

Color Theory

Color Combinations

Disharmony / Harmony

The selection of colors can provide visual delight or atrocity. Cultural definitions of color harmony vary (as shown in the fashion and interior design industries), however the choice of color is a crucial aspect of a design or composition. A traditional subject often calls for more traditional color combinations (local color), whereas an unconventional subject is usually more at home with less conventional (interpretive) color. If a traditional subject is rendered in disharmonious color, a whole new aspect is introduced.

Color Distribution

In even the most inharmonious color schemes the careful placement of color within the composition can make the colors work well together. For example, a dot of red in a field of green will make the whole jump with energy. All colors are affected by the colors surrounding them.

Weight and Balance

Dark colors appear more “heavy” (low key) whereas bright and pale colors appear “light” (high key).

Emphasis/Focal Point

Color can be used to emphasize essential areas of a composition. Color value, contrast and position within the format will draw the eye to a point of emphasis.

Color Temperature

Colors are referred to as warm or cool depending on the color family to which they belong. Colors derived from yellow and red are warm, whereas colors from the blue family are cool. However, colors mixed from red and blue, purples for example, can be either warm or cool, depending upon the predominance of red or blue mixed in the purple. A yellow-green would be a warm green whereas an aqua or a sage green would be cool, because there is more blue in aqua and sage than in a yellow-green like an apple green. Warm colors often appear to expand and advance visually, and cool colors contract and recede visually.

Color Keys (Dominant Colors)

Color keys can heighten psychological as well as compositional impact. A predominance of blue can suggest evening, water, emotional sadness, mystery, etc. A predominance of orange can suggest energy, upbeat feeling, anxiety etc.

Color Contrast

High contrast color has a dramatic, energetic, effect whereas low contrast, delicate color combinations have a more serene effect.

Emotional Effects

Color is never emotionally neutral. A sepia colored work suggest the slower pace and charm of an antique. Predominance of red suggests many emotions from love to anger. Your color of color scheme can be a great asset when communicating an emotion.

Symbolic Color

Colors are often associated with symbols, which can vary from culture to culture. Some of the symbolic associations are very strong and should be considered when choosing color.

“Blue is the symbol of baby boys in America, mourning Borneo, tribulation to the American Indian and the direction South in Tibet. Blue indicates mercy in the Kabbalah and carbon monoxide in gas canisters. Chinese emperors wore blue to worship the sky. To Egyptians it represented virtue, faith, and truth. The color was worn by slaves in Gaul. It was the color of the sixth level of the Temple of Nebuchadnezzar II, devoted to the planet Mercury. In Jerusalem a blue hand painted on a door gives protection . . . and in East Africa, blue beads represent fertility.”

Alexander Theroux, *The Primary Colors*