



Colour. Meanings and Emotions

red

In every spoken language, red is the first colour repeated after black or white (Eiseman 15). Red embodies excitement and passion, both positively and negatively, and is often nicknamed “the dynamo” because it has the greatest emotional impact.

One of the oldest associations for red is blood, life’s sustenance. In Chinese, the word for blood-red is older than the word for red. (Colour 186). Red is the colour that triggers the “fight or flight” intuition in animals due to this association with blood.

Tied with this inbred reaction is the physical effect that the colour has on the body. The pituitary gland springs into action, releasing the hormone epinephrine, which causes rapid breathing, increases in blood pressure and pulse rate, and the flow of adrenaline. Adrenaline is released into the bloodstream, quickening the heart rate for natural protection and alertness (Eiseman 19). Aptly named, the Red Planet, Mars, comes from the Roman god of war.

Red holds its place in culture as well, best shown in its prominence during Valentine’s Day, the holiday for lovers, and the flushed face of an angry or embarrassed man. Seen as the sexiest of all colours, perhaps because of its triggers to adrenaline, red excites and imbues passion in people. A red car, a red dress and even a red (()) can turn a person on—all in different ways, of course.

Whether it stems from the consequences of passion or not, red also speaks of sin, or immoral actions. In Eastern scripture, although Buddha’s colour was yellow or gold (read “Yellow” to understand why), he wore red robes when he pondered over the vicissitudes of man (Colour whaaa). In the famous literature “The Scarlet Letter,” the author Nathaniel Hawthorne depicts the common practices of societies during *that time period,* when red letters emblazoned the chest of a sinner who confessed their adulteries.



Colour. Meanings and Emotions

orange

The word for the colour orange didn't exist until the fruit permeated the food market. Then, they labeled the round fruit an orange, but still didn't associate the label with any other objects of the same colour. It wasn't until almost the 17th century that the word even separated from the fruit to simply describe a colour. Before this, the closest pigment to orange ancient societies had was a dull, rusty orange, resembling an earthy brown (Colour 194).

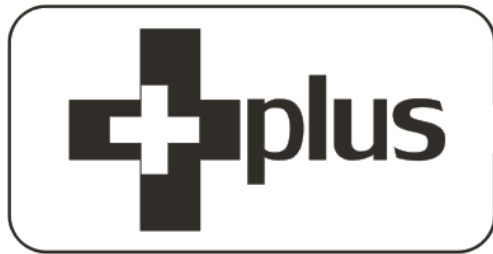
Orange is seen as the hottest of all colours (Eiseman 27). However, stuck in between the strong colours red and yellow in the spectrum, bright orange has steered clear of any extremely positive or negative connotations.

Mystics perceive the tint of orange in a person's aura to reveal pride and ambition. Similarly, the word for orange, "tenne," in heraldry meant strength and endurance (Birren 173).

The modern use for vivid shades of orange because of its loudness is in situations where safety through visibility is an issue. Lifeboat rafts, traffic directors and prison uniforms are all examples of this.

In its most intense shades, orange is usually not taken seriously (aside from the above use). Marketers and designers employ the colour for satirical ads or for children's products because people's perception of the colour is usually jovial, exuberant, or for hilarity.

Birren says that orange is the colour most pleasing in its tints (Birren 259). The lighter shades, such as peach, coral and melon all have more calming, pleasant connotations. Used in decorating homes and for adult clothing, the pastel oranges have acquired a more maternal quality. Darker oranges slide into the earth tones, and combine with greens to settle the mind into a safe, natural world.



Colour. Meanings and Emotions

yellow

When children first pull out crayons to draw pictures (that are recognizable), the one of the stereotypical first drawings consists of a house with two windows and a door, a chimney, grass and a bright yellow sun. From the earliest moments that children assign attributes to objects, practically the most common association is yellow with the sun. With sunlight.

This transition from the rays of a yellow sun to the idea of light has permeated across languages and cultures. Mystics believe that yellow emanates from the aura of an intellectual person. Naturally, it was the colour that symbolized the Enlightenment movement as well.

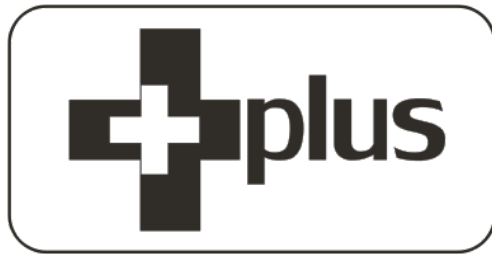
Each of these ideas were etched early into our personal minds. However, dating back to the earliest recordings of historical events, some of today's associations have been etched in the Bible and other documents.

More negative connotations date back to these scriptures, and were then portrayed in Medieval art. Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, is portrayed as wearing yellow robes in paintings as a sign of cowardice. In American slang, cowards are teased as being "yellowbellied" or "yellow."

