

UNDERSTANDING COLOR (Part 2)

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HOW COLOURS WORK TOGETHER

One of the biggest problems in home decorating springs from the failure to realize that color is a perversely changeable thing. No one color exists by itself; it is given its character by the other colors that surround it, and an area of color can be made to look smaller or larger in the same way. Look at the diagrams and you will see that the yellow square inside the black one looks larger than the same yellow square inside the white, and the color looks different too – the black surround makes the yellow look warmer and more vibrant.

You may think that this sounds complicated and over-technical, particularly if you are planning a controlled color scheme based on shades of one color, but it is useful to know how you can best emphasize or play down a particular color, or make an area look smaller or larger. It is also important if you are choosing new curtains or furniture for an existing scheme. It is only too easy to opt for a “safe” beige or grey, only to find, when you put it in place, that it looks quite wrong because it is a warmer or cooler shade than the walls or carpet.

For this warmth and coolness of colors, already discussed, is also to some extent relative. Theoretically, all greens are cool, but if you place an olive green next to one of the bluer greens, like jade, you will have difficulty perceiving them both as green – the olive will look distinctly brown. Much the same applies to the reds. In principle they are all warm, but some of the lighter tints of crimson will look bluish if placed next to a bright pillar-box red. This is why it is vital to choose all the component parts of a color scheme together, taking a sample of your chosen paint or wallpaper with you when you look at fabrics and floor coverings, and so on.

COLOUR AND THE SENSES

Another aspect of color is that it is emotive – it stimulates all our sense, not just our eyes. Music is often described in terms of colors; the cool sound of running water immediately makes us think of blues and greys; the crackle of fire conjures up reds and oranges. We make reference to color constantly in our everyday speech, in such phrases as “feeling blue”, “angry red”, and “black looks”. It is now even believed that color has some importance in our sense of taste. Red has been found to stimulate the appetite and encourage us to eat more quickly, and is incorporated in the décor of many fast-food chains for this reason.

A considerable amount of research has been done on the psychological effects of color on human behavior, which has been put into practice largely in the redecoration of hospitals and prisons. It is believed that certain shades and tones have therapeutic or relaxing qualities, while red has been found to stimulate ideas as well as generating aggression. Orange appears to be a good anti-depressant, while shades of blue, the greatest natural tranquillizer, are used extensively on walls and even floors for their healing

and peace-bringing properties.

As is often the case, this research tells us nothing startlingly new, but it is interesting because it bears out our own responses and feelings about color. There is no doubt that red, if not always an angry color, is an assertive one. It attracts attention immediately; it is stimulating and exciting. Orange represents happiness and joyfulness, but because it is tempered with yellow, it is less aggressive. Yellow itself is light, a form of liquid sunshine. It raises the spirits in the same way as the sun breaking through cloud. Its enlivening qualities have been borne out by research into lack of sunlight as a cause of depression and ill health – a sunny yellow wall was found to be a good psychological substitute for natural sunshine or the yellow glow of artificial light bulbs. Green and blue, particularly the latter, are both relaxing, restful colors, while violet, a blend of stimulating red and calming blue, are naturally well-balanced and promotes a feeling of peace and calm.