



Figure 1. "What's Your Color?," *American Magazine* 146,  
no. 3 (September 1948). Box 7, Folder 1, Faber Birren  
Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University

# What's Your Color? Mood Conditioning the Postwar Domestic Interior

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## Domestic Dreams

In 1948, RKO Radio Pictures and producer David O. Selznick designed and built seventy-five identical colonial farmhouses in locations ranging from Portland, Oregon, to Chattanooga, Tennessee, to promote their 1948 comedy *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dreamhouse* (dir. H. C. Potter, US).<sup>1</sup> These structures, which showcased General Electric's latest appliances and a variety of paint colors, were replicas of the film's eponymous "dreamhouse," a fixer-upper in rural Connecticut that New Yorkers Jim Blandings (Cary Grant) and his wife, Muriel (Myrna Loy), revamp from top to bottom as they make the transition from urban to country living. The production studio was picking up on—and cashing in on—the beginning of a national phenomenon: the postwar economic boom and the subsequent growth of the suburbs, which presented the single-family home as the foundation for new color palettes and appliances. The dream house replicas, which were open for public tours and eventually sold by raffle,<sup>2</sup> are therefore a self-

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reflexive realization of the mass-produced housing developments of the postwar period, which often came with built-in fixtures and painted (rather than wallpapered) walls, blurring the boundaries between Hollywood set and everyday inhabited space.<sup>3</sup>

But there was one catch that complicated this process of translation from two to three dimensions: the original film was shot in black and white, whereas much of the excitement surrounding the model homes stemmed from their aesthetically pleasing and meticulously coordinated color schemes.<sup>4</sup> The replicas were therefore not simply duplicates but a kind of remediation between the achromatic images on-screen and an inhabitable, colorful space the viewer could literally step into. Still, shooting in black and white didn't deter RKO from emphasizing the central role of color in the narrative. In one particularly comedic scene, Muriel Blandings struggles to describe to her decorator and his workman the color palettes she envisions for the house's various rooms. Holding up fabric swatches and color samples, she explains her choices, punctuated by the decorator's affirmative "yesses" and nods. Her monologue is worth reproducing in its entirety:

Now, let's talk about the painting. I had some samples. Ah, here we are. Now, first, the living room. I want it to be a soft green. Not as blue-green as a robin's egg. But not as yellow-green as daffodil buds. Now, the only sample I could get is a little too yellow. But don't let whoever does it get it too blue. It should be a sort of grayish yellow-green. Now the dining room. I'd like yellow. Not just yellow. A very gay yellow. Something bright and sunshiny. I tell you, if you'll send one of your workmen to the grocer for a pound of their best butter and match that exactly, you can't go wrong. This is the paper we'll use in the hall. It's flowered. But I don't want the ceiling to match any colors of the flowers. There are some little dots in the background. And it's these dots I want you to match. Not the little greenish dot near the hollyhock leaf. But the little bluish dot between the rosebud and the delphinium blossom. Is that clear? Now, the kitchen's to be white. Not a cold, antiseptic, hospital white. A little warmer, but still, not to suggest any other color but white. Now, for the powder room in here, I want you to match this thread. And don't lose it. It's the only spool I have, and I had an awful time finding it. As you can see, it's practically an apple red. Somewhere between a healthy Winesap and an unripened Jonathan.

At this, the sound of breaking glass in the other room interrupts Muriel and, with “Oh, excuse me!” she exits the room. Here comes the punch line: the interior decorator on the receiving end of the monologue looks at his workman. “You got that, Charlie?” he asks. “Red, green, blue, yellow, white,” the workman responds in a deadpan tone. “Check,” the decorator affirms.

The painstakingly descriptive language in this monologue is attempting to compensate for the absence of color onscreen while simultaneously drawing our attention to the gap between color names and perceived hues. Muriel’s vivid phrasing invites the viewer to imagine the house’s color schema in detail (even though the painter ultimately reduces her effort to “red, green, blue, yellow, white”). Though she compares her desired colors to natural objects—apples, butter, sunshine—these analogies ultimately fail her as she is forced to express these imagined shades in the negative. This Goldilocks-like language—not too warm, but not too cold, not too yellow, but not too green—exposes the insufficiency of words when it comes to describing color. Similarly, Muriel doesn’t pull out an apple and ask the designer to match his paint shades to that. Such a task would be impossible, as the apple she envisions—“between a healthy Winesap and an unripened Jonathan”—exists only in her imagination. Instead, the objects she consults—a spool of thread, wallpaper samples, paint swatches—detach color from referent as it becomes increasingly abstract, exposing a tension between her lived experience of color and systems of measurement and quantification. Though there are no numerical color labels in the film, a tidal wave of standards and proprietary matching systems, created by companies that saw an ideal consumer base in Muriel’s very demographic, would soon crash over the postwar color world.

On the one hand, this scene pokes fun at the seemingly infinite proliferation of color names during the postwar period with its clear commercial motivations. The humor here is clearly gendered, with Muriel playing the controlling housewife whose detailed requests the male laborers ultimately brush aside. The scene thus plays into beliefs commonly held at this time that women were more emotional, detail oriented, and attuned to the nuances of color

than men.<sup>5</sup> Yet the joke may also be at the workmen's expense; the painter, clad in grubby overalls, clearly does not possess the same aesthetic sensibilities or income as the Blandings, a white, upwardly mobile nuclear family who are very much the embodiment of the postwar domestic ideal. Satire allows us to situate the film historically; viewers at the time would need to be sufficiently familiar with these tropes to get the joke. We can thus locate the film in relation to key shifts in the conceptualization of standardized color in the postwar period, particularly as it played into identity formation along racial, class-based, and gendered lines.

In this article, I dissect a historical moment during which color, divided into serialized paint swatches, becomes grid-like, quantitative, and severed from form. In the mid-1940s, when mass-produced color swatches were not yet readily available to consumers, Muriel's usage of scavenged fabric samples points to the need for a more precise system for choosing paint shades. The scene also anticipates the influx of professional color consultants, whom homeowners would later hire to perform this very task. The decades between 1940 and 1960 witnessed a shift from individualistic proprietary capitalism to an increasingly bureaucratic corporate economy, as well as the creation of a new type of modern subject: the individual consumer. Though this consumer could, in the case of color, select from a range of "individualized" shades, the fact that these options were dictated by a chart of predetermined color standards spoke more to the illusion of choice than true customization or variability.

The color chart, which emerged at the turn of the century but saw its heyday during the postwar boom, had a transformative impact on the way consumers conceptualized and related to color. Commercial paint charts, including those in use today, group colors by "family" (blue-greens, grays, etc.) and rank them from darkest to lightest based on a scale of 0 (black) to 100 (white). Each swatch has a unique identifying code—usually a string of numbers and letters—marking it as materially distinct from its lighter and darker neighbors. Color charts invite us to view the visible spectrum as an infinitely divisible arrangement of interchangeable parts by foregrounding the discrete, modular, and above all numer-

ically based qualities of intermediate shades. In doing so, they bring with them the promise of infinite customization and individual expression in the form of choosing a color that is uniquely “yours.” But paradoxically, this very recognition of personhood in the form of individual choice in fact led to its opposite: more regulation, demarcation, and standardization and an administrative gaze that continues to loom over color technologies today.

By reframing color itself as a quality of lived experience that manifests differently in different eras—one that overlaps with, but is not subordinate to, specific technological apparatuses or media forms—I build on the work of several thinkers who are making important interdisciplinary interventions in the growing area of “color studies.” Books such as Carolyn L. Kane’s *Chromatic Algorithms* (2014), Nicholas Gaskill’s *Chromographia* (2018), Susan Murray’s *Bright Signals* (2018), and Michael Rossi’s *The Republic of Color* (2019) treat color itself as a medium that is always filtered or manipulated through the prism of different ordering systems, often to the benefit of corporate institutions and dominant structures of power.<sup>6</sup> Though color standards rationalize the visible spectrum in a way that appears “objective,” the historical and political contexts in which they emerged, as well as the frequently arbitrary decisions built into their structure, reveal such “neutrality” to be distinctly ideological. By analyzing a variety of popular materials such as paint catalogues and women’s magazines, which explicitly link the differentiating logic of the color grid to identity formation, I argue that it was in the midcentury domestic interior where the cultivation and commodification of personality became synonymous with technological advancement, particularly as it dovetailed with patriarchy, class, and questions of taste. The growing popularity of colorimetry and color psychology during the postwar period meant that an increasingly mathematical and systematic understanding of color was no longer relegated to the realm of science but had begun to permeate everyday life and inhabited space. Ultimately, though color consulting firms and paint companies emphasized that the home was a space for individuals to assert their aesthetic preferences and creative whims, I contend that this so-called freedom of choice cemented set identity categories as gender, race, and class

became subject to standardization and classification in the name of social and technological progress.

### **From Wheel to Grid**

During the postwar period in the United States there emerged an exponentially growing set of color terms and possible combinations of colors across a range of media forms and technologies. After Technicolor's decline, Eastman Kodak acquired a monopoly on color film and photography and provided test slides during the "color wars" in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when rival networks vied for ownership of the US color TV standard. In the domestic sphere, interiors, appliances, cars, clothing, and even food were becoming more chromatically varied, vibrant, and eye-catching—one could even serve Trix, the nation's first multicolored breakfast cereal, released in 1954, in plastic or ceramic dishware in shades such as Chartreuse, Rose, Cobalt Blue, and Forest Green. The 1950s are the pinnacle of what Regina Lee Blaszczyk calls "the color revolution" owing to the rise in mass-produced synthetic pigments, growing research in colorimetry (the science of measuring and quantifying colors by wavelength and electromagnetic radiation), and increasing demand for professional colorists that accelerated during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> In other words, during this period, standardized color became nearly inescapable, both on- and off-screen.

While it might be tempting to view this chromatic explosion as indicative of new possibilities for creative self-expression when it came to color, especially within the home, this rhetoric of consumer choice served to naturalize and regiment existing social hierarchies and normative modes of vision. This is not to say that color in the postwar interior could not be playful or toylife, or that there was no space for designers and consumers to experiment with novel combinations and materials; several historians of midcentury architecture, design, and material culture have indeed approached color from this very perspective.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, I contend that it was in the home as the site of the everyday that vision itself could be stan-

standardized most potently, paradoxically by being framed through an individualistic rhetoric of personality and identity.

