COLOUR
Sense-abilities

Decorating Mysteries Revealed

by Irene Turnbull

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Table of Contents

Why Is It Important to Understand Colour? 1
A New Colour Frontier Now Beckons Us 2
Cracking the Colour Code 3
The Master Key to Colour Success 5
The Three Essential Components of Colour 6
    Light Energy 7
    Objects & Light Reflection 8
    The Observer 9
The Cause & Effect of Colour Feelings 10
    1. Information Gathering - Our Senses 10
    2. From Sensation to Emotion 11
Behind the Veil of Perception 13
The Nature of Contrast 15
So, Who's Picking Your Decorating Choices? 17
The Layman's Language of Colour 18
Putting It All Together for Feel Good Colour 21
    Light Matters 21
    Objects 22
    The Observer 23
Tips For Getting Colour Right! 24
And Finally the Paint Colours 25

Sometimes Life Just Needs to Be Simplified….

Can you help me with my Colours?

The most commonly asked questions of interior designers and decorators continue to relate to colour choice. Yet despite the seemingly unlimited array of marketplace options, "cracking the success code" remains elusive for many homeowners as they struggle to transfer the look they want and expect to get from market to home.

That is until now…..

As you read through the pages ahead, it is my sincere hope that with some simple clarifications about a very complicated subject, you will be able to understand your real relationship with colour in a whole new way, which will ultimately leave you "Feeling Good" in your home. And, when you "feel good", everything just gets better!

Sincerely,

Irene

Why Is It Important to Understand Colour?

- ***Because colour is essential to our survival.***

Colour is a key component of a sophisticated communications network which has been hardwired into our physiology to ensure our survival. Our ability to distinguish colour allows us to categorize and communicate about the constituents of our material world. It enables us to evaluate the safety of our food; to detect signs of danger, whether it's from insect bites (yellow & black of bees and wasps) or a sailor's warning from "red skies in the morning". Our colour association with our environment and it's elements - fire; earth; metal; water and wood; has given us a reference to our feelings about them, as we coin the words like warm and cool to relate their colour to temperature and phrases like "red hot" and "black as coal" to describe their nature. In short, colour is essential to our welfare.

Based on the assumption that colour recognition is universal, we have successfully adopted its use to maintain a sense of community order in our lives with the standardization of symbolic representations such as the meaning of road signs; association with the seasons and cultural identification; logical reasoning by any account when you consider the alternatives!

However, aside from the usefulness of emblematic classifications to bring order to our lives, there is a dangerous tendency to over generalize colour response and to pigeonhole individuals into specifically labeled colour personality groups to support current fads in consumer marketing in all categories of life. Not surprising when you consider **colour's** significance!

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A New Colour Frontier Now Beckons Us

Modern technology has greatly expanded the scope of colour theory and its application in our world far beyond the early discovery of refracted light and the introduction of the "rainbow" inspired colour wheel. Today's sophisticated equipment measures the most intricate aspects of light and colour to determine and control every facet of its reproductive consistency.

But despite these incredible advances, it is the discoveries about the connections we have with our *feelings* that remain the most exciting, because it is our feelings about colour that we must ultimately satisfy if we are going to be happy with our choices.

Now high tech innovation in non-invasive brain scanning equipment is permitting neuro-scientists to observe and understand the functions of our brains as never before. This is revolutionary news on many fronts, and as we learn more about the relationships that direct our physiology, we can adapt new strategies to improve the quality of our lives.

One of the most significant areas where this knowledge can make a difference is in our approach to our living spaces because we can now build a new **colour** selection model based on our individual needs as opposed to a market driven response.

Cracking the Colour Code

If you're going to maximize your decorating success you must understand that colour is an experiential phenomenon as unique and individual as your fingerprints.

Unfortunately, we've been conditioned to think otherwise, and we continually look outward for answers to our dilemmas, when in fact the secrets of our success lurk within.

Colour is a powerful emotion-evoking tool and savvy merchandisers clearly understand the distinct connection between consumer response to its use in cleverly contrived advertising, and buyers' willingness to open their purse strings for their products.

