

UNDERSTANDING COLOR (Part 1)

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Saturday, 16 February 2008
Last Updated Sunday, 17 February 2008

Color is like the air we breathe; we don't truly appreciate it, or even fully realize it is there, until we begin to think about it in a specific context like home decorating. And then, as we try to gain some idea of the tremendous range of different shades now available, in the form of paint, papers, fabrics and carpets, it becomes bewildering, if not downright alarming. How can you ever hope to make a choice, or learn to avoid the expensive mistake of buying a costly fabric or wallpaper that doesn't seem to go with anything else?

But this lack of confidence is largely a result of ignorance of the basic principles of color – for here, as in most things; there are certain rules and guidelines to follow. You may decide to break them all – some people have an instinctive sense of color and always get it right – but once you have absorbed them you will be able to cope with the apparent complexities and enjoy controlling color with confidence.

THE PROPERTIES OF COLOUR

One of the most important 'tools' of the decorator is the color wheel, one of which is shown here. There are many different versions of these wheels, but the idea of them is always the same; they are a convenient arrangement of the basic colors from which all the others – through the neutral grey-greens, grey-blues, browns and beiges – are mixed.

Notice how the colors fall neatly into two halves, with the reds, oranges and yellows on one side and the greens and blues on the other. Artists and decorators often describe colors in terms of their 'temperature'; the greens, blues and acid yellows are known as 'cool' colors, and the reds, oranges and golden yellows are 'warm'. This is important in decorating, as the cool colors tend to recede, thus making a room look larger, while the warm ones, especially in the darker shades, have the opposite effect, closing in to create a cosier ambience – in the case of red, this can even become a touch claustrophobic.

Obviously a color wheel cannot show all the possible mixtures, or even all the shades of one color – the human eye can distinguish over ten million different ones – but it is a useful starting point. You can see the three primaries (red, blue and yellow) in position, and on either side are the mixtures of these, known as secondary colors: the greens (blue and yellow), oranges (red and yellow) and violets (blue and red).

These basics can be broken down into more and more complex shades, such as yellow-green and blue-mauve, and when a further color is added, you have what is known as the tertiary colors, the browns, beiges, grey-blues, grey-greens, and so on, that do not appear on the wheel. All colors, no matter what fancy names the manufacturers give them, are only permutations of the basic ones, and even the so-called neutrals have a distinct leaning towards one or the other of these. As long as you understand the principle of the color wheel, you will be able to analyse the constituent parts of your chosen color – it may be blue with a touch of green, or brown with red undertones – and this will enable you to co-ordinate it with other colors in your scheme.

HARMONIES AND CONTRASTS

Every color can be lightened by the addition of white; you will see the pale shades around the edges of the wheel. The best way of creating a harmonious color scheme is either to use shades of one color or colors that are close together on the wheel – you can rely on these to co-ordinate beautifully in a room.

The colors that are directly opposite one another on the wheel are contrasting partners, called complementary colors. These are particularly useful; accents of complementary colors are often used in the form of accessories or decorative details, and some patterned fabrics or papers will make use of similar combinations, violet and yellow, for example, in the paler shades. There can be problems if you try to pair a primary color with its secondary complementary, red and green being the obvious example. The success of this contrast depends very much on the proportions in which you use it. Equal amounts of the colors can create a jarring, unpleasant effect, but a small amount of red in a predominantly green room can be very exciting. You see this kind of scheme all the time in nature, after all – think of the dramatic effect of a few red poppies in a green field.