Furthermore, it was the controlling and categorizing logic of the color grid that made this standardization possible. The proliferation of different colors available for products as reflected in the form of the grid is a clear illustration of what the sociologist Lawrence Busch calls “standardized differentiation,” when standards are implemented primarily to establish degrees of separation between fixed categories (in this case, the separation between discrete, nameable colors). Standardized differentiation, as opposed to the assembly-line logic of mass standardization, has clear links to neoliberal understandings of selfhood, in which privatized markets emphasizing individual choice began to overtake collective models of consumption after World War II.<sup>9</sup> The rise in customizable color was wholly dependent on this model, as consumers were able to “choose” from a grid of predetermined color samples.

On the surface, this discretization of color may appear purely commercially motivated; after all, if more premixed colors can be identified, more can be patented and sold. But, as I argue, the rise of the color chart and numerical, discrete color was about more than neoliberal market policies. It was also the idea that differentiated color standards would generate nonprice competition between rival companies. What was being sold was not just paints, textiles, or plastics but an increasingly pervasive understanding of *colors* in the plural, as opposed to the seamless gradient of shades blending into a single *color* evoked by earlier color systems such as wheels and gradients. In their necessary plurality, color grids and charts indicate a shift over the course of the twentieth century from seeing the color spectrum as continuous to infinitely divisible into discrete and nameable hues. To contextualize the role color standards in the postwar period played in naturalizing the correlation between consumer choice, self-expression, and technological progress, let me offer a brief history of how the color grid’s emergence marked a radical departure from previous color systems—in particular, the color wheel or gradient.

Unlike grids and charts, color wheels or gradients, which



became a convention in the West beginning in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with precedents like Newton's *Opticks* (1704), merge adjacent tints to create a sense of boundlessness or immeasurability. Used primarily to catalogue and classify the colors found in the natural world, such circular diagrams were used by their creators, many of whom were entomologists, botanists, and natural philosophers, to emphasize color's ephemerality. The diagrams acknowledged the infinite number of intermediate colors imperceptible to the human eye.<sup>10</sup> Looping configurations such as Goethe's watercolor color wheel from his *Zür Farbenlehre*, or *Theory of Colors*, (1810) (fig. 2) denote not just infinity but also indeterminacy, foregrounding the perceptual ambiguities that arise when adjacent colors overlap. The painted watercolors of Goethe's color circle begin to smear and blur; colors bleed into one another and outside the lines, illustrating the German writer's claim that color, light, and shade, rather than form, constitute "the visible world."<sup>11</sup>

To be clear, I'm not arguing for a complete rupture between color grids and wheels, but rather a shift to a grid-like logic at the turn of the nineteenth century that transformed color into a set of abstract, mathematical variables. Even though color charts were in fact quite prevalent prior to industrialization, these taxonomies present a very different logic than postwar commercial color charts, which treat colors as a mathematical array of abstract values.<sup>12</sup> Despite their grid-like appearance, with rows, columns, and individually labeled color swatches, these older diagrams have more in common with the logic of the unknowable color circle. For example, as early as 1692, a Dutch artist known only as A. Boogert created an eight-hundred-page set of guidelines for creating different hues from watercolors. This particular text, which was recently scanned and made available online, is promoted on several popular media websites as a "Pre-Pantone Guide to Colors."<sup>13</sup> However, unlike Pantone, a company founded in the 1950s that bases itself on standardization and reproducibility on a massive scale, the mystique surrounding Boogert's color guide (fig. 3) stemmed from the fact that there is only one copy in existence; precisely replicating these hand-painted colors would have been impossible. Like many other early modern color charts, Boogert's taxonomy grounds color

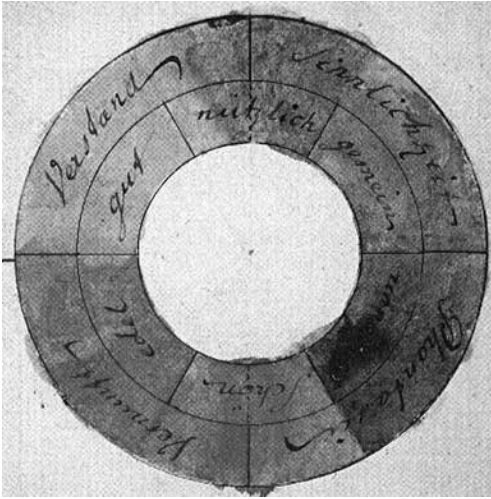


Figure 2. Goethe's color wheel from Zür Farbenlehre (1810)

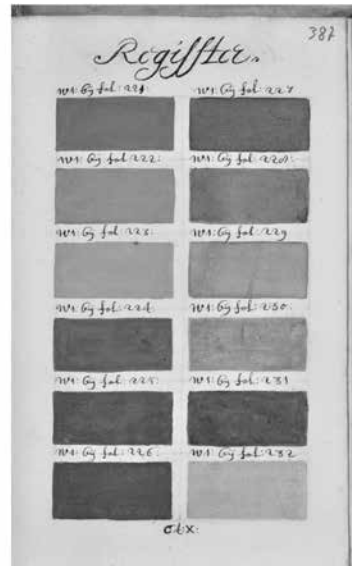


Figure 3. A. Boogert, *Traité des couleurs servant à la peinture à l'eau*. Bibliothèque Méjanes, Aix-en-Provence, Cote Ms. 1389

firmly in the physical world.<sup>14</sup> As Patrick Syme wrote in his 1814 commentary to the geologist Abraham Gottlieb Werner's *Nomenclature of Colors* (1774): "Those who have paid any attention to colors must be aware that it is very difficult to give colors for every object that appears in nature. The tints are so various, and the shades so gradual, they would extend to many thousands."<sup>15</sup> The infinite colors found in nature are "real"; the colors on the chart are therefore merely approximations.

By contrast, in their emphasis on edges, thresholds, and breaking points, industrial color grids and charts aimed to measure and label intermediate color-categories in the most exhaustive way possible. Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grid configurations such as the Standard Color Card of America (created in 1915) (fig. 4) taught American citizens to see colors as discrete entities that were abstracted from objects, thus reshaping human perception and patterns of consumption in a rapidly industrializing world. Created by the Textile Color Card Association of the United States (TCCA), this "card" was actually a booklet of fabric samples mounted on cardboard intended to streamline color consumption and production by providing a single standard. Each sample was identified by what was called its cable number; the idea was that it would be much simpler to provide buyers with a number rather than a description when "cabling" an order.<sup>16</sup> This obsession with numerical labeling was deeply entwined with the growth of the synthetic dye industry, technologies of mechanical reproducibility, and the emerging fields of psychophysics and spectroscopy, which attempted to quantify color perception and sensation in mathematical terms.<sup>17</sup> The early twentieth century also saw the creation of new, often nationalized governing bodies such as the National Bureau of Standards and the Optical Society of America, both of which made standardizing color across a multitude of industries (engineering, manufacturing, commerce, and education, to name a few) a central aim.

For these reasons, the color grid was the ideal form for circulating color standards. Codifying individual colors in numerical terms, its matrix format was designed for widespread standardization and reproducibility. By representing individual colors as math-

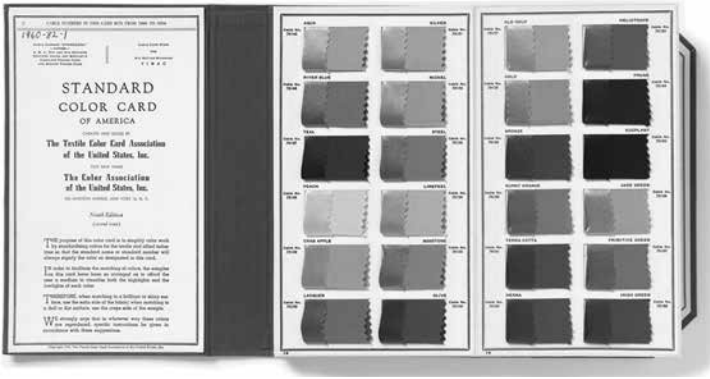


Figure 4. Sample Book, Standard Color Card of America, 9th ed.; label: board covers, printed cardboard pages, silk samples; H × W × D (closed): 26.5 × 15.8 × 4.8 cm (10 7/16 × 6 1/4 × 1 7/8 in.), H × W × D (open): 26.5 × 51.4 × 3.2 cm (10 7/16 × 20 1/4 × 1 1/4 in.); gift of the Color Association of the United States, Inc.; 1960-82-1

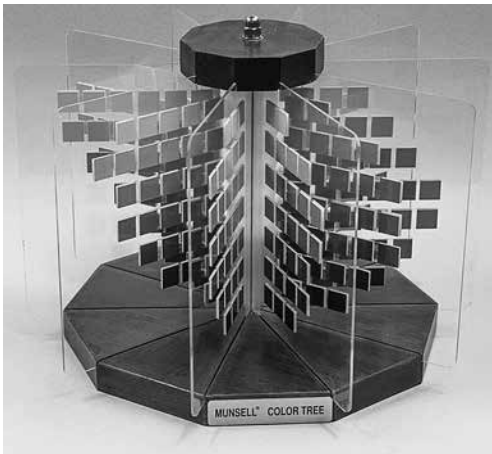


Figure 5. Three-dimensional model of the Munsell Color Tree. Photograph by Hannes Grobe

ematical variables, early twentieth-century color systems such as the Munsell Color System, which groups colors by *hue* (dominant wavelength), *chroma* (saturation), and *value* (lightness or darkness) in a three-dimensional “tree” model (fig. 5), attempted to “[do] away with the foolish misleading names . . . prevalent” in earlier models.<sup>18</sup> By the mid-twentieth century onward, there was no longer a single

national color standard but a set of competing companies such as Sherwin-Williams, Benjamin Moore, and Pantone, each with its proprietary set of color samples.<sup>19</sup> These corporations took great pains to label as many distinct colors as possible, where each gradation (despite often having commercially appealing names like Shell Beige and Empire Gold) always had a corresponding string of numbers and letters. These alphanumeric labeling systems did away with a great deal of discursive labor. Imagine what an easier time Muriel Blandings would have had if she had been decorating just a few years later, since by the 1950s commercial color charts were widely available and had become an intuitive and pervasive mode of color classification.