From intense brand connection to the simple naming of paint chips, colour marketing is a sophisticated and profit- focused business.

The Institute For Colour Research reveals that people make a subconscious judgement about a person, environment or product within 90 seconds of initial viewing; with 62% to 90% of that assessment based on colour alone!

Think about the impact of this on home decorating where colour decisions are a part of every product we consider – not to mention the struggles that arise just trying to get paint colours right!

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We're bombarded with media messages that sensationalize the importance of new fads and trendy consumer products (because that's what sells TV shows and glossy magazines), all while delivering the "you've just got to have it" message or somehow you're "missing the boat".

With the amount of product in the marketplace and its accompanying advertising hype, it's little wonder that many people feel "overwhelmed" and ultimately arrive at the conclusion that somehow *they aren't good enough to pick colour themselves!*

Too often, it`s here that the real problems begin, when we trade our own knowing for the "perceived" wisdom of others, who may or **may not** have the skills or credentials to help us. *Too frequently people get stuck with the wrong product for the right project.*

Fortunately there is a path to discovering your personal "right" colour choices, whether you engage the help of a professional, or decide to "go it alone".

The Master Key to Colour Success

This Colour Code is a simple, easy to understand formula for success which will introduce you to:

- **Your relationship with light and colour**
- **The cause & effect of your colour feelings**
- **Your phenomenal relationship with your brain and its impact on colour experience**
- **The role of perception & judgement**
- **The significance of contrast**
- **The language and dimensions of colour**
- **Solutions for getting colour right in your home**
- **Solutions for getting paint colours right**

Once you realize that the real skill in colour choice is not about saying yes or no to a colour on a paint chip or product, but rather knowing how to interpret your reactions to it, you will be on your way to *Feeling Good* with colour … Let's start at the beginning…….

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The Three Essential Components of Colour

Colour does not exist without light; an object; and an observer.

Remove light and you have blackness -no colour.

Remove the object and there is nothing to see colour on.

Remove the person experiencing the colour and there is no colour experience.

This is not unlike the old philosophical debate which asks the question: *"if a tree falls in the forest and nobody is present to hear it, is there still sound".*

The phenomenon of colour is an experience that takes place in the observer.

Understanding the relationship of the three fundamental components of colour is essential to decorating success.

Light Energy...

is photons (particles) of electromagnetic energy travelling in waves of differing lengths, advancing in a straight line. The lengths of the waves determine its colour, and those that can be detected by the human eye constitute the visible spectrum.

While light from the sun contains all possible colour variations, not all electromagnetic wavelengths can be experienced by the human eye, and not all people "see" the same wavelengths or therefore the same shades of a colour.

We are capable of experiencing light/colour because our eyes have light and colour sensitive receptors known as rods (receptive to amounts of light) and cones (sensitive to colour) which send light energy information through a complicated neuro-communications network between the eyes and the brain. Individual cones can only sense one of three light frequencies: **red**, **green** and **blue** which the brain translates into our perception of colour. When one of the receptors malfunctions, colour blindness results.

Therefore, the experience of light is individual and perceptual depending upon our physiology.

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Objects & Light Reflection

When light hits the surface of an object it is either reflected; absorbed; or transmitted.

When an object is transparent, such as glass, it will transmit light through it.

When an object appears to be a **colour,** then it has absorbed all of the light waves except that of the colour it appears to be.

In other words, an object that appears to be **blue** will absorb all light waves except those that are blue.

The degree of an object's transparency will affect the extent to which light waves either pass through or are reflected by the object.

The more transparent the object, the more light will pass through and the less colour the object will appear to have.

The finish of an object's surface – whether it is smooth or textured; shiny or matte; will influence the degree to which light appears to be reflected or absorbed and therefore affect the experience of the object's colour.

