
Green can symbolize the need to be cunning, the ability to deceive others and the willingness to betray even the closest of friends.
Color of Islam, Celtic myth - the color of fertility
Psychological Symbolism
Cheer, hope, expansion, vitality, egoism, mental enlightenment, illness, optimism,

Contemporary Culture
Caution, traffic light

Other
Symbol of the emperor in China
Sacred color in Hinduism
Preferred color by Confucius
**Psychological Symbolism**
Activity, excitement, warmth, self-esteem, confidence, unifying,

**Contemporary Culture**
Life rafts, symbol for inexpensive, Halloween,

**Other**
Excepted, unifier across socio-economic scale.

through socio-economic scale
Brown

Psychological Symbolism
Nature, durability, reliability, warmth, home, comfort, stability, simplicity, earth, inexpensive, approachable, authentic, modest, grounding, healing

Creates trust in clothing (brown suit)

Other
Brown is the most commonly seen neutral in nature. It reminds people of home and honesty.
Brown is a neutral.
**Psychological Symbolism**
Power, sophistication, death, mourning, grief, depression, corruption, end of a cycle, evil, the unknown, dominance, seriousness, affluence, drama, quality,

**Contemporary Culture**
Industrial, machinery, cast iron,

**Other**
Color of Christian Priesthood, self denial
Black is the most misunderstood color.
Black symbolizes death in some literary works and evil antagonists usually dress in this color to personify their wicked motives.
Black is actually the absence of all color, combining all colors in subtractive color theory.
While white reveals, black conceals.
It has come to mean hidden, fearful or bad experience and is linked to the unknown or the unseen. Black can be mysterious, but also represents danger.

Black is often considered the strongest of the neutrals. All blacks often have a negative connotation.
Psychological Symbolism
Purity, truth, newness, goodness, new beginnings, wedding and marriage, sterility,

Contemporary Culture
Peace, white dove, white house, uniforms for doctors and nurses.
Other
White is a neutral.
Near neutral whites (off-whites) are often considered subtle, elegant, and classic. All whites generally have a positive connotation.

Salvation, holiness, purity in priesthood, wedding, doctors and nurses, white can produce glare

Flag of surrender, color or mourning in ancient Rome and medieval France, color of mourning in many eastern cultures,
Fashion color for wedding dresses,

In additive color theory white is the result of the combination of colors of the spectrum
Psychological Symbolism
Neutrality, futurism, technology, sadness, modesty, maturity (grey panthers) wisdom
Contemporary Culture
Industrial, technological advanced
Other
Simplest color to the eye to see,

All neutrals, due to being easy to look at, commonly symbolize relaxation, neutrality, and tranquility. Gray symbolism varies, as this neutral has neutral hues ranging from black to white. Darker grays can appear mysterious, dramatic, steadfast, sophisticated, enduring, solid, constrained, and solemn. Lighter grays appear soothing, calming, and enlightening. Metallic grays — such as silver — appear sleek, elegant, and modern. All grays, in general, are associated with being timeless, designer, classic, corporate, methodical, balanced, and emotionless. They represent responsibility, fairness, loyalty, wisdom, selflessness, practicality, depression and loss.
While no color scheme holds universal appeal, some guidelines for success are worth noting.

A good color scheme uses only a few colors, properly selected and blended. The colors chosen can evolve around a symbolism or meaning. Use restraint. Amateurs use too many colors.

A little color goes a long way. Using one variation of a color in only one area is a surprise. Don’t repeat every color in the design.

Use an established harmonious color chord. A combination of warm and cool colors works best.

Experiment with dynamic and subtle color harmonies. Harmonies with strong contrast are attention getting and energizing. Subtle harmonies with low contrasts are more fluid and low key and sometimes more sophisticated.
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1. Before you select any colors, create a thumbnail of the design in black, white and greys. Analyze the light and dark relationships and plan your areas of strongest value contrasts.

2. Use highly saturated colors and strong value contrasts, such as a very light background and darker shapes. If text is part of your design, readability depends on maximum value contrasts.

3. Stick to established color harmonies and don’t overdo it. Most beginners make the mistake of using too many colors. More is less. Less is more. The example at the right is confusing. Similar to bad music, it is “untuned.”

4. For innovative color harmonies, find an example of a dynamic color scheme in nature, the fine arts, print media, textiles, or other design sources. Use this as a departure point and resist the temptation to add other colors.
1. Before you select any colors, create a thumbnail of the design in black, white and greys. The values of all large shapes and the background should be close. Design easy transitions between them.

2. Select muted colors in a medium to high value range for the large areas. The more colors you use, the closer the values should be. Place these hues in the dominant areas first.

3. Create accents with value contrasts. Small quantities of much darker or lighter colors break the monotony of the close values used on the large forms and create visual interest.

4. Create accents with a pure color. Include a small area of a highly saturated version of at least one of the muted colors. This contrast will enliven the design.
Complimentary Harmony

A dynamic harmony based on strong value contrasts and saturated colors.

A subtle harmony based on closer values and less saturated colors.

Complimentary Harmony, blue and orange on the color wheel
Split Complimentary Harmony

A dynamic harmony based on strong value contrasts and saturated colors.

A subtle harmony based on closer values and less saturated colors.

Split Complimentary Harmony, orange blue and lime green
Triad Harmony

A dynamic harmony based on strong value contrasts and saturated colors.

A subtle harmony based on closer values and less saturated colors.

Triad Harmony, red, yellow blue
Color theme following color psychology: Appetizing
Medium golden brown
Golden brown
Light yellow orange
Dark forest green
Color scheme following symbolism Authority

Bright blue
White
Light blue
Cyan
Color scheme following psychology: Comfort and dependable (appearance in clothing)

- Walnut brown
- Light coffee brown
- Dark chocolate brown
Color scheme symbolism aristocratic elegant
Dark Purple
Light Grey Purple
Light Purple
Burgundy Purple
Color scheme color psychology  Exiting

Tomato red
White
Golden yellow
Color scheme psychology Feminine
Raspberry Pink
White
Deep Pink
Medium light yellow
Color scheme psychology feminine

Light golden tan
Burgundy purple
Red purple
Turquoise
Color scheme psychology  Festive
Bright Raspberry pink
Hot red purple
Tomato red
Yellow Orange
Color scheme symbolism  Powerful Clean
Black
White
Cobalt blue
Color scheme psychology Refreshing
Aqua
White
Cyan
Cherry red
Color scheme psychology unifying across socio economics, inexpensive
Orange
White
Russet brown
Yellow orange
Passionate

Color scheme psychology Passionate

Bright Purple
Hot red purple
White
Cherry red
Color scheme psychology Masculine
Bright blue
Deep blue
Navy blue
white
Color scheme psychology Peaceful
Light blue grey
Light blue
Medium muted blue
Color scheme psychology Spiritual
Medium light yellow
White
Yellow
Light Blue
Color scheme psychology: Strong
- Tomato Red
- Deep blue
- Bright blue
Color scheme symbolism  Sweet
Deep Pink
Light pink
Cherry red
Green
Light green
Color scheme psychology Whimsical
Hot pink
Golden Yellow
Bright purple
Lime green
Tomato red
Thank You