Color charts were also an attempt to eliminate the contingency of something as notoriously unreliable and ephemeral as color perception. However, as several media scholars have argued in their work on color television standards, this ultimately meant that the viewing limitations of a hypothetical viewer were incorporated into color standards by design, establishing a single “normal” way of seeing.<sup>20</sup> For example, in the 1950s, the National Television System Committee (NTSC) put select observers in a laboratory setting through a series of color tests, which revealed that the average human eye is less sensitive to blue than other wavelengths. Because a central goal of broadcast television was to conserve bandwidth in order to maximize efficiency, the NTSC concluded that they could reduce the amount of blue transmitted in the televisual image in consideration of the limitations of an imagined viewing subject.<sup>21</sup> This restrictive understanding of “standard” human vision, which assumes a viewer who is not color-blind but also does not possess unusual visual acuity, has helped ingrain the notion that color technologies faithfully imitate how all people see and are therefore “objective.”

The color grid played a key role in establishing this veneer of objectivity. In an attempt to quantify the subjective experience of color, television networks such as RCA used test charts based on the Munsell Color System that would serve as a standard test object.<sup>22</sup> I say “veneer of objectivity” because, in addition to making assumptions about who constituted a “normal” viewer, systems

such as Munsell contained several built-in flaws from the outset. Ignoring how environmental conditions such as shifting light and shadow can affect the perception of a single color, they left no room for contingency or variability. In its severing of the bond between color and physical environment, the grid thus marks a clear epistemological shift from earlier, preindustrial modes of visualizing the color spectrum—a shift that by the 1950s was fully integrated into technologies of perception.

### **Ambient Color and the Controlled Environment**

Grid-like configurations of color during the postwar period, with their emphasis on relationality and modularity, cannot be separated from the rise of mood conditioning and functional color, two analogous midcentury design principles that sought to engineer the ambience of a given space through a highly controlled system of colored walls and light fixtures. Following the “form follows function” tenet of architectural modernism, with functional color, “beauty [was] made subservient to utility, and pleasure [became] a by-product of purpose.”<sup>23</sup> The expansion of several color-focused design corporations, such as Pantone, Color Dynamics, and Color Conditioning, resulted in jobs for “color forecasters,” “color engineers,” and “color stylists.”<sup>24</sup> Functional color, responding to the contemporaneous rise of behaviorism, reconsidered the human as an organism responding to an external environment where light and color acted as stimuli. Muriel Blandings’s desire to avoid an “antiseptic hospital white” in her kitchen makes a contrast between warm and cool colors and their presumed psychological impact and between public and private spaces.

Whereas public or corporate color schemes could not by definition be tailored to individual tastes, color consultants emphasized that the nuclear family home would be a reprieve from utilitarian functional color. Yet while the domestic interior did not appear to follow the same regimented rules as public spaces, the forms of control that resulted were arguably more insidious because they were inseparable from ideologies of individualism and the idea that consumer choice was synonymous with self-expression

and emotional authenticity. The home was not just a place for eating or sleeping but a “controlled environment,” as color consultants and behavioral scientists described public and private spaces alike. Choosing what color sofa to buy or whether to paint your kitchen Eggshell or Taupe was thus far from a passive endeavor. Yet even when taking individual preferences for style or specific colors into account, consumers had to follow a quantitative rubric. Colors were nothing more than abstract numerical entities that could be switched out interchangeably, marking a historical shift in how homeowners related to color that was ideally suited to the form of the color chart. Color charts and paint chips served as convenient and tactile matching tools, encouraging designers and consumers alike to visualize their surroundings in terms of discretely numbered tints and, in so doing, to embrace a form of “self-expression” based on standardization and regulation.

Functional color dispensed with the notion that individual colors had psychological or symbolic meaning; however, an array of shades together were said to possess a discernible psychic charge. Consumers could finesse the mood or ambience of a given space with the aid of a rubric or manual and a few cans of paint, turning their homes into life-size, immersive versions of the color-by-numbers kits that were so popular in the 1950s. Like paint-by-number kits, which involved painting over instructional numbers in a predetermined order, functional color likewise posited a direct correlation between colors, numbers, and accessibility. Anyone could be trained to paint or decorate their home harmoniously when provided with a set of guidelines or a formula. In the post-war interior, numerical representation and systematization were ultimately more important than color itself.

The assumption that ambient color and light could be subsumed under a room’s practical function emerged from the growing field of color psychology, which viewed color as an entity that could not be separated from the limitations of human vision. The American color consultant and writer Faber Birren, arguably one of the most color-crazed figures of the twentieth century, played a key role in making color theory and psychology accessible and appealing to what he saw as the average American consumer. The word *average*

here is key, since it covers over multiple assumptions about what constituted normality, typicality, and “Americanness” in Birren’s time. Birren believed that only by first removing color from any specific physical context could he establish a standard or system for color that could be implemented across industries. For example, he designed his “color equation,” a three-dimensional color system heavily influenced by the chemist and color theorist Wilhelm Ostwald’s color solid (1916), to train consumers in the principles of functional color. Birren believed that Ostwald’s system, which uses a gray scale, was uniquely suited to design and consumer goods. According to Birren, the average person could sense the proportions of black (B), white (W), or color (C) content contained in a single hue, and it was by grouping colors that had the same gray content that one could create the most harmonious palettes and color schemes.

Crucially, Birren claimed that his color equation was the most “democratic” color system owing to its accessibility; one didn’t have to purchase an expensive color atlas or three-dimensional color models (as was the case with the Munsell Color System) but only required thirteen cardboard disks of “pure hues,” a white disk, a black disk, and a device to spin the disks to create optical mixtures—and all these materials could be purchased by mail order for \$5, complete with instructional booklets (fig. 6).<sup>25</sup> The portability of this color guide reiterates the message that anyone can apply the principles of functional color to their surroundings once they learn the formula, again cementing the notion that qualities such as accessibility and creative experimentation were unique to the home. At the same time, the guide’s \$5 price tag (which in 1948 would have been roughly equivalent to \$60 in 2022), confirms its target market as solidly middle class; the promise of having the world of color at one’s fingertips was by no means achievable for all.

Similarly, Birren’s Gloray Prism, “A device that should belong to everyone interested in color,” capitalized on the home’s associations with play and self-expression. Essentially a simplified spectroscope, the Gloray Prism (fig. 7), when placed on the windowsill in direct sunlight, projected the full color spectrum on the opposite wall. “Hold it before your eyes and all the world will be decked in rainbows,” the advertising blurb gushes. “Set it up as an



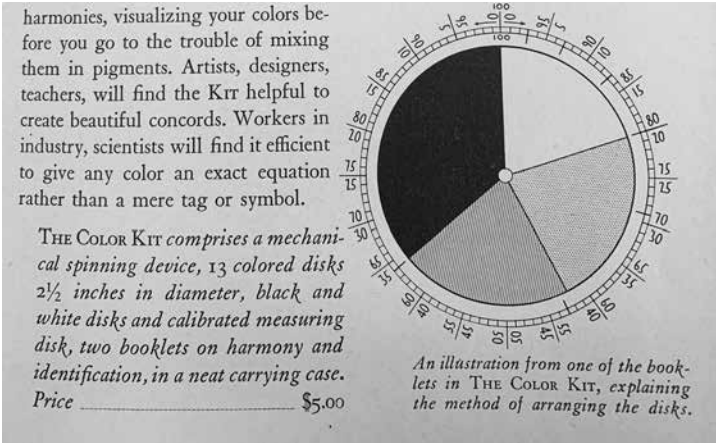


Figure 6. “The Color Kit.” From “A Catalogue of Books on Color by Faber Birren” (Westport, CT: Crimson, 1942). Box 1, Faber Birren Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library

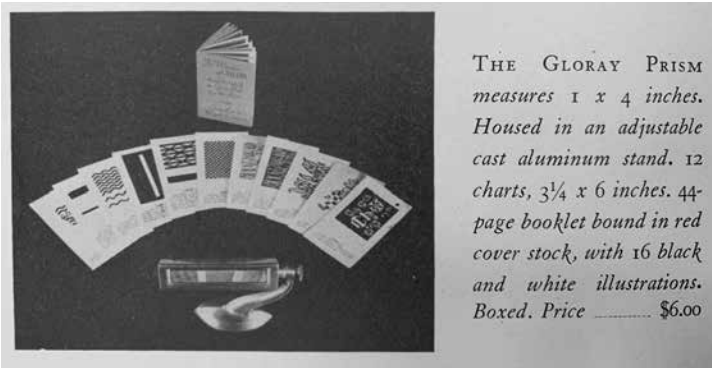


Figure 7. “The Gloray Prism.” From “A Catalogue of Books on Color by Faber Birren” (Westport, CT: Crimson, 1942). Box 1, Faber Birren Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library

elementary spectroscope and see it reveal the elements in a Neon sign, in common table salt, in colored objects. Gaze at a series of black and white charts and see them blaze forth with color—plain lines that change to rainbows, designs that grow iridescent, colorless flowers that suddenly blaze with hue.”<sup>26</sup> The Gloray Prism presents color as something playful and whimsical, capable of producing a sense of wonder in adults. Such devices underscored how individuals could express their own aesthetic preferences in order to cultivate well-being and happiness. As I’ve asserted throughout this essay, this emphasis on uniqueness and creativity in the post-war discourse on color was especially pronounced in the domestic sphere, where these qualities were framed as a foil to new corporatized modes of vision in the workplace. But crucially, though domestic color palettes may have appeared more aesthetically varied and whimsical than those of municipal and commercial spaces, toylike mechanisms such as the Gloray Prism were part and parcel of the same normalizing logic, where color and lighting were always a means to an end—toward greater efficiency, productivity, and profitability.