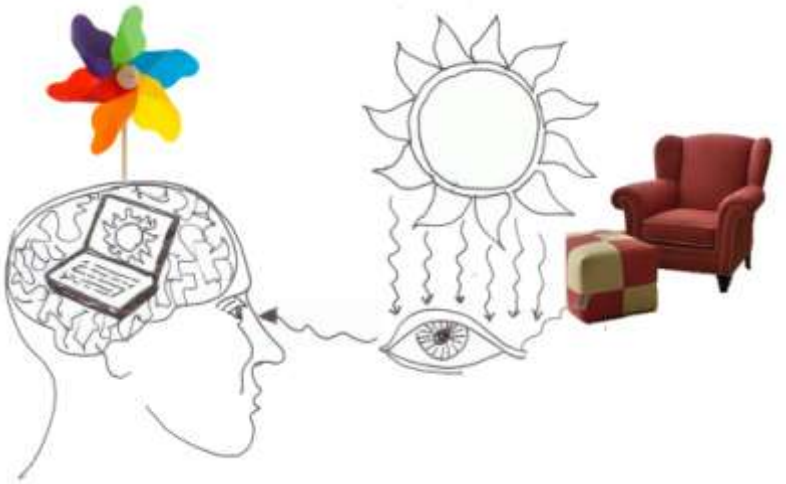
Light travels in straight lines so when its pathway is blocked shadows will appear where light is not reflected, thus altering the observer's perception of colour in the unlighted area.

The shape of an object therefore will affect how light is reflected or absorbed and also influence the observer's experience of that object.

The Observer

Contrary to everything our commercial world would have us believe**, it is not our eyes that are seeing colour**, but rather it is experienced as a physical and emotional response which results from a complicated neuro-network of communications that takes place between the eyes and the brain. In actual fact, **colour is a function of the brain.**

The eyes report to the brain, their personal experience of visible wave lengths that are reflected, absorbed or transmitted by the surface of an object. The brain then transfers this information based on its perception into "coloured" images which appear in accordance with the specific data supplied by the individual observer and we experience the **sensation of vision.**



Your experience of light waves and your interpretations of their **colours** are individual. However, your connection with **colour** is even more intimate**, because every brain is wired differently, even twins.**

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The Cause & Effect of Colour Feelings

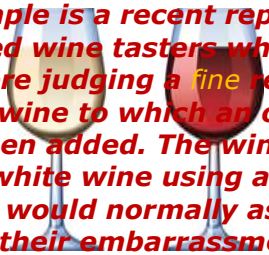
Understanding how our physical experience of colour is transmuted into emotional response, is an important step in discovering how and why we "feel" the way we do about colour.

1. Information Gathering - Our Senses

As we have just seen with vision, we gather information through our sensory receptors which when converted into electrical signals travel along a vast network of neural pathways to various processing stations in our brain where it is miraculously converted into the responses required to carry out the activities of our lives**. Since no two brains have the same neural connections, it stands to reason that our respective interpretations of colour information will differ.**

All of our senses are involved in our physiology but **sight trumps and dominates all the others, at 70%.** While each of our senses has specific responsibilities, they all work as a team so memory recall of one sense may be triggered by awareness of another. Smell is a particularly strong associating sense and like all its other partners often triggers **colour** memory. There is also interaction between specific partnering senses – thus the ability of some people to experience results like the "**sound** of **colour"**.

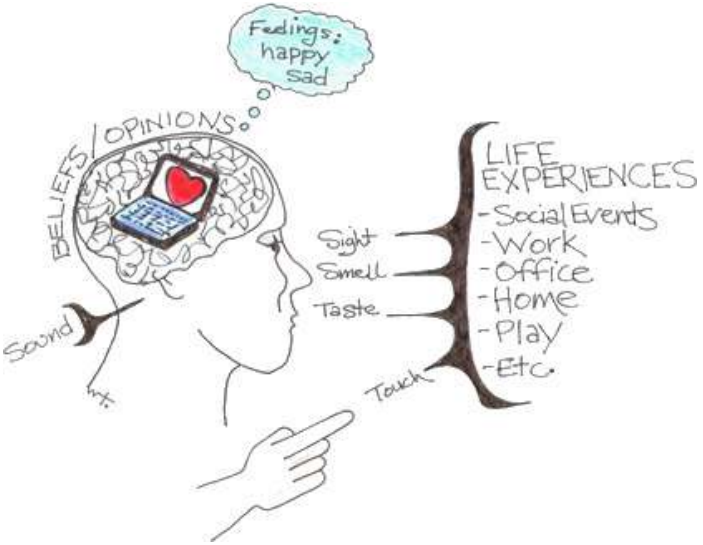
A strong feeling about an object's colour will over-ride the influence of the other senses.



