THE IMPACT OF COLOR

Story by Gina Scott

Miranda Priestly: Something funny?

Andy Sachs: No, no, nothing. Y’know, it’s just that both those belts look exactly the same to me. Y’know, I’m still learning about all this stuff.

Miranda Priestly: This… ‘stuff’? Oh… ok. I see. You think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select out, oh I don’t know, that lumpy blue sweater, for instance, because you’re trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don’t know is that that sweater is not just blue, it’s not turquoise, it’s not lapis, it’s actually cerulean. You’re also blindly unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves St Laurent, wasn’t it, who showed cerulean military jackets? And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. Then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled down into some tragic “casual corner” where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and so it’s sort of comical how you think that you’ve made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you’re wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room. From a pile of “stuff.”

-Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway in “The Devil Wears Prada”
Remember when consumers sought out avocado appliances and burnt-orange countertops for their kitchens? Many of us still have pretty vivid images of the '70s color schemes in our minds. Ever wonder why certain colors are popular during specific time periods? Color plays a major role in our economics; it drives what people buy and how they live. You may not think much about it because color is all around you every day—it's in nature, it's at work, it's at home. But how does color really happen, and who decides what colors are popular?

Webster's Dictionary defines color as "a phenomenon of light (as red, brown, pink or gray) or visual perception that enables one to differentiate otherwise identical objects." Color is something that is perceived differently by each individual eye. The appeal of different colors is up for interpretation. With such subjective concepts behind color, how do we define it in such a way that it affects our culture at its core level?

Because color is such a broad and important subject, experts like Donald Kaufman play a key role. As the owner of Donald Kaufman Color, Don works with both residential and commercial clients, providing them with custom-mixed colors and much-needed advice. In fact, he and his wife, Taffy Dahl, an artist who works alongside him, sometimes see themselves as mediators when two people can't decide on a color for one reason or another. Don has a background as a painter (using materials like canvas), so he has a perfect history to work with color.

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Over the years, Don and his wife have worked on projects throughout the U.S. and around the world. Their projects encompass using color to enhance tiny apartments to working on the new American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Don and Taffy work with people who care about how things look and "want the right feeling" in their spaces. Not being archi-
tects or interior designers themselves, they work together with all trades to harmonize different materials, wallcoverings, tinted concrete, etc. to create the best atmosphere for the space. “We can contribute to the poetry architects and designers create,” says Don, who describes color as a “shape-changing sensation.” He and his wife are often brought in to help decide if a color is the correct choice—it’s as simple and complex as that. Talking with Don, you understand just how much there is to know about color. He points out that “biologists believe human beings can differentiate between seven and nine million distinct shades.”

Color shifts within the eye and is ever-changing. Other things that shift along with color are trends—and that’s where the avocado-green appliances come in. Who decided that green appliances would be a hit? Or did consumers already reveal what would be in style so manufacturers could produce just that? This involves color forecasting.

Sandra Sampson, vice president of public relations and communications for the Color Marketing Group, describes color forecasting as “determining consumer color preferences several years in advance.” Made up of volunteers, the Color Marketing Group is the leading international association of color design professionals, and has been forecasting color for over 50 years. Each year, the Color Marketing Group releases to the public four key colors, which are determined by regional color forecasting workshops known as ChromaZones® and in conferences throughout Europe, Latin America and Asia Pacific. Explains
Sandra, “The color forecasting workshops gather together color designers, marketers, color scientists, CMF designers, and others from multiple industries to discuss their industry-specific color trend research. Our trend research is driven by what’s happening in the economy, museums, movies, television, politics and elsewhere.” The members then boil down the research to the most forward-looking colors that will appear in the market two years ahead. Each individual color forecasting workshop collaborates on a 16-color palette with supporting color trend stories. Sixty-four colors make up the CMG World Color Forecast™ and are released to the members each year at their international summit.

Color forecasting dates back to 1915, when the Color Association of the United States was founded. At that point in our culture, color became an important part of the economy. Sarah says it is all about “having the right color on a product, in the right market, at the right time” that helps sell products. It’s important for all industries to understand where the trends will be with color forecasting, because, as Sarah explains, consumers desire coordinating colors—for example, a pink towel that coordinates with their pink wall and pink blender.

She agrees there is an “undeniable connection between color and our emotion, and color does influence us,” so the emotional connection in color design is an important component of the color design process. “The psychology of color can be influenced by our past experiences, our preconceived notions and symbology,” Sarah says. So if a child received a blue bike and had many good memories riding it, you could expect this child to carry the happy feeling about blue into his adulthood. Conversely, we can associate negative feelings with colors, so if you grew up in a yellow bedroom and didn’t have a happy
childhood, you might never be attracted to the color yellow again.

Color can be attached to just about anything. For some cultures, traditional colors are symbolic or hold special meanings. Interest groups might associate a certain color with their mission statement. Color also affects us subconsciously and even affects our behavior. Would we stop at a green stop sign? Since we generally associate the color green with go and the color red with stop, we would at least be confused by the switch—if not cause an accident by not stopping at all. “The preconceived notion that all stop signs need to be red would make it confusing to us if someone were to change the color for another,” says Sarah.

“Color psychology is deeply tied to context,” she continues. “Interior designers apply colors that fit the home, hospital, bedroom or kitchen setting—not too bold for sleeping, yet lively for gathering spaces. We set the mood of our homes by the colors we apply from the front door out the back, and into our outdoor rooms in context to the room’s purpose.” Outside the home, colors are carefully chosen for hospitals and doctor’s offices because certain colors are known to be healing.
Dee Schlotter, senior color marketing manager for PPG Paints, agrees that we use color not only as a comfort at times, but also as a reflection of what’s going on in our culture. When PPG color forecasts, she says, “We look at societal influence. After 9/11, for example, the two colors that bubbled to the surface were soft pink and chocolate brown. Soft pink is a compassionate color and chocolate brown is a cocooning, hunkering-down color. They were all over fashion and quickly came into home décor because they represented the sentiment of the world.”

Dee also says that after 2008, the wall colors turned to gray to reflect the recession. However, “after a sea of gray,” she adds, “we are seeing color come back. Blues and greens are super trendy right now.” She explains that they’ve never seen anxiety in the culture as they do now, and blue is a calming color, which is why they moved to blue as a color of the year.

Color has such a wide-ranging effect on our culture that it’s hard to truly comprehend its importance. Anyone involved in the manufacturing of products is affected by color. “The right colors sell more,” says Dee. “If you get the right color in front of someone, it can help them with their project by coordinating all their pieces.” Color affects our buying choices and our moods; it can cheer us up or bring us down. It can even affect our behavior and our actions towards others.

Dee thinks the global opinion on color is coming together in a way like never before. In the past, she says, different areas of the world had a harder time agreeing on similar colors to be the trend, but in the past few years, that hasn’t been the case. “I think that says the world is sharing a lot of the same sentiments,” she notes.

At times, color is so mysterious that even experts who work with it have a difficult time defining it. For, as elusive and ever-changing as it is, color influences everyone around the world, every day. Its impact is more far-reaching than most of us could ever imagine.

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