Though conglomerates such as Du Pont and General Electric had almost all started as smaller family-run businesses, between the early and mid-twentieth century, a fundamental shift was taking place from an individualistic “proprietary” capitalism to the now familiar corporate capitalist model consisting of large bureaucratic structures. It was in part through color science that this new corporate model was made “sensible”—that is, as Michael Rossi puts it, “ordered in such a way that sensing beings could join the emergent political structures of a self-consciously modernizing American state.”<sup>27</sup> For companies seeking to accelerate their growth and prioritize efficiency, color was a worthy investment. Like lighting, to which it was intimately related, color had the potential to disrupt work and overstimulate the nervous system. Glare, problems of visibility, eyestrain, and other forms of ocular fatigue were all potential dangers that could interfere with the intended function of a given space—learning in schools, healing in hospitals, completing tasks in offices, increasing sales in shops, and so on. Companies such as General Electric developed “light conditioning” campaigns

in which they advocated for brighter and better-lit workplaces to ensure greater productivity on the part of workers.<sup>28</sup> Together, a highly standardized and controlled use of color and electric light played a key role in conserving “visual labor,” with the worker’s body functioning as an energy-expending machine.<sup>29</sup>

At this time, General Electric also began to manufacture a line of ceramic-coated “decorator” bulbs specifically for the home, most famously the Glamour Pink bulb.<sup>30</sup> These Coloramic bulbs came in a variety of shades (including Dawn Pink, Sky Blue, Sun Gold, and Spring Green), reiterating the message that the domestic space was uniquely suited to individual choice and variability (159). Rival companies such as Sylvania Electric also began to market colored bulbs, releasing their Softlight incandescent bulb in 1955. The Softlight bulb came in yellow and orange hues and was said to cast a soft glow, making objects appear warmer in color and thus creating a more “comforting” mood (157). Though these products emphasized consumer choice and customizability, they played a key role in training homeowners in basic principles of midcentury color theory that were not so different than those implemented in offices and hospitals. In purchasing a Softlight bulb, one could experience relational color firsthand, noticing that a given color will appear different depending on ambient lighting conditions. Thus, while the home did not appear to be subject to the same kind of controlled vision as public spaces, it functioned as an even more effective training ground that taught home dwellers to apply the standardized principles of color conditioning and functional color to their surroundings. Design firms hoped that consumers would become more color-conscious by hiring consultants to help them select the colors and lighting in their home, thus allowing them to develop an increased sensitivity to external stimuli.

The combination of these aesthetic and cultural factors meant that most idealistically, color was capable of enacting social change, making people into more perceptive individuals. More sinister was the notion that having a “color sense” (“a distinctive faculty for feeling colors”) could be used to “[mark] a perceiver as ‘primitive’ or ‘civilized.’”<sup>31</sup> As Nicholas Gaskill traces, the term *color sense*, which comes from philology and ethnography, appears pri-

marily in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A central tenet of American progressivism involved integrating abstract color standards into the everyday experience of individuals, especially children, with the goal of molding them into better, more “civilized” citizens. This notion of “civilized” color perception was intensely racialized, stemming from dominant beliefs that color sensitivity differed hierarchically by race and ethnicity; at the same time, children were thought to have “primitive” impulses in their unruly desire for bright colors, which had to be tightly controlled if they were to become productive members of (white) American society (124). This is where color systems using numerical notation created by educators such as Munsell, Milton Bradley, and Louis Prang came in. They “encouraged children to approach the visible world as an assortment of decomposable colors able to be reconstructed and mass-produced on demand” (129), revealing the ways in which modern color standards were inseparable from the socially and technologically deterministic reengineering of perception itself in quantitative terms.

But while Gaskill claims that the fact that “color sense” was not widely used after the 1920s indicates a decline of the concept, I would argue that this notion of a civilized color sense had been so absorbed into the surrounding discourse by the 1950s that to name it was no longer necessary. The commitment to a “systematic training” of perception was fully integrated into both technological infrastructure (as we saw with color television) and the by-then popularized fields of color theory and psychology. However, whereas Progressive Era color educators were highly critical of consumerism, which they saw as a cause of moral degeneracy, their sense-training regimens were ironically perfectly suited to a neoliberal corporate context in which color standards, consumer capitalism, and identity formation were inextricably linked. Viewed through this lens, the “standard observer” of color television can be viewed as an adaptation of the idealized color-conscious modern subject to a highly mediated mass culture.<sup>32</sup> As I discuss below, the test cards and stock images used to calibrate optical media to favor paler “flesh tones” likewise stemmed from turn-of-the-century attempts to classify and catalogue racial, ethnic, and sexual differ-

ence with the aid of standardized color swatches, demonstrating how the construction of race via skin color is historically embedded within the very material substrate of color technologies themselves. In the postwar interior, the process of categorization and identity formation through home decor became itself a way of “doing” race and gender according to numerical color. The home was thus not a blank canvas for creativity and personality as much as it was a space where normalized identity categories could be reinforced under the guise of domestic bliss.

### **Standards of Selfhood**

“Personality,” which came to replace the nineteenth-century concept of “character,” was a largely secular and individualistic construct tied to specifically American ideologies of democracy.<sup>33</sup> In the early years of World War II, behavioral psychologists and sociologists promoted the idea of a “democratic personality,” which would allow individuals to cultivate their own personality development while simultaneously boosting collective morale and patriotism.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to what they saw as the top-down homogenization of identity under both fascism and communism, mass media (radio, television, newspapers, etc.) would “train the perceptual apparatuses of American citizens” to favor a particularly “democratic mode of seeing.”<sup>35</sup> Both the concepts of character and personality contained built-in contradictions; with character, one was expected to cultivate skills of self-control or self-mastery while simultaneously adhering to civic laws and moral ideals. The inherent paradox of personality, on the other hand, was a need to discover and express one’s own uniqueness, to make oneself distinct from the crowd—but at the same time to also present oneself as appealing, magnetic, and charismatic to society.<sup>36</sup>

In the case of color, one’s “true self” was thought to be revealed by one’s favorite color, which Birren described as “the shade which, whenever you think of it, makes you feel beautifully happy, content, protected, inside.”<sup>37</sup> Targeting perception gave citizens a sense of agency and choice; though personality was supposedly malleable, it was only malleable within certain classifiable

parameters. Of course, the irony here is that self-help literature and advertising encouraged individuals to be unique and to shun the advice of others, while providing a set of guidelines or standards to follow.<sup>38</sup> This illusion of choice meant that people adapted to their surrounding environments, rather than the other way around.

Self-assessments or personality quizzes, which involve answering a series of questions to gain insight about oneself, especially emblemized this kind of standardized individualism, in which the ideal outcome was for the test taker to “see, in a rationalized fashion, the outside world.”<sup>39</sup> These quizzes, which were extremely popular in the postwar period, were meant to be introspective processes for the individual taking them, ultimately taking the form of a kind of self-monitoring. Emerging alongside developmental psychology and its application to commercial industries, personality was seen as something that could be cultivated, an “adaptable psychological outlook” that determined one’s success in attracting a husband (since writings on personality were nearly always geared toward women) or achieving success in the workplace.<sup>40</sup> It was the home in particular, however—the middle-class housewife’s stomping ground—where the science of personality merged with consumer culture, resulting in the application of “a spatialized concept of personality to the domestic environment” (152).

To preserve and normalize the notion that humans possessed an intuitive sense for color, color consultants never gave top-down advice for the home but instead wanted homeowners to obtain a greater awareness of what colors best fit *them*. “A color expert is perhaps the last person who should tell a woman how to decorate her home,” Birren wrote. “Nonetheless, a scientific viewpoint is possible . . . if only to remind architects and decorators that reason and purpose may support a quest for beauty. There are functions to be served in the choice of color.”<sup>41</sup> Birren’s language here is particularly telling: “scientific viewpoint” points to the ways in which Taylorist principles of efficiency were very much present in the domestic sphere, whereas the phrase “functions . . . in the choice of color” reiterates how, even when presented with what appeared to be an array of choices when it came to color, this choice was always in the service of this facade of scientificity or objectivity.

While in the postwar United States this cultivation of color perception was framed in terms of a kind of democratization of taste, those who had a greater propensity for feeling color often belonged to fixed identity categories. The average consumer was conceived as a white, middle-class woman (or at least naturalized as such in idealized images of domesticity in print and screen media); women were seen as more color sensitive due both to their lower rates of color blindness and to largely unfounded cultural beliefs that viewed them as more attuned to sensory pleasure and emotion.<sup>42</sup> These notions about the innateness of color sensitivity in women, combined with the notion that the home was the woman's domain, meant that color campaigns were almost entirely targeted toward female consumers. Between the 1930s and 1960s, Benjamin Moore's color mascot "Betty Moore" (almost certainly based on Betty Crocker) was an imaginary color consultant who provided decorating advice in magazines and over the radio. In 1952, in conjunction with the release of its *Paint and Style Guide*, the paint manufacturer Sherwin-Williams designed a nook to be built into stores where the catalogue was sold. These nooks were specifically meant for women to browse through the catalogue and be inspired by the color swatches within.<sup>43</sup>

Class politics also played a key role in popularizing theories of color harmony and functionality. So-called highbrow culture was defined by a complete aestheticization of everyday life through which color design principles (by way of mass media and advertising) were "turning the ugly American into a design-conscious aesthete."<sup>44</sup> Finally, the average consumer was assumed to be white not simply because of white hegemony in America but more specifically because of color's slippery relationship to both skin color and racialized color perception (two separate but intricately related topics that I address in the following section). As Dianne Harris notes in *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*, coordinated color palettes in the midcentury interior conveyed qualities like "hygiene, novelty, sophistication, and individual distinction," all of which were central to constructing an idealized image of middle-class whiteness.<sup>45</sup> This racially charged rhetoric was also inseparable from discussions of technological and

social progress. If color had the potential to impact mood and disrupt productivity, it had to be used responsibly, regulated, and controlled—and there was no better way to do this than through numerical representation and abstraction, which carried with them the guise of objectivity and ideological neutrality.