A perfect example is a recent report of a group of world renowned wine tasters who were fooled to believe they were judging a fine red wine when in fact it was a white wine to which an odourless; tasteless red dye had been added. The wine tasters appraised the disguised white wine using all the terms of reference they would normally associate with red wine, much to their embarrassment.

2. From Sensation to Emotion

In addition to directing the trillions of functions that take place moment to moment within our body`s physiology, our brain simultaneously forms **opinions** about the events taking place in our lives, which it categorizes and files as **fact** in permanent memory. Our feelings determine what we pay attention to and thus shape our **perceptions which become** our **beliefs and ultimately the fuel that feeds our emotional responses.**



Because a great deal of this exchange happens on a continuous basis without our awareness, like the beating of our hearts or our breathing, we don't think much about it; that is until we experience a strong physical or emotional reaction on the **basic scale between pain and pleasure.**

Naturally we gravitate towards sensations that feel good and away from those that don't, but the curious thing is the **entanglement** we experience between our physical and emotional responses **that seem to come from "nowhere"; such as an intense like or dislike for a particular colour.**

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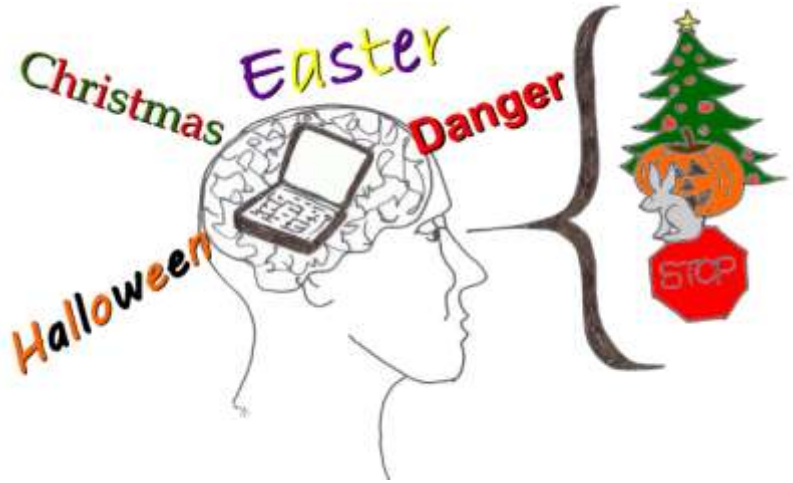
Interestingly, recent behavioural research has uncovered ***"empirical evidence to suggest humans do not need to be aware of the event that caused their mood or feelings in order to be affected by it."***
*(As reported by Science Daily from materials provided by Association for Psychological Science.)

So, it's not surprising that we sometimes struggle with the nature of our **colour** feelings given that we may not even be aware of their root source, or the triggers that evoke them.

Since we freely associate our observations with our experiences to formulate our beliefs, it stands to reason that our memory of **colour** would become part of our assessments.



The more intense our feelings are concerning specific experiences, the more we will cling to our judgements about them as being absolute. A **turquoise** **pumpkin** just wouldn't feel like Halloween!

