

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Considering the history, science, and language of color
- » Understanding color's relativity, contrast, and dynamism
- » Working with palettes and conveying meaning
- » Exploring systems of color and different mediums
- » Discovering ten colorful careers and ten ways to work with color

Chapter 1

Your Color Journey

This chapter is a colorful roadmap that briefly describes the main ideas you find throughout the book. My hope is to provide a foundation for your journey into color — and to whet your appetite! I also want to build in some redundancy; if you're like me, reading a thing twice never hurts.

Color is vast. The human eye perceives a seemingly infinite number of colors. Some colors are strikingly different while others are different in extraordinarily subtle ways. The world of color is an ocean of different perceptions, with incalculable possible combinations and juxtapositions. To work with color is to confront the vastness of color.

For a glimpse into the vastness of color that's all around you, try this: First, look at the back of your hand, observing its different colors. Some areas might be darker and others might be lighter (but the differences might be subtle). Second, look at the objects in the room you're in. Observe the dark colors, light colors, bright colors, and dull colors. Now imagine all the people in the world observing the colors on their hands and in their rooms in the same way. Compile these theoretical color observations in your mind. This is your glimpse into the vastness of color, observed in a hypothetical moment!

Color and the Power of Limits

In this book, I help you navigate the vastness of color by using a concept known as the *power of limits*, which is the sense of increased freedom (and control) within a decreased set of options — akin to the scientific concept of experimenting with constants and variables. The narrower your choices within (or your view of) a set of colors, the more you can do and see. Throughout the book, colors are presented in categories that narrow the color range, enabling you to make specific observations and progress without too many variables. When you focus on a narrow set of color choices, possibilities open up.

No matter your creative medium — painting, drawing, collage, graphic design, interior design, cooking, quilting, teaching, photography, or textiles — the power of limits helps you hone and strengthen your color skills.

Slowing Down to See Color

Many people are occupied by the digital devices that hold their attention so closely. Images move faster than ever, and colors are bright and backlit. The immersive quality of video games and VR is enthralling. But when observing color, our eyes need more time to adjust, especially when the difference between the two colors is subtle.

I suggest that you take a breath (or two) when looking at the color studies in the book. The extra seconds will help you perceive what is happening colorwise in whatever you're observing.

Where Color Begins

In Part 1, “Opening Your Eyes to Color,” you learn about the history of color as well as the science behind color perception (the physics of color and the biology of the eye). You also learn about the link between language and color.

Appreciating the history of color

Humankind's work with color goes back to prehistoric times, where cave-dwellers decorated their walls with paintings of animals and abstract patterns. Throughout

history, humans have used the natural world as a source for color. For example, ancient Phoenicians used liquid squeezed from tiny snails as a source for purple.

Beginning in the 18th century, developments in science and industry resulted in the manufacture of color that was brighter, more vivid, and less expensive. These days, color is cheap, quickly produced, and widely available. Chapter 2 covers more details about the history of color — and its use by contemporary artists.

Talking about color

Language defines how we perceive, ponder, and communicate about color. There are several ways to describe colors. One method uses *basic color terms* (such as red, yellow, beige). Adding an adjective provides specificity (light blue or grayish-green). This is a straightforward — albeit general and imprecise — way to describe color.

Another method uses *fancy color terms*, which are largely associative (such as mauve, café latte, cordovan). Fancy color terms are memorable and can be fun to use, adding zest to the language. But they can also have a high-falutin' air about them, causing some people to doubt their color capabilities (for example, if they don't know what *chartreuse* is). Don't be fooled! The use of fancy color terms doesn't necessarily indicate expertise with color, and ignorance of fancy color terms doesn't indicate an inability to work with color.



REMEMBER

The gap between the perception of color — and how it is described with language — must be acknowledged. The word *maroon*, for example, conjures different colors for different people. Language never defines color; it simply points to it! Check out Chapter 4 for more information about color and language.

Why Is Color So Slippery?

Have you ever painted a room, only to observe that the color looked different once it was on the wall? Or have you purchased an article of clothing thinking it was one color in the store, only to experience it as a slightly different color at home? Painters often grapple with color's slipperiness when a color on the palette looks different on the canvas. Why? In Part 2, “Examining Color Relationships,” you learn how color changes in context and about different types of color contrasts.

Seeing color in context

Chapter 5 is all about how color changes in context. Color's changing nature is also known as the *relativity of color* (which is the basis for color theorist Josef Albers's famous color theory book *Interaction of Color*). For example, a brown swatch takes on a greenish tinge against a large area of red but takes on a reddish tinge against a large area of green. Thus, the brown appears to be two different colors. Chapter 5 includes worksheets with color swatches that you can cut out and paste, so you can test color relativity for yourself!

Getting to know color contrasts

Chapter 6 is about contrasts of color and is based on the theories of 20th-century Swiss artist Johannes Itten. He identified contrasts such as light and dark; complementary contrast (colors opposite on the color wheel: red and green, blue and orange, purple and yellow); and warm and cool. Color contrasts can be used to create different effects. For example, warm colors evoke fire and the sun, while cool colors evoke water and ice.

Dealing with dynamic color

Do certain colors weigh more than others? Do some colors advance, while others recede? Can colors convey conditions such as wetness and dryness? The answer to all is yes!

In terms of weight, dark colors and saturated colors tend to weigh more, appearing heavier to the eye. Light colors tend to weigh less, appearing lighter and airier. A phenomenon called chromostereopsis is the reason why reds tend to advance and blues tend to recede. Sometimes, light and warm colors tend to advance, while dark and cool colors tend to recede. Warm earth tones tend to evoke dryness, while cool water tones tend to evoke wetness. More details about these dynamics are in Chapter 7.