To examine how color media cemented this correlation between color, personal identity, and ideologies of progress, I turn to several popular artifacts that include questionnaires inside paint pamphlets and columns in women's magazines. These vernacular and highly gendered objects played a key role in training consumers in the principles of color harmony and provided insight about their personalities or identities. With these examples, the color chart once again functions as a way of discretizing color, here emphasizing the plurality and variability of identity categories. Yet these identities and color preferences must necessarily map onto the types available: the color grid categorizes through exclusion, interpellating those who participate in its structural logic.

The cover of a 1956 fold-out pamphlet for the Paint Merchandising Council (fig. 8, top) attempts to link the color gradient's historical associations with fluidity to personality and freedom of choice. A color gradient spans all four quadrants, slowly moving from red to green, the edges between hues imperceptible. Etched in white ink on a black background is a sketchy illustration of a fortune teller clad in a jeweled turban and star-patterned robes (fig. 8, bottom). This orientalist stereotype raises his hands around an orange globe reminiscent of a crystal ball. Within the globe, block letters read "Which color do you like best?" The combination of color gradients, a distinctly preindustrial form, with the image of the fortune teller builds on the historical suggestion of a correlation between color and personality that is organic bordering on mystical. There is also an added layer here in which it is the "primitive" fortune teller who embodies otherness who is more in touch with the mysterious or undefinable, and therefore magical or incomprehensible, aspects of color; by contrast, the pamphlet claims that its findings have been "fact-checked against the findings of modern scientists and psychologists."<sup>46</sup>

However, recalling the distinction I drew between a "grid-





Figure 8. “Character Analysis through Color,” Paint Merchandising Council, 1956. Box 7, Folder 1, Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University



like logic” and a physical grid in which an actual color grid does not need to be present for the process of quantification and discretization to take place, the gradients and color wheels here turn out to be smoke and mirrors. The Paint Merchandising Council’s gradient primarily functions as a decorative backdrop to set categories rather than a way of categorizing color. Each quadrant provides insight about a particular color and what it reveals about one’s personality: red, pink, orange, and green are the only available options. Though the pamphlet advertises the availability of 13,222 distinct paint colors, there are only four “color personalities” listed. These basic categories, which do not include, for example, “reddish-orange” or “yellowish-green,” cannot by definition capture the nuances of the background behind them, and ironically, pink and orange are actually located on the yellow quadrant.

There is thus no clear correlation between the gradient and these color categories, which, in their emphasis on edges and boundaries, belong to the logic of the grid, which controls, captures, and categorizes. “Red is the color of action, of sacrifice and sin, love and courage,” the leftmost quadrant reads. “To prefer it is to reveal a yearning for the impulsive life.” By contrast, pink “is frequently liked by persons who have lived a sheltered and protected existence” and who “probably lack the nerve (of red) to do anything really bad.”<sup>47</sup> Though these descriptions vaguely build on widely culturally accepted symbolic associations (red evokes anger, pink gendered passivity), the symbolism rings hollow, as the division between these two colors is largely arbitrary—pink, though largely considered a distinct color, is merely red with the addition of white. The separation of these as unrelated entities makes them mutually exclusive; one cannot prefer both pink and red any more than one can have both an active and a passive personality at the same time.

By definition, the color grid catalogues and indexes individual elements by assigning them fixed locations. In emphasizing edges and boundaries, it inevitably makes visible certain categories while making others invisible by exclusion. Arguably the most visible identity category is that of the white, middle-class homemaker, the key target demographic of housewares and paint companies. Not simply housewives but also future housewives and

brides-to-be were imbricated in this schema (career women are conspicuously absent). A 1951 article published in *Better Homes and Gardens* includes a personality quiz for couples to take, with the assumption that their relationship compatibility will be reflected by shared color preferences. These color preferences can then be used to decorate the home they share together—and if there are clashes, compromise is possible: “If you and she differ, how about different colors for different rooms?”<sup>48</sup>

A similar personality quiz in *Woman* goes as far as providing examples of “color-compatible couples,” whose color preferences are not identical but rather complement each other (figs. 9–10). These gendered color preferences vaguely map onto complementary color pairings, such as red with blue or green; orange and yellow with purple; cool or low-wavelength colors with warm, high-wavelength ones. This binary between hot and cool also maps onto the popularly held division of colors in the 1950s into “active” and “passive” categories, where colors such as red, orange, and yellow are active, while green, blue, purple, white, and black are passive.<sup>49</sup> Importantly, these assigned emotional values exist entirely independently of any specific viewer or observer; color thus becomes a kind of distilled, abstracted identity that can be used to design a harmonious living space. What we see here is not simply the innateness of color preferences but also the possibility of self-molding. After completing the quiz, the test taker is instructed: “Turn to the charts on the next page for an analysis of your character and discover which color personality would make you the best partner.” The character analysis tagline, “If your color is . . . His should be . . .” implies that personality is malleable, but only by self-monitoring and adapting to fit preestablished categories.<sup>50</sup>


### **The Color Chart as Racial Technology**

As a form of ubiquitous technology, color systems codify and organize our sense of what is normal, natural, or common sense. And with standardized color, as with any form of standardization, counting and quantifying cannot be separated from the things and people being turned into numbers, no matter how abstract

or objective the final product seems.<sup>51</sup> To make living beings legible within such a mathematical system, however, certain groups inevitably become outliers by being marked as either unclassifiable or nonstandard.<sup>52</sup> It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that the color chart, with its discretizing logic, has lent itself to furthering white supremacist ideologies, in which—following Richard Dyer—whiteness is the unmarked “colorless” norm against which all other racial categories are measured.<sup>53</sup> In what follows, I show that there is a long history of using the color chart to reinscribe existing racial hierarchies that had been fully naturalized by the 1950s.

Mid-twentieth-century visual culture reveals how media of quantification and distinction came to index a politics of racialized segregation by positioning whiteness as the baseline. This politics of segregation was especially insidious when it came to color technologies, whose infrastructure played a key role in naturalizing the historical relationship between so-called abstract color and skin color as an index of race. There has recently been a wealth of publications on the once relatively obscure reference images known as “Shirley Cards” or “China Girls”—test cards of anonymous, conventionally attractive white women (despite the Asiatic connotations of the name) used to calibrate color photography, television, and film to favor “ideal” skin tones.<sup>54</sup> These reference images were juxtaposed with “color control patches”—grids that sampled the colors contained in the image—to fine-tune the desired level of exposure and color balance. These critics (who touch peripherally on color but do not make it a central focus) point to the ways in which systems of mediation are not only a product of historical conditions informed by racial and gendered hierarchies; they continue to produce and reinforce these very norms by design. While I likewise want to insist on the entrenched relationship between race and media infrastructure, rather than focusing on Shirley Cards or any one material artifact or technology, here I've been insisting on color *itself* as a technology, one shaped by an historical context in which grid-like color transformed identity categories into discrete, numerical data with the pretenses of objectivity and scientific legitimacy.

That the discretization of race via color emerged alongside



## WHO IS LIKELY TO MAKE YOU HAPPIEST?

By answering the questions on the previous page, you will have found your personality colour. The character-analysis chart below will help you to a deeper knowledge of yourself and others, to make you happier socially, emotionally.

Certain colour types naturally blend best with you, so find out who they are among the people you know. Look for them when choosing boyfriends, too!

### HERE IS THE COMPATIBILITY GUIDE TO HELP YOU

*If your colour is*                      *His should be*

**RED OR MAROON**..... **Blue or green**—he will delight in all your lively interests, yet put a brake on your more abundant enthusiasms.

**PINK**..... **Blue**—his conservative balance and natural dignity will please your own refined ideas.

**ORANGE**..... **Purple**—the simpler type. Your flamboyance will be attractive to him, and for him you will be neither too strait-faced nor bold.

**YELLOW**..... **Purple**—the genuinely profound purple type. His depth will stimulate your capabilities and draw out your own thoughts and ideas.

**BLUE-GREEN**..... **Maroon**—you will like his red qualities, yet be glad he is mature, sophisticated.

**BLUE**..... **Blue, Green, Orange, Yellow, Red**—because you are a good, steady blender. But if you choose red, don't try to change him.

**GREEN**..... **Red or Orange** will be best—but you, too, could be content with most types. You are capable of ardently following his love of life.

**PURPLE**..... **Yellow**—if you have true profundity. He will appreciate your creative personality. You could be happy with the green type who has a lot of money to back your genius, too!

**BROWN**..... **Brown**—his fresh, stable, natural personality is just right for your own frankness and dislike of anything artificially showy.

**LAVENDER**..... **Orange**—he will happily share your social pursuits without criticism of your harmless illusions and pretences.

### YOUR FAVOURITE COLOUR reveals a lot about your personality

**RED** You have real courage for life; you are vigorous and given to action. You probably like sports, are inclined to have very definite opinions. In affairs of the heart you are likely to be bold—you may break old hearts in your efforts to win new ones. You are kind and quick to judge people, and first impressions often cause you to act emotionally rather than mentally.

**MAROON** You are a wild person, tempered by strict training or by a series of trials in life. You have a compassionate heart, but you may, in perfect innocence, demand a great deal from others. People will like you, but in your turn you are likely to seek many friends and perhaps arouse some jealousy in those who know you intimately. You make an excellent marriage partner.

**PINK** The gentler way of life is yours. You have much feminine charm, good taste in friends and clothes and a very gracious social manner. You like and cultivate people who are cultured and refined. You adore affection and people are drawn to you, but sometimes you have quite a time holding them off.

**ORANGE** You are the "half-fellow-well-met" type. You are just as much at ease among strangers as among saints. You want life to surround you. You make an ideal hostess or spinner, because your need is for cheerful companionship more than for a passionate relationship. It is more natural for you to know a little about a lot of people than to know a great deal about one or two.

**YELLOW** You are probably intelligent and high-minded and perhaps go in for reforms and modern trends. You have a beauty but a person who get to know you intimately respect your character, and people who are drawn to you are a true friend and a rare one who keeps secrets. You should permit in cultivating your fertile and rich mind.

**GREEN** You are a fresh and natural personality. You take a broad interest in the world and are tolerant and liberal in your actions. Because your mind is clear and adaptable, you are an agreeable person. You like to play cards, to shop, to read all the best selling books. You respect money and are anxious to improve your standard of living. You are not disinterested in scandal while carefully avoiding it in your own household.