The second usage for the colour yellow throughout the centuries has been to liken the colour to sickness. Starting with nature, the yellowing of leaves is the first sign of a lack of nutrients, usually predicting the imminent dying of that branch or plant.

In the late 19th century, the United States and various Western countries called the era the Yellow Peril as a huge influx of Chinese and Japanese emigrated from their homelands, supposedly threatening white wages and standards of living. People considered the Asian people's skin colour a tint of yellow, subtly inferring their infesting of the states.

Similarly, the Nazis made the Jews wear yellow wristbands during World War II to set them apart from other citizens (Colour 200). Like red, yellow is a dynamic colour that has gained recognition in many different forms in culture and history.



Colour. Meanings and Emotions

green

As the foundation of nature, green ties all of us back to our roots, gives us a feeling of retreat from the normal materialistic, bustling life we lead every day. Green is quieting, refreshing, and reassuring; as the first green buds pop through the white blankets of snow, we are assured of the imminent coming of spring, the season of birth and rejuvenation. As in heraldic tradition, the word for green, “vert,” means growth and hope (Birren 173).

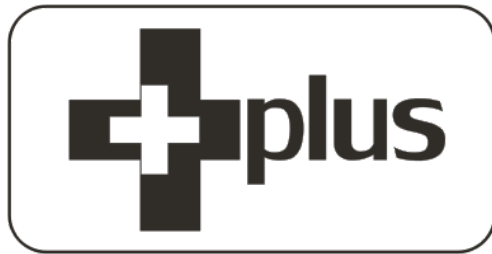
Interesting fact: this connotation for green is the reason almost every government prints some of its currency in green. Not only does it present reassurance, but green also symbolizes the foundation of life — just like money is the foundation of a country’s economy.

Perhaps due to its overwhelming presence in nature, green is also the colour that rests most center of the retina in the eye. Thus, when receptor cells in the eye pick up light waves, vision is most receptive to green due to how easy the retina can absorb it. Because of this, green provides an ideal environment for relaxation, concentration and meditation (Colour 206).

Like most other colours, however, green has a split personality as well. Ancient Egyptian mythology recognized green’s contradictory nature, assigning the colour to Osiris, the god of both vegetation and death (Colour 206).

The personality traits society has become to most associate with green are guilt, envy, jealousy (Birren 143). Seers assert that grayish green auras tip off a deceitful, cunning person (Birren 43), two thought processes that usually surface in someone “green with envy.” When a person’s mind becomes so satiated with these thoughts, one can call them diseased.

Disease and poison, like green venom depicted dripping from a snake’s fangs or green bottles of poison in fantasy epics, follow along this standard. The origin of this idea dates back to the 19th century when arsenic—laced emerald green wallpaper decorated thousands of walls in Paris homes. Now known to be lethal, this wallpaper was inadvertently responsible for numerous deaths before the cause (arsenic) was discovered (Colour 208).



Colour. Meanings and Emotions

blue

Blue has qualities that oppose red (Birren 260). Studies show that its presence helps lower blood pressure and pulse rate. This may seem to be solely positive responses — and they are, in certain situations — but blue also retards the body's reactions and hormonal activities. The immune system doesn't heal wounds as fast due to the slower metabolism and response time. Thus, medics used to wear red clothing and wrap wounds in red cloth to expedite healing because that is the stimulant colour.

Just as the skies and the oceans seem to extend to infinity, blue is described as dependable, cool, and a constant in our lives. Blue does not waver, does not disappear. Thus, banks and financial institutions regard blue as a professional colour for their backgrounds or advertisements because it gives consumers a sense of continuous support (Eiseman 39). (Don't worry about a stock market crash, your money's safe with us.)

Similarly, in America blue symbolizes military service and stands as a part of the country's flag: official, eternal support.

The emotional meaning of blue divides itself naturally, depending on the tint of the colour: light blue auras show devotion to ideals (Birren 43), as the traditional word "azure" signifies piety and sincerity.

The Romans, linking blue with black, paired the colour with Saturnine and melancholic humor. When a person called skin blemish "black and blue" (even when the colours don't depict that), he/she feels sore from a bruise. The music genre the Blues originated from this darker image of the colour, first popularized by Washington Irving when he abbreviated an older term about the presence of blue devils (Colour 212). Now, when we're feelin' a little down and gloomy (Birren 143), we've got the "blues."



Colour. Meanings and Emotions

purple

Although orange is quite eccentric, purple presents itself as the strangest colour in the group — strangest meaning the most biologically unnatural. Purple sparingly appears in the natural environment, generally appearing as flower petals, like lilacs and lilies (Colour 218). Its greatest impact lies in objects and ideas created by humans, and it manifests greatly in two categories: royalty and mysticism.

