



Colors of the Future: Color Psychology and Textile Aesthetic

By Nicola Davies



P psychological assessment of the aesthetic value of textiles is subjective and can vary according to warmth, physical sensations, social perceptions, body image,¹ seasonal experiences, and pressure comfort.² However, the visual senses have a universal impact on determining aesthetics, particularly with regards to color.

Cultural and Physical Influences of Color Choices

Color psychology isn't a science that can be quantified with precision. For every color, there is both a psychological and physiological impact as well as subjective meanings experienced by individuals. Without any environmental influences, there are certain universal responses to some colors, such as red for stimulating the mind and increasing blood pressure—translating to feelings of aggression or passion; and blue for calming the mind and lowering the blood pressure—instilling feelings of tranquility and peace.³

However, the experience a particular person has of a color may create different emotional and psychological associations that alter these perceptions. While red may be a warm color of passion to some, if a person had been traumatized by someone wearing red clothing then their subjective reaction to it won't be favorable and would produce feelings of fear or anxiety instead. In India, for example, where red is the color for wedding clothing, a bride might not be happy about wearing the culturally prescribed choice of red if she had been traumatized by someone wearing red and had developed negative associations with that color.

One thing that is scientifically quantified is the wavelength of a particular color. Red is in the 700 range, while blue is in the 450 to 500 wavelength range, measured in nanometers.⁴ As wavelengths of light strike the eye retina, they are converted to electrical impulses and sent to the hypothalamus—the part of the brain that stores behavioral patterns, sexual functions, and appetite, among other things. This means that color has energy and can therefore have physical effects. In various experiments, blind people taken into a red room and then a blue room maintained at precisely the same physical temperature, are able to distinguish the red one as warmer due to the physical energy of the color.

Wealthier people often prefer more complex and sophisticated tertiary colors. Also, well-educated people are more likely to choose tertiary colors as well as colors with unusual names. For example, aubergine is a color featured in trend forecasts for 2015—definitely a sophisticated color with its rich hues, incorporating shades of purple.

When asked if cultural color choices are being eroded due to increased exposure to global trends, Ela Dedhia, associate professor at Nirmala Niketan Home Science Department of Textiles & Fashion Technology, associated with the University of Mumbai, said, "This is true to some extent, but not really in traditional functions and occasions in India. People still prefer the traditional colors in India for marriages and festivals." In Hindu beliefs, the color pink is popular, being associated with the heart chakra, thus representing the qualities of compassion, nurturing, and love. In the West, however, pink represents youth, femininity, and innocence and its Eastern spiritual significance isn't appreciated to the same extent.

Asked whether global eco-awareness was having an impact on fashion, Dedhia said, "Awareness is picking up very slowly; however, it will have more impact gradually."

Environmental Influences of Color Choices

Dedhia believes in the validity that humans subconsciously reflect their environment in their color choice, mentioning as an example, "Bright colors are worn in desert areas of Rajasthan and Kutch in India."

The colorful clothing with hues of red, orange, green, blue, and yellow seen at marketplaces under the bright African sun would seem totally foreign to a Londoner accustomed to color choices involving the neutral colors of black, grey, charcoal, and shades of burgundy and navy blue. This selection also carries over to central European countries

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such as Germany and Switzerland. In Scandinavia, color choices include blue, white, and clear yellows, reflecting the brightness of spring in the country.

In Asia, orange has positive connotations, being a color linked to spiritual enlightenment (witness the saffron robes of Buddhist monks), success, and positivity, whereas in the West this color isn't as favored in fashion; rather, safety vests come in bright orange!

Forecasting Color Stories

Color forecasting evaluates and analyses the colors that consumers will find favorable up to two years ahead of the season. These "color stories" are sold to the textile industry and retail companies so that production of textiles proceeds according to schedule. Companies may give their color stories different names, but the palette is quite consistent across the various players.

Indigo, New York, a show catering to the North American textile industry, reveals one of the trends for 2015—"Chiaroscuro," an Italian word indicating contrasts of light and shadow used for heightened impact in art. Applied to textile aesthetics, it references Renaissance art, notably the work of Leonardo da Vinci. The palette comprises shades of old gold, copper, teal blue, and a deep red. The contrast of black and white is offset with shades of grey.⁵ "Allegory," the color palette from Lenzing Interior textiles, is similar, since it also references Renaissance artwork and the romance colors associated with fairytales.⁶

Indigo's "Romany" palette appeals to the inner gypsy spirit, with clear colors deriving inspiration from the brightly painted wagons and embroidered textiles of the gypsies who roamed across Europe. Shades of red and orange are complemented with blues and greens. To offset the plethora of bright colors, charcoal greys, navy blues and pale yellows are also included. Lenzing call this palette "Challenge" as the colors are assertive and bold.

Indigo's third color story, "Buoyant," reflects the current global mood of cautious optimism. Bright and light hues are used—but in subdued tints and tones—offset with neutral colors to lower the overall intensity. No basic primaries are used here. Lenzing's "Borderless" color story, with shades of red, greys, and blues ranging from pale to intense azure, is quite similar.

The original 1960's palette of rust brown, olive green, and a tint of orange offset with paler greens, is the "Tangram" by Lenzing. However, its current incarnation is far more sophisticated in the tints, tones, and shades used to modify the basic colors. In the *British Colours and Textiles* forecast for 2015/16, their color story "Strata" also references these earth tones.⁷

So, is color trend forecasting a big gamble, or a blend of research and intuition? Trend forecasters make it their business to know what is inspiring top designers, to assess what is trending in popular culture, observe past patterns in color choices, watch economic trends, and do their best to gauge the mood of the general populace. Generally, if the mood is buoyant, selected colors for the season will be lighter. In times of gloom, the palette will tend to be darker. Consumer buying patterns, as well as street fashion, is closely observed by the forecasters. In addition, retailers who are closest to the consumer will feed purchasing data back to manufacturers who in turn report what is happening with forecasters. It's an endless process of information constantly being assessed, refined, and calculated.

Forecasters also consider reactions to historical events of the time, and make references to past fashion styles. Magazine articles and television programs that focus on trends for the season ahead may then influence the buying habits of consumers. The final say, however, is in the hands of the consumers, whose buying decisions will determine the accuracy of the forecasters. At the end of season sales, it is easy to spot the flops—those colors piled





high on discount racks and tables. The International Colour Authority (ICA) produces biannual forecasts of color trends for fashion, interiors, and exteriors. The panel comprises members of international textile and paint companies as well as professional consultants. Interestingly, their names are never disclosed. By including Pantone and Natural Colour System (NCS) notations, accurate international color matching and descriptions can be achieved.

Color Connection

With online communication we are all globally connected; however, even before this was possible, there was an obvious interconnectedness of the human psyche. How else can we explain things such as the safety pin being invented simultaneously on opposite sides of the globe?

Consider the young designer in Korea who decides to integrate apple green into her summer range and then discovered that the European trend is apple green, although she hadn't known that when she started her collection. This is not simply because that is the color that was available, but because it is the aesthetic of the season, eliciting particular emotions—and evidence shows that this is a global phenomenon. As Alice said in *Through the Looking Glass*, “Curiouser and curiouser!”

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