**BLUE-GREEN** Although sensitive, you are quite capable of imposing your own aims without advice or help. You are orderly, even fussy, and want things just so. You can be generous without doling out rewards. Yet you are emotionally rather cold, not an easy person to get along with. You have excellent taste. You are sweet and charming when you so desire and wholly self-possessed.

**BLUE** You are conservative and have strength of character, never entering into silly enthusiasms without careful thought. You are not one to monopolize conversation, although you can make up your mind to do so. You are cautious in words, dress and action, and are excited. You are a good executive and provider. Don't try to alter your marriage partner.

**PURPLE** People often favour purple for its exclusive dignity. Such persons are generally satisfied with themselves, sometimes conceited, and tenacity always capable of great things. You do doubt have if only in your heart) a rather superior attitude towards the world. But though you are extremely clever, you also may be lazy. Don't neglect to cultivate the excellent qualities of your mind. Purple types are among those who are easy to live with.

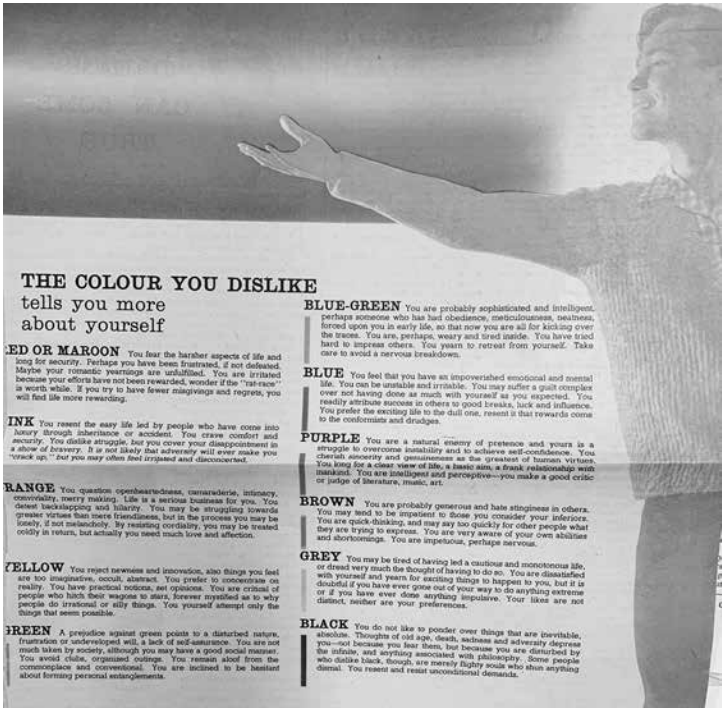
**BROWN** You are substantial, dependable, steady. You avoid things showy or gaudy. Your brain is slow but sure in action. You never worry. You prefer to be a spectator rather than a player. You like good, wholesome food, well tailored clothes, trustworthy friends. You will make an ideal wife or husband.

**LAVENDER** You like to be set apart from others, to be considered an exponent of culture and the arts. You may be quick-witted, but in fact you are not particularly intellectual. In certain women, a liking for lavender indicates vanity, slothness. Lavender types are bathosical, for they like everything to be delicate, never coarse. But it may be a shock to look too closely into their minds.

**GREY** You are cautious, a seeker of compromise and peace. You have practical and agreeable compromise. A woman who likes grey is probably calm and composed, and she will be likely to attract elderly rather than young men. Grey indicates a turn from excitement to all that is steady and sure. You may be dedicated, willing to work hard and be of service to others.

Figure 9. "Meet Your Color Mate," *Woman* 47, no. 1219 (October 15, 1960). Box 7, Folder 1. Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University

the industrial color chart as an organizational mode was not merely accidental but owed much to the formation of the disciplines of physical anthropology, ethnography, and eugenics at the turn of the century. These disciplines attempted to tie race to phenotypical color not just in terms of skin but also hair and eye color, using numerically ranked color swatches as matching tools to calibrate and measure skin tone. Both racial classifications and color systems operated by the principles of visual contrast, relationality, and ratio-



**THE COLOUR YOU DISLIKE**  
tells you more  
about yourself

**RED OR MAROON** You fear the harsher aspects of life and long for security. Perhaps you have been frustrated, if not defeated. Maybe your romantic yearnings are unfulfilled. You are irritated because your efforts have not been rewarded, wonder if the "grass" is worth while. If you try to have fewer misgivings and regrets, you will find life more rewarding.

**INK** You resent the easy life led by people who have come into money through inheritance or accident. You crave comfort and security. You dislike struggle, but you cover your disappointment in a show of bravery. It is not likely that adversity will ever make you "crack up," but you may often feel irritated and discouraged.

**RANGE** You question openheartedness, camaraderie, intimacy, conventional, merry making. Life is a serious business for you. You desire backslapping and hilarity. You may be struggling towards greater virtues than mere friendliness, but in the process you may be lonely, if not miserably. By missing cordiality, you may be treated coolly in return, but actually you need much love and affection.

**YELLOW** You reject newness and innovation, also things you feel are too suggestive, socially abstract. You prefer to concentrate on reality. You have practical notions, set opinions. You are critical of people who lack their wits to share, forever irritated as to why people do irrational or silly things. You are pleased almost only for things that seem possible.

**GREEN** A prejudice against green points to a disturbed nature. Frustration or underplayed will, a lack of self-assurance. You are not much taken by society, although you may have a good social manner. You avoid clubs, organized outings. You remain aloof from the cosmopolitan and conventional. You are inclined to be hesitant about forming personal entanglements.

**BLUE-GREEN** You are probably sophisticated and intelligent, perhaps someone who has had obedience, meticulousness, neatness, forced upon you in early life, so that now you are all for kicking over the traces. You are, perhaps, weary and tired inside. You have tried hard to impress others. You yearn to retreat from yourself. Take care to avoid a nervous breakdown.

**BLUE** You feel that you have an impoverished emotional and mental life. You can be unstable and irritable. You may suffer a guilt complex over not having done as much with yourself as you expected. You readily attribute success to others in good breaks, lack and influence. You prefer the exciting life to the dull one, resent it that rewards come to the conformists and drudges.

**PURPLE** You are a natural enemy of pretence and yours is a struggle to overcome loneliness and achieve self-confidence. You cherish sincerity and genuineness as the greatest of human virtues. You long for a clear view of life, a basis for a frank relationship with mankind. You are intelligent and perceptive—you make a good critic or judge of literature, music, art.

**BROWN** You are probably generous and have stringencies in others. You are quick-thinking, and may say too quickly for other people what they are trying to express. You are very aware of your own abilities and shortcomings. You are impatient, perhaps nervous.

**GREY** You may be tired of having led a cautious and monotonous life, or dread very much the thought of having to do so. You are disheartened, doubtful if you have ever gone out of your way to do anything extreme distinct, neither are your preferences.

**BLACK** You do not like to ponder over things that are inevitable, absolute. Thoughts of old age, death, sadness and adversity depress you, although you bear them, but because you are disturbed by the infinite, and anything associated with philosophy, these people die. You dislike black, though, are merely flighty souls who shun anything dismal. You resent and resent unconditional demands.

*They're colour-compatible*

Mr. and Mrs. Geoffrey Johnson Smith . . . She loves red, wants to have a car! If I had more money they never to a new hat. He feels most about green, but is fully in accord with his wife's plans. He has been, dark shades for a dark complexion and becoming a dark man with light colors.

Mr. and Mrs. Mary White . . . He goes for red, he loves dark, deep orange. Joyce White said that all people appear in her and that she and Harry had no trouble in arriving on the bus green, pink, grey and white, color scheme for the lounge of their flat.

Mr. and Mrs. Sidney James . . . She has her eye made like a man's; she for him too, pale if possible. Ever thought of being on the perfect husband? He is, too, he is able. "Whatever color I love, my wife's wearing—that one it always my favorite shade for the moment!"




Figure 10. "Meet Your Color Mate," *Woman* 47, no. 1219 (October 15, 1960). Box 7, Folder 1. Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University

nalization, making the color grid the ideal format for the naturalization of racial hierarchies (even though it became quickly clear that terms like *black*, *white*, *red*, and *yellow* didn't literally describe the color of peoples' skin). Color tables such as the physician and anthropologist Paul Broca's *Table chromatique* (1879) (figs. 11–12) were quite literally held up to living subjects in an attempt at racial standardization. Later, devices such as spectrophotometers lent even more scientific legitimacy to the measurement of "middle"

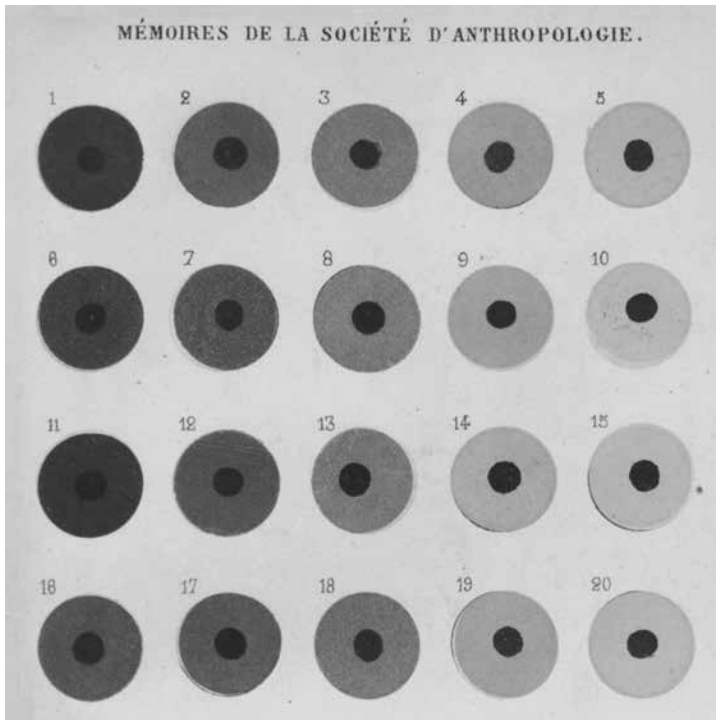


Figure 11. Paul Broca, *Table chromatique: yeux, peau, système pileux* (1865)

colors more precisely, leaving no skin tone unlabeled.<sup>55</sup> All of these models—it probably goes without saying—took for granted that whiteness was the default “neutral” rather than a constructed category, with qualities such as “civilizedness” and intelligence decreasing the further away subjects veered from this ideal. By extension, central to the American eugenics movement was the idea that race was a “colorimetric quality” that could be measured quantitatively.<sup>56</sup> The prominent eugenicist Charles Davenport even expressed a desire to design his own color grid using readily available commercial paints, an example of the alarming ways in which the industrial color chart is deeply entrenched in institutionalized violence and anxieties around racial purity.<sup>57</sup>