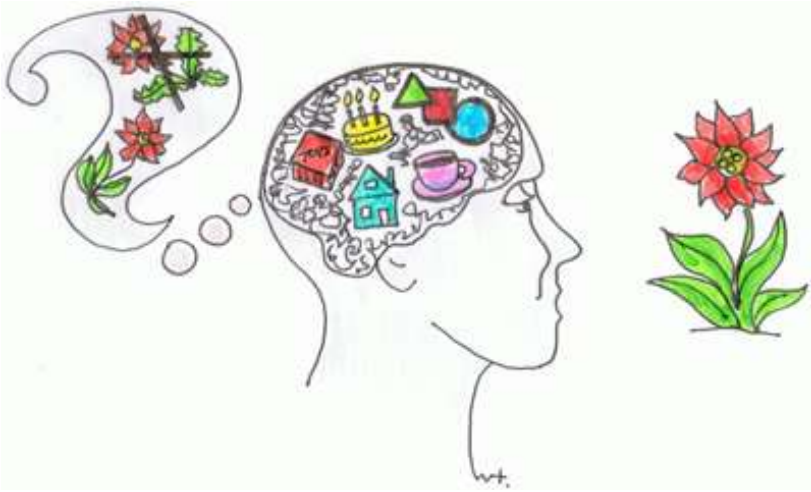
Behind the Veil of Perception

"Reality Leaves A Lot to The Imagination."

John Lennon

While scientists acknowledge that our senses gather information at an unbelievable rate of some 400 billion bits per second, they estimate that only about 2000 get through to our consciousness. Therefore, the brain has to censor a great deal of information in order for us to create our stories of our world.

As information travels along our neural roadways, it is distributed to different parts of the brain and stored as shapes, colours and patterns. Then, it is reconstructed by a process of pattern matching with stored memories of similar bits of information while associating it with emotions and meanings that have been assigned to these events, tying all the information together in an integrated picture.



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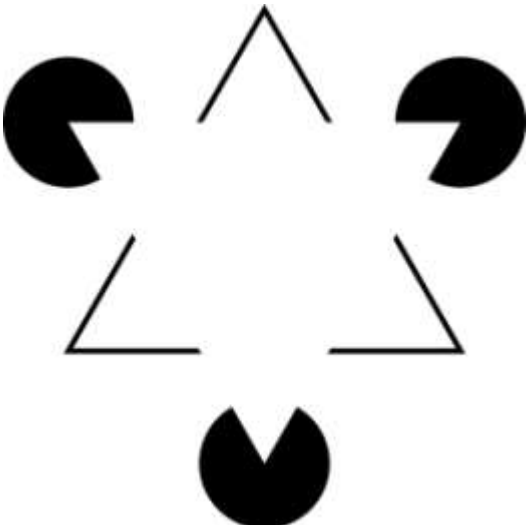
To be specific, our brain ***assumes*** and in order to paint a picture it connects the dots based upon our perceptions of past experience.



Kanizsa Triangle
Courtesy of
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanizsa_triangle

If you see a triangle in the illustration above, it's because you have a triangle neuro-connection in your brain's memory bank that is telling you to see one here, because in fact there is no triangle, just missing pieces of circles.

Our beliefs evolve over the course of our lives and are shaped by our connection with nature; our cultural influences; and the day to day events of our lives.

So while we struggle with decorating and **colour** choices in the present, a great deal of our feelings is actually tied unconsciously to the memories of events in the past. And here's the glitch - **Early memory always over-rides present day desires. So who and what is influencing your colour feelings?**

The Nature of Contrast

Shadow Owes its Birth to Light…..

John Gray

We don't make determinations about information in isolation. With our senses finely attuned to detect change our **brain instantaneously translates data into response, based upon a sophisticated process of comparison**. We don't judge **colour** in isolation, but rather describe it in relation to the "whole" of light and portions thereof.

Ancient wisdom referred to this as the Tao (Dow) – based on the principle that all of life, while intricately connected, is actually experienced in terms of a delicate balance between opposing yet complimentary energies. Today we would describe the degrees of extremity between the outer edges of the two opposites as ***contrast.***

Following the concept that you can't have up without down; light without dark; and cold without hot; the degree of contrast between each polarity becomes the sliding scale for measuring our differences and our acceptance quotients.

