

21st CENTURY COLOR

By Lidewij Edelkoort

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By using paint right out of the tin or spray straight from the can, the artists of the 60's and early 70's managed to give up a personal opinion when it came to color, expressing a need for interpreting quality renderings and transforming color into an emotional vehicle. With the arrival of acrylic fast-drying paint, automotive chromatic paint, flat and often synthetic surfaces and the popular image as inspiration, readymade color was meant to be a symbol of reality and therefore had to resemble the colors of packaging, billboards, magazines and comic strips. The two-dimensional artist prints realized with screen-printing (instead of more refined lithography) only emboldened this movement of pure color, so directly that brushstrokes were expressively amplified by Roy Lichtenstein and paintbrushes even stuck directly onto the canvases of Jim Dine.

This was a period when interiors were to come alive with bold blocks of upholstered chairs made of synthetic molded materials as seen in the designs of Joe Colombo and Pierre Paulin. The world was optimistic and playful, with designers and artists kneading matter like a child uses play dough and coloring in surfaces with flat, fast and fashionable markers such as in the Do It Yourself works of Andy Warhol. Out of the paint box, out of the can.

Nowadays, the public at large has learnt to discern color perfectly. As the curator of their own museum houses, they have learnt how to handle color choices and will reinterpret their individual cultures through color. They know that green can be pistachio, avocado, spinach or wasabi, that red might be coral, that pink could be flamingo, that brown will be chocolate and that skin no longer means a weird shade of salmon, but that it can be anything from the palest porcelain to a dark shade of ebony. When fine-tuned by sophisticated color and textile designers, these nuances make our times specific in their own right.

Today color never comes on its own. When we discuss color we speak of volume and we describe matter. The fusion of material and color has given our surfaces new interpretations; from matte rubber to high-gloss lacquer, from speckled mica to iridescent and pearlized effects, from lightweight transparencies to multiple layers and from brushed titanium to polished bronze. These new developments that embed color in materials have deeply changed the way we see and actually feel color. Our fingers seem to see the shade of things to come. The next step will be to push color to be fragrant and audible; a crispy salad green, a heady mildew mauve, a crunchy Japanese apple...

With a surge of brights currently parading the catwalk and clashing with the red carpet, and with lively lacquered surfaces in interiors and architecture changing color like structural chameleons, it is easy to mistake this colorful movement as a revival. Most fashion magazines have already labeled the color comeback as a return to the 60's and early 70's and seen it as a rekindling of the Pop movement. Yet a closer analysis of contemporary color codes teaches us the contrary.

Although brilliantly and blatantly colorful these newer shades are carriers of emotion and finesse and tend to be complex and researched. These tones are influenced by a digital timeframe where the color of light, video and the Net affect our perception and require today's hues to be translucent and mutant since there are derived from pixels, recomposed and flexible.

The contemporary yellow is acidic and reflective and doesn't resemble the egg yolk yellows of Andy Warhol or Ellsworth Kelly.

The current craze for green is as inspired by nature as was the vivid green of the Fauvist period; an interpretation of nature rather than a one-on-one Pantone match taken from the grass. These greens are the edible and drinkable greens of an organic movement with absinthe being the newest and hottest hue.

Our blue is not from either of the Yves (the intense blue of Klein or the navy of Saint Laurent) but a blue that resembles the Cerulean Ocean with the transparent quality of perfectly-rendered water.

Our oranges no longer resemble a Fanta bottle or an Orangina poster; they are based on exotic fruits like kumquats, mangoes and lush papayas. For autumn they may resemble pumpkin and fashionably introduce the shades of a prolonged Indian Summer, perhaps a symbolic anticipation of further global warming.

Our reds are possibly the only color that can still match the references of the 60's and early 70's, mainly because bright red has the strongest communication capacity amongst all the colors. Red is a color that is liberated from political possession and without an ideological identity; since the end of the Cold War red has been redefined by Coca-Cola, the Pope, Nancy Reagan, and most recently by the omnipresent red carpet.

Our pink (now in its tenth anniversary as a fashion favorite!) has been defined by roses, ribbons and more recently, macaroons, making these shades the darlings of us all. Even men have given in to a sweeter tooth and in recent summers hot Bombay pink has become a bestseller amongst polo shirt companies worldwide.

In a way the colorcard of the 21st Century very much resembles the Book of Genesis with its beginning of light, the water and earth dividing, the arrival of green - strangely enough before the moon, stars and sun - the colors of fish and birds (the best brights yet to be studied), the endless neutral shades of animal fur and last but not least, the color of man, our very own skins derived like a fashion colorcard.

So we live in our own century with our own brilliant shades of brights illustrating life from within and not just on the surface. But do they really play such an overarching role?

The bestselling RAL color in history is reference #7035, a boring middle grey tone. Grey is the perfect fusion of black and white, the color of nuance and dialogue, and a metaphor for a mature and truly democratic lifestyle. The family of greys permits all other colors to lean against them, to underline or overshadow them. Grey is patient and flexible and an appeasing tone in times of change and financial crisis. And with the recent success of Ratatouille, mouse grey paint everywhere may be the next small thing.