

Emotion and Color  
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**How did you become interested in how emotion and color are related?**

I remember as a kid putting two pieces of colored construction paper together as if they were characters in a play acting out some sort of fairytale and I could make that magic happen. I could tell a story. I could make people feel something with color; excitement, mystery, happy or sad. I realized that artists are like writers; we both tell stories. Writers have adjectives and artist's adjectives are colors. I wanted to tell stories in my art and make people "feel" something.

**What are the influences that color has on people?**

Colors sometimes influence people based on the characteristics of the color itself and how we see it. For example, the color yellow stands out because our eyes are more sensitive to the wavelengths of yellow light. A pale yellow, when compared with a light blue, will appear brighter. Yellow demands attention. It's no wonder that we have yellow taxis, yellow post-it-notes and yellow highlighters.

Other times colors influence people based on its history in our culture. In ancient times purple dye was very expensive to make and reserved for royalty. At one point the secret to how it was made was revealed upsetting the Roman Empire. The Emperor Nero, in the first century, declared that only he could wear the color purple and if anyone else was caught wearing purple, the punishment was death. We still associate the feeling of luxury and royalty with the color purple.

The color blue is cool and can give us the feeling of melancholy. We know that Pablo Picasso went through a blue period from 1901 to 1904 while he was mourning the death of a close friend. The pieces he painted then were mostly monochromatic in blue or with a blue cast expressing his feelings during that time.

**How do marketers use this as a strategy?**

Graphic artists and advertisers know the emotions colors have and use them to reach their target market. For example; if I'm trying to market a fishing pole to a rugged outdoorsman, I'm probably not going to package it in pink or purple wrapping. A better color might be green or blue.

There are products on retailers' shelves that we identify with and reach for every day without thinking why, but we are comfortable with them, familiar with them. Sometimes the color of the packaging tells us what's inside like an orange container meaning orange juice or a yellow container containing lemonade. Other times it's about selling a feeling, like love (red), or energy and good health (green).

## How can we as artists use this to our advantage in telling our story?

When I teach my “Light the Way with Color” workshop I have a part I call Color 101. I call out a word and the students are to call out the first color that comes to their mind. Some words I use are: winter, happy, poverty, rain, pain, young, old.... There are really no right answers, but it helps them think of things in terms of how color is connected to feelings.

In another part of the class I ask them all to pretend that I am hiring them to do two art quilts from the same photo with two different purposes. They must change the color in order to show the difference. One example is: A photo of a woman who is 40 years old. In the first piece they must portray her as a woman who was told she could never have children, but is now pregnant for the first time and she is very excited. In the second (the same photo) the woman has just been told she has terminal cancer. I ask them how the colors would change to show the difference. Some say the skin tones in the woman with cancer would be more grayed and the one who is pregnant the colors would be pure and brighter with pink or peach undertones and the eyes would be brighter and clearer in the one who is pregnant. The purpose is to help them see how important their color choices are and that colors really are adjectives that can help them tell the story. Notice the difference in flesh tones in this work in progress. The baby’s flesh tones are peach and pink while the older gentleman’s flesh tones are yellowed.



(Fig. 1, Time Stops for No one)

**What are some good examples?**

Once we understand how colors create emotions in people, we as artists can use them to move people in our art. In my piece I Am the face of Rescue, I used blues (blue green to blue violet) in the darker tones of the dog's fur to create a moody blue feeling; obviously to help tell the sad story of the life of a dog in the need of rescue.



(Fig. 2, I Am the Face of Rescue)

Red is flashy and can express love or hate equally. Here it expresses love and passion. This piece would not have been the same had it been in any other color. The “red” says it all.



(Fig. 3, Romancing Red)

“Oh, So Blue’s” feeling is melancholy. This may have been a nice piece in another color, but the blue reinforces the forlorn expression she has.



(Fig. 4, Oh, So Blue)

It's the adjective that helps tell her story.

Art needs to make a connection with people and we can do that by using color effectively.