How **green** is the **green?** How **red** is the **red?** How **dark** is the **wall**? It all depends on what you're comparing it to!!

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Here’s another example. If you are thinking that the two gray rectangles are different shades, you would be the victim of contrast’s illusion. The gray shade behind the dark horizontal lines looks darker than when the same colour is placed on top but in fact the two are the same shade.

White’s Illusion
Courtesy of www.newworldencyclopedia.org

Rubin's Vase
Courtesy of www.wikipedia.org/wiki/rubin_vase

The common border in Rubin’s vase defines the edges by degree of contrast so we see the difference between the two colours as ground and primary object. Depending upon our individual interpretation, we see either the vase or two faces looking at each other. It’s all a matter of perception.

So, Who's Picking Your Decorating Choices?

Let's recap what we have just reviewed:

- You now know that your experience of light waves and your interpretations of their **colours** are individual.

- Our connection with colour is even more intimate than you might have imagined.

The truth is our feelings emanate from "***memory chips"*** of information stored in our brain, which contain genetic and acquired details of all the events of our lives together with our **beliefs** about them. - And, nothing ***shapes the uniqueness of our personal colour paradigms more than our perceptions about the recorded history we have filed. Where are your colour likes and dislikes coming from?***

Unlock Your Colour Feelings – Ask yourself:

- **Why am I considering a new or different colour? How do I really feel about the colour I have? What feels good? Why? What are my colour memories?**
- **Think about the ambience you wish to create and connect to your words with visual pictures both imaginary and from magazines. We see best in pictures.**
- **Pay attention to the textures and surface finishes you prefer – hard; soft; shiny or flat; reflective or absorbing.**
- **What kind of light do you need? How does light make you feel. Are you a victim of Seasonal Affective Disorder?**
- **Pay attention to the shapes you like and the amount of contrast you are comfortable with?**
- **Pay special attention to your feelings. And,**
- **If you are hiring a professional, make sure they are asking you how you "feel" not imposing their views.**

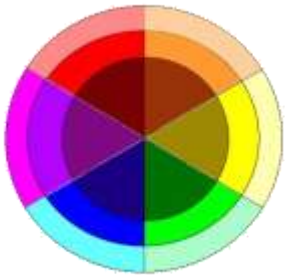
The Layman's Language of Colour

So, now you understand how to unlock **your colour feelings**, the next challenge is finding the words to **speak "colour",** so that you can communicate your needs and desires to those helping you with product selections.

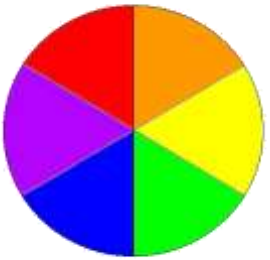
1. **Colour theory is explained in two ways.**
   (a) Colour produced by light or
   (b) Colour produced by mixing pigment.
   (c) The primaries of each are different –
   Light: red, green & blue
   Pigment: red, yellow & blue
   d) Pigment colour dominates colour in consumer goods.

2. **Colour Communication Tools**

The **colour wheel** is a communication tool based on pigment colour primaries and mimics the effect of refracted light or the **rainbow.** It builds outward from the centre combining colours beside one another in increasing combinations. Its use facilitates easy grouping and categorizing of colour families and provides a visual guide for colour recognition and comparison. Paint store colour displays and fan decks use this concept to organize colour.



3. Colour Terminology



Think of basic spectral colours in family groups; dividing them into blocks of red; green; yellow; blue; orange; violet; magenta. Families that reside opposite to each other are in the position of greatest contrast, and following the rule that "opposites attract", they complement each other particularly if they are used in equal value. The same is true for all their descendants. This means they are more of themselves in each other's company. Reds look redder and greens more green when used together.