Together, the relativity of color, color contrasts, and color dynamics show how slippery color is. Color changes according to context, it is affected by contrasting colors, and color dynamics such as chromostereopsis play on our understanding of where color is in terms of distance. So if you see color change before your eyes, don't be surprised. And don't think you're doing anything wrong. Better to embrace color's changing nature and celebrate its slipperiness!

A Colorist's World

The two chapters in Part 3 give you tools and information for working with color. Taken literally, a palette is a surface on which painters mix paint. Figuratively, a palette is a set of colors that any kind of creative practitioner might work with. Chapter 8 introduces palettes you can use whether you're planting a garden, sewing a quilt, or making a digital collage. Chapter 9 is about color and meaning, and covers color in consumer culture as well as color in visual art and personal expression.

A limited palette is a powerful palette

A key idea in Chapter 8 is the *power of limits*, which helps focus your work with color. The palettes I describe — monochrome palettes, analogous palettes, primary color and secondary color palettes, split complementary palettes, neutral palettes, and palettes based on nature — limit your options with color, which conversely opens up possibilities.

I also talk about the intuitive approach, which basically means working with color by the seat of your pants, in the moment, with no conscious strategy or approach. I believe that most artists — and other creatives — work this way, and you probably will too as you develop your creative projects. The deeper your knowledge of color, the more effective your intuitive work with color will become.

Meaningful color

As you discover in Chapter 9, color is rich with meaning in the world of consumer culture. Logos, brand identities, product packaging, and advertising all use color to communicate about goods and services. For example, Bank of America's red represents dynamism and strength, and Citibank's blue represents trustworthiness and reliability. The color of a brand contributes to the product's recognizability.

Moving beyond the conventional — almost cliché — color meanings in consumer culture, you consider the meaningfulness of color in art, which can be refreshingly subjective, personal, and nuanced. In the hands of poets, musicians, and visual artists, color takes on new, personal, and even private meanings that can reveal a profound depth of feeling.

Ways of Working with Color

In Part 4 you look at color systems that can help your work with color. You also look at different art mediums and the color possibilities for each.

Getting systematic with color

Chapter 10 addresses color systems, which are used to organize color in ways that make it easier to work with. Some systems standardize color, so that exact colors can be identified among different people at different times and locations. You learn about two standardization systems: Pantone, which is probably the most widely used color system today, and the Munsell system.

Other color systems present users with ways to apply color. These *application systems* include the color dictionary of Japanese colorist Sanzo Wada, which presents the reader with different combinations of colors that can be used in textiles and objects, and the system of color blots by British watercolorist Mary Gartside that are used in representational flower painting.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Digital color systems are also covered in Chapter 10. The primary colors for the mixing of light (additive mixing) are red, green, and blue (RGB), so it should come as no surprise that digital devices such as computer monitors use an RGB color system as their primary color.

Colorful mediums

Because color is bound up in the material qualities of whatever medium you work in, color varies greatly between painting (and even types of paint), drawing, textiles, digital art, and other forms. Knowing how color behaves in your medium is essential, so Chapter 11 covers a number of different mediums, such as acrylic, oil, watercolor, and enamel paints, color pencils, pastels, markers, dyes for textiles, and collage. In addition to the ins-and-outs of working with paint, I cover various techniques and approaches for collage as well as color selection for interior painting.



WARNING

When working with art materials, be sure to read all warning labels and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

My Colorful Part of Tens

The last section in all *Dummies* books is the *Part of Tens*, with chapters that describe ten of this and ten of that. This book has two chapters in the *Part of Tens*.

Saying hello to a colorful crew

Whether you are exploring which creative field to pursue after school, considering a second career, starting a small business, or simply looking for inspiration, the interviews in Chapter 12 provide a glimpse into the inner workings of color among a diverse groups of creative professionals. These interviews demystify how professionals in different fields use color and provide access points for you to enter their world.

Getting your hands dirty with color

The other chapter in the *Part of Tens*, Chapter 13, has ten exercises to kickstart your color creativity. Rather than assignments (or projects with clearcut conclusions), the exercises are open-ended and adaptable. After you start, you're on your own!



REMEMBER

It's good to read about color, but it's essential to engage in hands-on activities with color. When you move swatches of color around, mix paint, or draw with markers, you're engaging with color in a way that you can't do in your mind. You mix, juxtapose, and make color discernments that sharpen your ability to see and understand color — and these tasks must be done hands-on to really learn!

Do as many — or as few — of the exercises in Chapter 13 as you like. Work in any order, and adapt the exercises however you want. If you're a teacher, you might want to use the exercises as the basis for assignments. And heads up: Chapter 5 has hands-on activities about the relativity of color.

Good luck!

In my research for this book, I stumbled upon the image in Figure 1-1, an early color photograph of a fortress in Staraya Ladoga, in eastern Russia. The photograph was taken in 1909 by Sergey Prokudin-Gorsky, a pioneer of color photography. The colorful bars around the edges of the image are the edges of color plates that, when overlapped, give the image its realistic color.



FIGURE 1-1:
Sergey
Prokudin-
Gorskii,
Fortress
in Staraya
Ladoga, Russia,
1909, color
photograph.

Prokudin-Gorskii / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain

The image shows a curved pathway leading from an archway, down a little slope. To me, the pathway represents the beginning of a journey, leading out of the left side of the photograph and going who knows where. The colorful bands around the image give it a strangely contemporary look, in striking contrast to the ancient stone ruin. The color is both realistic and artificial in a technicolor sort of way. I have a special fascination with this image, and its colors are a big part of why I respond to it so strongly. I include it to welcome you on your journey with color, which I'm sure will lead you to unknown and surprising places.