Once it became clear that physical color attributes could

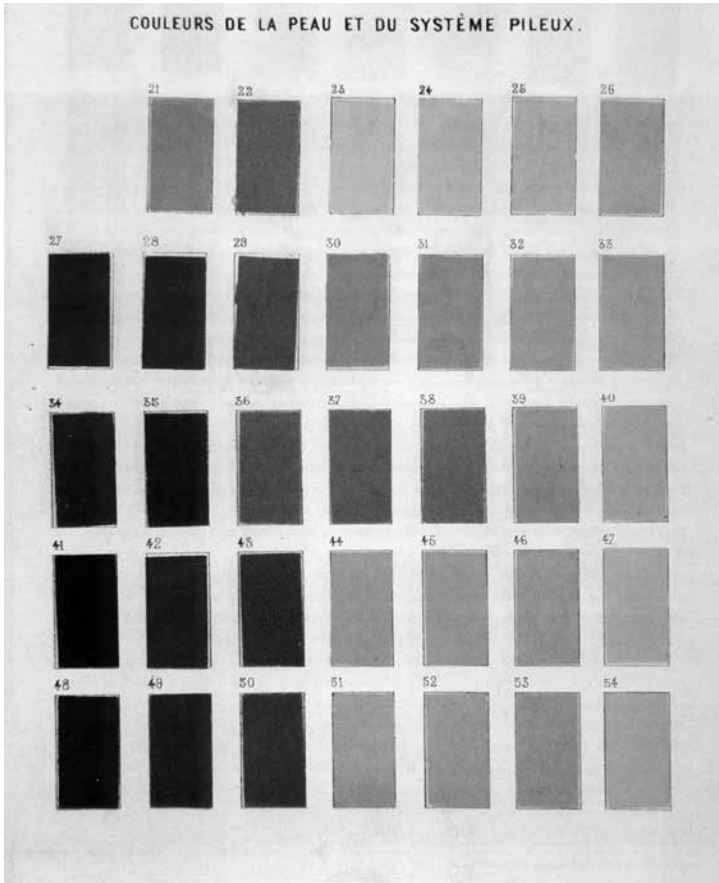


Figure 12. Paul Broca, *Table chromatique: yeux, peau, système pileux* (1865)

never fully function as an index of race, cataloguing color preferences emerged as another way of differentiating race—as we saw with the training of the “color sense.” What made the postwar period distinct, however, was that color typologies were linked to consumer choice, individualism, and even pleasure. Particularly within the discourse of color psychology and personality testing, there was a clear perceived correlation between skin tone and color preference (even though this correlation was ultimately arbitrary). No longer in the hands of specialists, taking quizzes to determine



one's color "personality" or learning how to dress in a way that flattered one's complexion and hair color made codifying oneself via color a type of voluntary labor.

As something more intangible than phenotypical skin color, the link between personal color preference and race/ethnicity was easier to insist upon—and, by extension, more difficult to dispute. Drawing on what he claimed were "proven" psychological studies, Birren wrote: "Warmth and coolness in color choice may also reveal racial types. Persons of Latin descent—Spanish, Italian, French, Balkan—may prefer warm colors, as will the majority of people having brunette complexions. Persons of Nordic descent, the English, Scandinavian, the typical American, will prefer cool colors, for cool colors seem to be emotionally pleasing to those with blonde complexions."<sup>58</sup> Note that "Latin" encompasses not just Spanish but Italian, French, and Balkan—a seemingly random collection of European demographics that becomes one umbrella category. With mass immigration from Europe to the US following World War II, rapidly changing demographics shifted discussions of race in terms of black and white toward the plurality of ethnicity.<sup>59</sup> Yet we can see from Birren's language that certain European groups had not yet assimilated and were seen as white-adjacent. The establishment of those of Nordic descent as the de facto norm, it hardly needs to be said, is part of a much longer and troubling history of an aspiration toward racial purity that treats pallor and whiteness as neutral.

The "standard" subject—a white, middle-class woman—could therefore choose from a plethora of favorite colors, whereas racial and ethnic groups not included within this framework were lumped into types with homogeneous color preferences. Only white Americans of a certain means had the luxury of being individuals, an individualism that could be expressed through color in fashion, interior design, and screen media.<sup>60</sup> The "objective" or immersive qualities of photography, in particular, further cemented the triangulated relationship between so-called abstract color, skin color, and color preference as a determinant of race. We need look no further for evidence of this synthesis of race and color preference via photography than a feature Birren published in *American Magazine* (1948) featuring a color photograph of Ava

Gardner wearing a coral red dress with matching shawl (fig. 1). The choice of Gardner, a Hollywood celebrity whose image was primarily mediated through the screen, is not coincidental, since, as I previously noted, color film and photography were historically calibrated to highlight pale skin tones—called flesh tones in industry parlance—which were established as the norm. Unlike drawn images, these technologies, with their connotations of realism and “objectivity,” helped cement and neutralize whiteness as the norm by targeting perception itself.

Gardner, who is said to have “the average American girl’s complexion,” then serves as a starting point for the division of women into types, such as “pink and white skin with the bluish cast,” which includes “the pastel girl, the Irish colleen type, and the strawberry blonde” (fig. 13).<sup>61</sup> In this case, categorizing women by skin tone went beyond color preferences and into the realm of color matching in cosmetics and fashion; just as lipstick shades could be numbered and differentiated, so could the faces with which one could match them. Most striking (and in fact, quite sinister) here is Birren’s clinical language: “I’m stubborn enough to believe that the colors women wear are just another phase of engineering,” he writes. “When an engineer thinks (professionally) of a woman’s complexion, he doesn’t think of ‘peach-blow,’ or ‘moon-glow,’ or ‘pomegranate Canada gold-dust.’ A color engineer is more concerned with surface capillaries, venous blood, and pigmentation.”<sup>62</sup>

Two aspects of this quote are worth noting: first, the substitution of poetic language with the perceived objectivity of scientific jargon builds on what I have already identified as the legacy of ethnography, anthropology, and eugenics, all of which involved “engineering” and quantitatively measuring human subjects, reducing them to objects of study rather than living beings in the process. Second, by encouraging female consumers to reflect on which colors suit their hair and eye color and complexion the best with the use of a “scientific” rubric, Birren frames in terms of choice what is really a process of disciplining the eye to recognize color distinctions in racialized terms. Far from being a set of neutral design tools, color standards are social and political technologies in and of themselves.

## Conclusion

The assumption that paint shades, lighting, and their corresponding warmth or coolness have an emotional or psychological impact on home dwellers is now deeply ingrained in popular culture. Contemporary interior design websites such as Apartment Therapy, which frequently publishes color-oriented articles, frame the home as a place where we can assert our individual personalities and identities, a space of creative potential.<sup>63</sup> These platforms largely erase the historical and political origins of this way of thinking about color, treating it as natural or eternal. Yet, as I've shown, this perceived link between color and lighting and physiological well-being is distinctly historical. We reenact the legacy of functional color and mood conditioning every time we select an LED bulb instead of a fluorescent one, believing that the former's warm glow will create a gentler ambience than the harsh glare of the latter.

We can trace this correlation between color and mood to the postwar era, during which a growing electronic culture combined with the emerging concept of "personality" naturalized color's ability to soothe, stress, or alter human behavior as well as to signal uniqueness and personal freedom. Looking to the mid-century domestic interior reveals the ways in which what appeared to be do-it-yourself customization was in reality an increasing reliance on standardized materials and regulated ways of seeing. The rise of this mode of seeing stems from the increasing ubiquity of the color chart as not just a tool but a dominant visual mode that pushed consumers to see their surroundings as measurable gradations of discrete, numbered shades rather than a continuous spectrum.

This legacy of standardized color cannot be separated from the codification of identity categories—particularly race and gender. Returning to *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dreamhouse*, we see the ways in which color standards in the postwar home were intimately entwined with questions of power and identity. The film centers on an archetypal midcentury white nuclear family: a working father, a stay-at-home mother, two children, and their African American maid, Gussie (played by Louise Beavers, an actress known for primarily portraying servants of the "Mammy" stereotype). Even the last name "Blandings" connotes averageness or banality, evoking the image of a cookie-cutter (middle-class, white, heteronorma-

tive) 1950s American suburban lifestyle that has been retroactively established by its cinematic representations. Muriel's role as self-appointed interior designer cements the home as the woman's realm, where color functions as both a means of artistic control and an expression of white middle-class femininity. As part of a larger turn toward what I've dubbed "standards of selfhood," the film points to the ways in which mood conditioning and functional color ultimately reinscribed racial, sexual, and social divisions that worked directly alongside a rhetoric of consumer choice and individualism. As the primary site onto which middle-class American homeowners projected their desires for stability and individuality, the single-family home in the postwar period embodies the inherent—and often sinister—contradictions between narratives of technological progress and innovation and the never-ending quest for human "authenticity."

## Notes

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1. The original film set is in Malibu. Several of the replicas have been repainted over the years, but they were initially uniform in color.
2. Grace Holm, "Public to Inspect Blandings Dream House with Ceremonial Booked for 2 p.m. Saturday," *Oregonian*, 6 November 1948.
3. Scholars doing important work at the intersection of media studies and architecture and design history with a focus on the postwar domestic space include Lynn Spigel and Justus Nieland. See Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), and *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Justus Nieland, *Happiness by Design: Modernism and Media in the Eames Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), as well

as “Midcentury Design Cultures,” ed. Justus Nieland and J. D. Connor, special issue, *Post45* 6 (2021), <https://post45.org/sections/issue/midcentury-design-cultures/>.