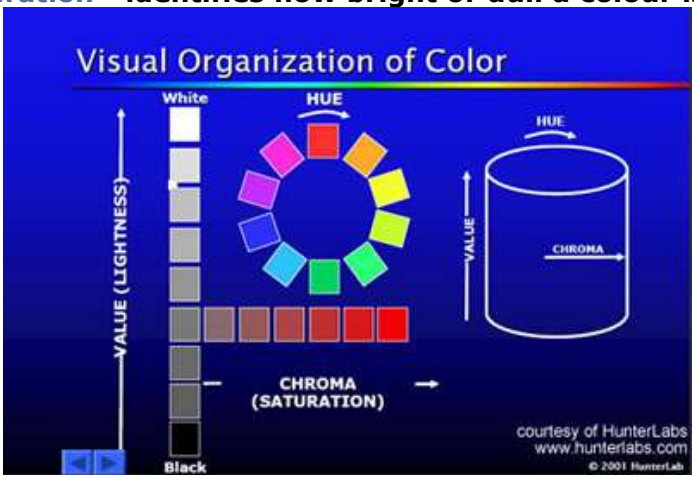
Think of colours as being three dimensional.

Hue **– identifies its spectral colour name - blue**

Value **– relates to how light or dark it is.**

- **Colours are made lighter by tinting with white; and darker by shading – adding gray or black;**

Saturation - identifies how bright or dull a colour is.



Words to Connect Colour to Nature

All colours are categorized as being **warm** **or** **cool,** symbolic of how they appear in nature. Colours made from reds & yellows are warm while blues & greens appear cooler. All colours have **warm** **and** **cool** *versions* depending upon the combination of colours they are mixed with. Further colour association with seasonal groupings – spring summer, fall, and winter emphasise our comfort with natural palettes.

We have the ability to distinguish untold thousands of colours. Since most colours are made from combinations of other colours mixed together, we sense the influence of these colours which are identified as ***undertones,*** particularly when colours in the same family are compared with each other. Undertones can render a colour warmer or cooler.

About Black & White

In light colour theory, black is the absence of colour and white is the combination of all colours. However, black and white do exist in today's colour world in the form of pigment colours and so, they are indeed colours and they can have many different versions of themselves. They are polar opposites and therefore present the greatest opportunity for contrast. They are also used as additives for shading and tinting other colours and so have a great effect on the value of the colours they are influencing. In their purest hue, they are colour neutral but can be extremely impactful in a decorating scheme depending upon their reflective qualities.

For an example of black & white see the picture in Objects, following.

Putting It All Together for Feel Good Colour

The experience of colour depends upon light, objects and an observer each of which must be fully understood in order to achieve maximum decorating success.

Light Matters

Its source, direction and clarity will affect colour. The time of the day and seasons of the year will cause colour change.

Light travels in straight lines so interruptions to its travel paths cause shadows and colour change.

- Take photos and study light patterns to see its effect on your colour before you begin your decorating project.
- We tend to think that light is always coming from above. Think again… check your light source. It may be fooling you particularly if it is artificial light.
- Remember, we need more clear glare free light as we get older.
- Be aware of "penny wise – pound foolish" savings. All energy-save lighting solutions are not all they're cracked up to be. Bad lighting has negative effects on health, and vitality as well as ruining colour schemes.
- Choose function first when it comes to lighting and remember there is no Band-Aid that can save a colour scheme lost to poor lighting.

Objects

- Whether you are considering a wall to be painted, a piece of furniture or fabrics for soft furnishings or carpet…. the process is the same.

- The finished surface of the object in question will have impact on the colour it appears.

- Shiny objects appear to reflect light and look brighter than matte finishes which appear to absorb light and tend to look duller. The more reflective an object - like a granite counter, the more three dimensional its surface may appear when light is reflected from it. Glossy finishes look darker than matte.

- Finishes with a "pile" or "nap" like velvet or suede will reflect light across the surface depending upon the direction of the nap and therefore will have directionally influenced colour impressions and may appear to be several shades of a colour.

- Curves in furniture and walls will affect how colour appears. Concave curves will appear darker. Imperfections in drywall can cause colour distortion. An objects shape will cause light to shadow and colour will appear to be different on different parts of the same object.

- Rougher surfaces appear to have a greater scatter of colour reflectance.