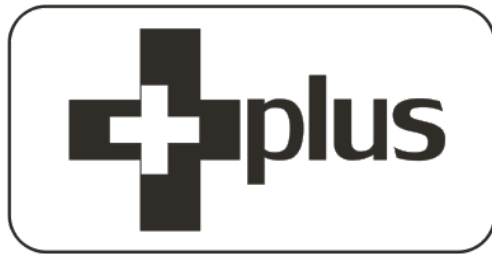
Being a blend of red and blue, the two ends of the emotional spectrum, purple has a dynamic effect. If used in large areas, the colour can disturb the focus of the eye, but it ironically has a very aesthetic appeal. Monarchs and kings added splashes of purple to their material items to announce their wealth to others.

Perhaps their choice of colour relates back to the difficulty of producing the purple. Phoenician Tyrian purple, the colour most prized in the ancient world, was extricated from the *Purpura mollusk* (hence its name). Its extinction date is unknown, but the species has been lost to mankind for centuries now.

Aside from that creature, no raw products naturally produce the colour. Thus, purple was not available to the people until chemical synthesis found the correct formula (Colour 218).

The rarity of the purple product automatically leant itself to the upper class, giving its distinguishing nature as a part of royalty. In the 10th century, the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VII's surname, *Porphyrogenitus*, translates to "born to the people." Sons born to a reigning king who would inherit the throne were announced as heirs by attachment to the colour purple.

Heraldry tradition speaks of purple, or "murrey," as representing royalty or rank. Even today, in marketing efforts, advertisements or labels with deep purple backgrounds tend to be perceived as a higher-quality product. This is especially true in European markets or for people with European backgrounds due to their past histories of monarchies.

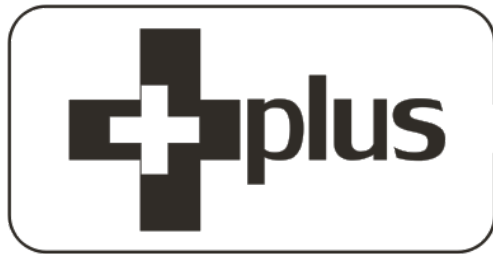


Colour. Meanings and Emotions

A light tint of purple falls into the spirituality category, popularly seen on banners portraying the dove in Christian churches. However, mystics have passed on aural healing techniques to present-day natural healers, and violet and lavender are used for a soothing effect on mental concentration (Birren 46).

This has been translated into modern American culture through its association with New Age philosophies, such as Eastern massage techniques, herbal remedies, yoga and pilates — perhaps because the ultimate goal of these activities is to soothe the mind, body and spirit with continued practice (Eiseman 48).

In its most extreme cases, the darkest hues evoke a deep melancholy, a level of depression and desperation way beyond the simple sadness of having the “blues” on a lonely evening (Birren 143).



Colour. Meanings and Emotions

black

Red and blue serve as the antithesis of each other due to their emotional and hormonal effects on the body, but the most absolute contrast that exists is the difference between black and white.

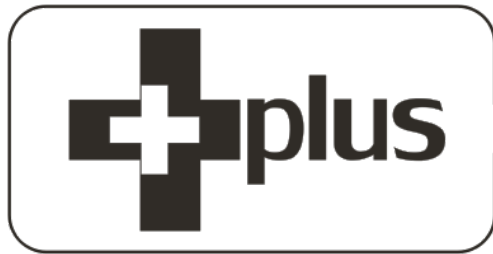
Yes or no questions are labeled “black or white” questions. And black and white serve as the assigning colours in all of the reigning absolutes of today: day and night, good and evil, birth and death (Colour 178). As Eiseman said, “black and white is the quintessential and most classic combination of strength and clarity, power and purity (Eiseman 61).”

Black shades on objects give an impression of weight and strength perceptually — it gives objects a sturdy, solid feel. Spatially, blackness, like in outer space, implies vast emptiness and a more foreboding perception of infinity than blue skies depict.

Dating back hundreds of years, the majority of associations to the colour were negative. Mystics claimed black-tinted auras indicated hatred and malice. “Sable,” the traditional root for the word, signifies grief and penitence (Birren 173). Society mourned the end of life by donning solid black garments at funerals. And at the root of many disparaging phrases was this colour: such as in blacklist, blackmail, black sheep and black market.

However, attitudes about black have changed more than any other colour in recent years. In some cultures, black is still associated with mourning, but the colour has gained a reputation of prominence and sophistication in the past two centuries.

In shows and presentations during the 1830’s, men dressed quite eccentric, wearing sky blue shirts, dove grey pants and primrose waistcoats. But one or two men appeared all in black, and the look caught on by the second half of the 19th century. This era, marked as one in which hard work, industrial development and sober outlooks skyrocketed as key values, aided the dissipation of colour from upper-class men’s clothing (Colour 185).



Colour. Meanings and Emotions

Strong. Classic. Elegant. Such black came to be, perhaps epitomized in the release of the sleek black Model-T cars produced by Henry Ford in the 1910s. When Fords first hit the market, it was the wealthier class who acquired them, and such influence and weight was pronounced in the shiny black body of the car.

Thus, the mournful atmosphere surrounding black has given way to sophistication as more people identify it with black limos, black tie events, polished granite and other upscale looks that pronounce elegance (Eiseman 60).