4. The film was produced when expensive and cumbersome three-strip Technicolor was reserved primarily for films with fantastical or musical elements, but just before the widespread conversion to cheaper and more accessible one-strip processes such as Eastmancolor and Agfacolor. A colorized version of *Mr. Blandings* came out in 1989 at the height of the colorization craze, but like the vast majority of colorized classic Hollywood films, it was a flop.
5. Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *The Color Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 139.
6. Carolyn L. Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms: Synthetic Color, Computer Art, and Aesthetics after Code* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Nicholas Gaskill, *Chromographia: American Literature and the Modernization of Color* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Susan Murray, *Bright Signals: A History of Color Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Michael Rossi, *The Republic of Color: Science, Perception, and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
7. Blaszczyk, *Color Revolution*.
8. See, for example, Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Amy F. Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
9. Lawrence Busch, *Standards: Recipes for Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 186.
10. Other examples of eighteenth-century color wheels include Moses Harris, *The Natural System of Colours* (1766); and Ignaz Schiffermüller, *Versuch eines Farbensystems* (1772).
11. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colors*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006).
12. Foucault even calls the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries “the age of the catalogue,” whose primary tool is the table. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), 75, 131.

13. "A Pre-Pantone Guide to Colors: Dutch Book from 1692 Documents Every Color under the Sun," *Open Culture*, 9 July 2014, <https://www.openculture.com/2014/07/dutch-book-from-1692-documents-every-color-under-the-sun.html>; Kala Barba-Court, "This Hand-Painted Manuscript Was 271 Years Ahead of the Pantone Color Book," *Plain Magazine*, 22 June 2017, <https://plainmagazine.com/pantone-color-book-handpainted/>; Sarah Cascone, "Handpainted Color Guide from 1692 Is Pre-modern Pantone," *Artnet*, 6 May 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/handpainted-color-guide-from-1692-is-pre-modern-pantone-14121>.
14. Bettina Bock von Wülfigen, "The Periodic Tableau: Form and Colors in the First 100 Years," in "The Periodic System: The Multiple Values of an Icon," ed. Annette Lykknes and Brigitte van Tiggelen, special issue, *Centaurus: An International Journal of the History of Science and Its Cultural Aspects* 61, no. 4 (2019): 379–404.
15. Patrick Syme, *Werner's Nomenclature of Colors: Adapted to Zoology, Botany, Chemistry, Mineralogy, Anatomy, and the Arts* (London: Trustees of the Natural History Museum, 2018), 13.
16. "Spring Color Card, 1918," *Illustrated Milliner*, 18 October 1917, 17.
17. See Esther Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds: Nature, Art, and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).
18. A. H. Munsell, "Introduction to the Munsell Color System," in A. H. Munsell and Thomas Maitland Cleland, *A Grammar of Color: Arrangements of Strathmore Colors in a Variety of Printed Combinations According to the Munsell Color System* (Mittineague, MA: Strathmore Paper Company, 1921), 7.
19. All three of these corporations are still extant and extremely commercially successful (particularly Pantone) as of this writing.
20. Kane, *Chromatic Algorithms*; Murray, *Bright Signals*; Jonathan Sterne and Dylan Mulvin, "The Low Acuity for Blue: Perceptual Technics and American Color Television," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 2 (2014): 118–38.
21. Sterne and Mulvin, "Low Acuity for Blue."
22. Murray, *Bright Signals*, 68.

23. Faber Birren, *New Horizons in Color* (New York: Reinhold, 1955), 2–3.
24. Blaszczyk, *Color Revolution*, 18.
25. Faber Birren, *Color Dimensions: Creating New Principles of Color Harmony and a Practical Equation in Color Definition* (Chicago: Crimson, 1934), 54, 36.
26. “A Catalogue of Books on Color by Faber Birren” (Westport, CT: Crimson, 1942), Box 1, Faber Birren Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.
27. Rossi, *Republic of Color*, 5.
28. Sandy Isenstadt, *Electric Light: An Architectural History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 151.
29. Isenstadt, *Electric Light*, 140.
30. Margaret Maile Petty, “Glamour Pink: The Marketing of Residential Electric Lighting in the Age of Color, 1920s–1950s,” in *Bright Modernity: Color, Commerce, and Consumer Culture*, ed. Regina Blaszczyk and Uwe Spiekermann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 149.
31. Gaskill, *Chromographia*, 7.
32. Rossi, *Republic of Color*, 252.
33. Warren I. Susman, “‘Personality’ and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture,” in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 150. See also Raymond Williams, “Personality,” in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 232.
34. Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 44.
35. Turner, *Democratic Surround*, 63.
36. Susman, “‘Personality,’” 180.
37. Faber Birren, “Meet Your Color Mate,” *Woman* 47, no. 1219 (15 October 1960): 9–11, Box 7, Folder 1, Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University.
38. Susman, “‘Personality,’” 277.

39. Elspeth H. Brown, *The Corporate Eye: Photography and the Rationalization of American Commercial Culture, 1884–1929* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 50.
40. Petty, “Glamour Pink,” in *Bright Modernity*, 150.
41. Faber Birren, *New Horizons in Color* (New York: Reinhold, 1955), 138.
42. Blaszczyk, *Color Revolution*, 139.
43. Kathleen McDermott and Davis Dyer, *America's Paint Company: A History of Sherwin-Williams* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Group, 1991), 67.
44. Spigel, *TV by Design*, 155.
45. Dianne Harris, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 96.
46. Faber Birren, “Character Analysis through Color,” Paint Merchandising Council, 1956, Box 7, Folder 1, Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University.
47. Birren, “Character Analysis through Color.”
48. Faber Birren, “What Is Your Favorite Color?,” *Better Homes and Gardens* 29, no. 14 (October 1951), 57, Box 7, Folder 1, Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University.
49. Murray, *Bright Signals*, 108.
50. Faber Birren, “Meet Your Color Mate,” *Woman* 47, no. 1219 (15 October 1960), Box 7, Folder 1, Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University.
51. Busch, *Standards*, 143.
52. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 38.
53. Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
54. See Lorna Roth, “Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34, no. 1 (2009): 111; Genevieve Yue, *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020); Mary Ann Doane, *Bigger Than Life: The Close-Up and Scale in the Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University



- Press, 2021); and Dylan Mulvin, *Proxies: The Cultural Work of Standing In* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).
55. Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 85.
  56. Rossi, *Republic of Color*, 229.
  57. Rossi, *Republic of Color*, 232.
  58. Faber Birren, "Find Yourself in Whose-Hue," *Bride and Home* 65 (Summer 1959): 70, Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University.
  59. Harris, *Little White Houses*, 17.
  60. Harris, *Little White Houses*, 128.
  61. Faber Birren, "What's Your Color?," *American Magazine* 146, no. 3 (September 1948), Box 7, Folder 1, Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University.
  62. Birren, "What's Your Color?"
  63. Sample headlines include Caroline Biggs, "The One Color That Might Actually Make You Calmer, According to Science," *Apartment Therapy*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.apartmenttherapy.com/baker-miller-pink-effects-36716406>; Danielle Blundell, "Here's What Your Childhood Bedroom Color Says about You," *Apartment Therapy*, 16 July 2019, <https://www.apartmenttherapy.com/heres-what-the-color-of-your-childhood-bedroom-says-about-you-36624167>; and Danielle Blundell, "Could This Bedroom Trend Actually Help You Get a Better Night of Sleep?," *Apartment Therapy*, 19 February 2019, <https://www.apartmenttherapy.com/dark-bedroom-sleep-benefit-266759>.

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Beware of your favorite hue! It gives away your character and it may not become you. Here's how to choose the colors that enhance your appearance and still keep your personality a secret

*By Faber Birren*  
 NOTED COLOR ENGINEER AND CONSULTANT



*PHOTO BY PAUL D. HARR*

**Pastel type:** *Blood Madeline Tyler best represents this group and she wisely models a blue frock*

yellow ones, brown ones, green ones, and many others.

The grayness in an elderly person's skin is the result of an accumulation of pigments that so neutralize one another and are so offset by diminishing blood at the skin surface, that the end product is no color at all! Such a person must depend for color on that reflected from articles of clothing and should use most cosmetics only in delicate shades of the ones she wore best when she was younger.

**I**N GENERAL, women can be divided into 3 types of complexions. (Men probably can be too, but we won't bother with any Dresden china men.) The first of these 3 types is the *pink and white skin with the bluish cast*. In this group will be found the pastel girl, the Irish colleen type, and the strawberry blonde.



**Strawberry blonde:** *Any pale, soft color is becoming to this type. Model Virginia Coyne chooses lavender*

The pastel girl's hair will be golden to brown and her eyes either gray or blue. I saw one lost in a bright red dress recently. Pastel girls should stay away from bright reds. For this coloring, the best shades to wear are the shell pinks, baby blues, and lavenders. Very dark green, deep blues, grape, dark navy, black, and dove gray are okay. But all the lovely pinkness disappears when a pastel girl wears a fire-engine red, and the delicate blues in her skin are lost when a brilliant blue dress is put next to them.

The second type girl in the *pink and white skin combination with the bluish tinge* is the one known as the Irish colleen. She has black hair and blue or gray eyes, and should wear clear blue, soft green, blue-green, violet, and raspberry. Strong colors won't be too much for her. Sky blue, peacock blue, and royal blue. (Continued on page 126)

**What your FAVORITE COLOR tells about you**

The author of *What's Your Color?*—a noted color engineer and consultant—here names and shows you 10 colors. Choose the one that best satisfies your heart, honesty, spontaneously, and without thought concerning styles of dress, interior decoration, or the like. When you have made a decision (and don't take long, turn to page 128 for Faber Birren's analysis of your personality.



RED



BLUE-GREEN



MAROON



BLUE



ORANGE



PURPLE



YELLOW



LAVENDER



GREEN



BROWN

33

Figure 13. "What's Your Color?" *American Magazine* 146, no. 3 (September 1948). Box 7, Folder 1. Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University