The Observer

- The experience of light and colour is an individual one.

- We depend upon our senses for information processing and they all work together.

- While sight trumps all other senses, there is a strong interconnection among all of the senses and any of the others especially smell and touch can trigger feelings about colour. Pay attention to them when trying to uncover your feelings about colour.

- Our memories and feelings about past events are influencing our colour responses in the present.
  We remember in pictures and our brains pay attention to repeating patterns of information.

- We differentiate and categorize the events and material components of our world by comparing one to another and making judgements about our assessments. We measure contrast on a scale of polarities between opposing but co-operative energies.

  We are able to discern thousands of colours but only when one is compared with another as a point of reference can we appreciate the differences among them. The degree of contrast that we are comfortable with will indicate whether you paint your walls and trim the same colour; different values of the same colour or you choose a complete contrast.

- The greater the contrast between adjoining edges, the more defined the edges become. Whether a wall looks larger or smaller depends upon the degree of contrast with the colour of the other walls adjoining it.

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Tips For Getting Colour Right!

- **Fix the lighting first! It's worth every penny. There's no magic bullet for bad lighting….. and it's a high cost to pay if your decorating doesn't look great.**

- **Sample; sample; sample. Take your samples home in big enough sizes that you can actually see them in the room where they are to be used. Order yard pieces if you need to for big ticket purchases.**

- **Have all the pieces of your decorating project assembled to be considered at the same time in the place where they are to be used, and move them around the room so that you can observe their interface with light and each other.**

- **Observe your samples in all types of daylight and artificial light. Remember the light changes daily and seasonally.**

- **If you need help, make sure your professional understands your feelings; your colour expectations and your real colour preferences.**

- **Don't ignore your own colour instincts and assume others know better. A good professional can help you understand and predict certain outcomes given certain circumstances; and help keep you focused on your real colour objectives, but the feelings are yours only.**

And Finally the Paint Colours

While paint is the most flexible for choice, it is the hardest to get right.

First of all, it is impossible to accurately choose a paint colour without seeing it painted on the surface where it is going to be applied. The relationship between light and paint is inseparable. One depends upon the other to exist in the eye of the beholder.

While technology has certainly improved the accuracy rate of colour match between paint chip samples and the pigment combinations in the can, the fact remains that one is ink on paper and the other is paint in a can. They are different and their relationship with light will be different.

The light in paint stores is probably the most unlike any residential setting one could choose in. So add the bad store lighting to the tiny ink stained paint chip together with a sales clerk who probably has no idea of what your home environment is let alone anything about your colour feelings, and you have a recipe for choice disaster.

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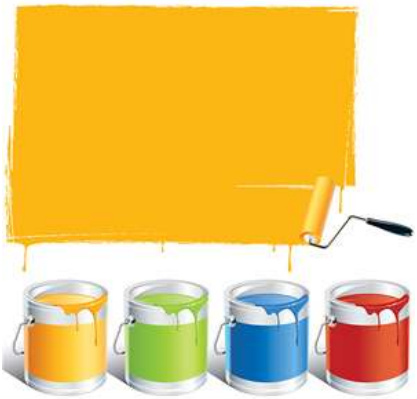
The only way to ensure that your paint colours end up the way you want them is to narrow down your playing field by working in a colour range – easily determined by choosing from the colour chips. Talk colour language so you can express your feelings and what you are experiencing with the colours you are contemplating. Are the colours bright enough…. Do you want the colour to be clearer or duller… When you have narrowed down your choice, buy a litre of each of the colours you prefer and take them home and get it on the walls. (Many brands now offer sample sizes also.) This will give you a bench mark for colour comparison – light vs. dark; more hue – less hue, etc.



Yes it takes a bit of elbow grease, but success depends upon the accurate reading of the interaction of the painted surface with light in the presence of the observer.

Irene Turnbull has a mission "to make the world happier, one home at a time!" and what's more, she's doing it!!! Contact Irene about upcoming Workshops, Seminars, Speaking and Personal Consultations. **Feel good in your space!**

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