

# next year's collection

FORECAST THE FUTURE by PAUL WHARTON

khaki

sable

haute

Why did the deep, muted tones of the 30's and 40's migrate to the bright pastels of the 50's and early 60's? Why do color preferences change? Why do we care? As the pace of change in our lives reaches warp speed, the ability to anticipate the future becomes more critical. No wonder we covet insight into why tastes change. Color should be a core competency for designers. It's a critical factor in how our clients buy and sell. It can make or break shelf appeal, which drives profit or loss. With so much riding on future appeal, it's part of our job to know what comes next.

ecru

camel

## who's in charge

A commonly held belief is that designers drive color styles and preference. And to some degree, in fashion, that's true. But further research and study reveal that the real driving factors are more socio-economic than aesthetic. Color trends have more to do with Afghanistan than with Milan.

If, however, you need to believe that designers are secretly in control, don't let me stop you. Designers are typically more sensitized to fashion and style. And as visual leaders and lovers of artifacts, we often recognize new directions before others. But even with our visual training and talents, we are still as influenced by the prevailing social conditions as our fellow consumers.

## science, art or myth

Color forecasting is part science, part artistry and part alchemy. Color response elicits some of our deepest and most basic emotions. It shouldn't be too surprising that color preferences are directly and indirectly linked to important social and personal events in our lives.

Forecasters review environmental, political, social and economic conditions in order to make informed predictions about future color preferences. They then identify "hot buttons" or catalysts that drive taste. Macro socio-political trends, such as accelerating globalization, affect individuals as well as nations. As our world becomes more interdependent, color forecasts from around the globe exhibit an uncanny consistency. Economic conditions (whether the economy is growing, stable or faltering) have an impact on consumer spending and general sense of well-being. Geographic influences such as climates, seasons, terrains and population densities, provide a complex series of individual prejudices and preferences. Cultural values and religious customs form an emotional and philosophical lens that affects our choice of colors. Cataclysmic events such as wars or acts of nature change our color preferences. And all these factors are filtered

through our individual reference point of age, sex, race, status, sexual orientation, etc. to further define how and why we prefer certain colors at certain times. A further complication is that colors have acquired symbolic meaning over time which influences how we feel about them. By analyzing and interpreting this mixed bag of influences, forecasters link prevailing social attitudes to the likelihood of preference for specific colors.

## keeping up with trends

What is "color trend?" Color trends are simply the recognition of emerging patterns of color preferences and usage. As with weather patterns, forecasters are usually more accurate when making short term predictions, generally for two to three years out. Colors change more rapidly in style conscious or developed markets, but generally follow a more gradual four to seven year cycle. That's because societies as a whole don't change behaviors quickly.

Manufacturers affect preference, too. They create products and materials based on predicted buying habits and attitudes. It takes time to develop dyes, tints or chemicals that will create the desired colors; then test, refine and produce in volume. It can be an expensive and sometimes lengthy process, so manufacturers resist frequent changes. Conversely, clothing is dependent on yarn colors available in an incredible array of subtle color increments. Since clothing styles can change quickly, they do.

As with all behavioral trends, colors grow to acceptance and wide spread usage, then gradually decline and transmute into a new trend following a continuous bell curve. Just when we thought we were really being cutting edge...we discover that color preference is cyclical. Our predecessors were just as affected by droughts and disasters, booms and busts, war and peace as we are. Not too surprisingly, color preferences tend to repeat. Compare the color trends of the Victorian era (late 1890's - 1910's) to recent color preferences in the late 1990's - 2000's.

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## what's next

So, what are the color prognosticators and trend charlatans forecasting for our immediate future? Well, let's look into the crystal ball. Here are six forecasts for color direction in the next few years.

- Elusive Color** — Metallic colors and some of the interesting new shimmering colors may not seem so new. We've been experiencing the resurgence of metallic and opalescent colors for the last three years. Technology is helping us infuse pigment with more additives — allowing for more interesting variations. As a result, we'll see more complex tones, from iridescent and multi-toned metallic to holographic, opalescent and glittered color. The really interesting effects happen in the deep and bright color areas.
- Un-color** — With the explosion of home buying nesters, and partially in response to a desire for simplicity and safety, we'll see more neutrals and soft, nearly-white shades used, (especially in home decorating and furnishing). Since these colors have always translated well into graphic design, these tones will continue to expand and be used as the background base of many communications. White will give way to pale blue and green, phosphorus yellow and ecru. Tans and beige tones will dominate over grays. Khaki, natural dried grass tones as well as caramel and camel are abundant.
- Cool Blue** — For the next two years clear ice blues with overtones of aqua and lavender will be the most dominant hue in graphics, homes and fashion. This move towards clearer, cleaner color has been emerging for several years and will dominate for the next several years. These cool, crisp, honest and transparent colors reflect a desire for tranquility, honesty and fair play.
- Haute Reds** — There are more shades and varieties of red preferred now than for several past decades. A return to tradition, patriotism as well as international influences fuels this affection. The direction for reds will be less blue and more earthy, yellow and orange tinted. Red with brown undertones, red with coppery and sun dried aspects. Deep nearly black violet red. Red and its complimentary thalo green will be used as bright notes to compliment all those neutrals.
- Shades of Black** — As designers, we may need to rethink our standard uniform. Black, of course, is an eternal standard. But black is going brown, blue, teal and purple. A subtle but dominant theme will be the broadening aspect of black into very deep color. Nearly black-brown, the color of cola, and teal-black will find their way into home products, automotive and fashion. Blacks with iridescent color or metallic undertones will offer an interesting option to color.
- Tradition, tradition!** — Colors that are thought of as conservative: navy, burgundy, forest green, sable brown, black and ivory are staples. Sometimes they take center stage and other times play a supporting role. Today's conservative attitudes fueled by economic and political uncertainty will most certainly bring them into the forefront.

Color forecasting provides neither an axiom nor an absolute. Whether you accept it as accurate or not, color trend forecasting is certainly more than an elitist group of designers foisting their opinions on the rest of society. The intense interest and economic necessity to predict color preferences, means these behavior roadmaps will be watched for some time to come. As designers, we can help guide and even lead our clients with trend knowledge. Just remember that how we choose color reveals as much about our state of mind as our aesthetic judgment.

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— **sources** *The Symbolism of Color*, Faber Birren  
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 Color Marketing Group