

“We need more courage again in our choice of color”

18/07/2017 French color designer Jean-Gabriel Causse is convinced that we underestimate the power of color—and he dreams of an orange Porsche.

You drive a turquoise motor scooter. Why this color?

In many cultures, turquoise symbolizes youth and hope. After all, it’s hard to look at a lagoon without feeling refreshed. The color exudes a light and carefree quality, which fits in very well with the sensation of driving a motor scooter through the city.

Is turquoise your favorite color?

My favorite color varies throughout the day. In the morning, it might be the orange on the package of my shower gel, and later perhaps the blue of my sports coat.

Most people are a little more decided in their preference.

We know that blue is the most popular color in all cultures. This might have something to do with the fact that blue is the color of the sky.

A very basic question: What exactly are colors?

In physical terms, colors are different combinations of electromagnetic waves. Our retinas turn these mixtures of light into nerve impulses. These signals are transmitted to the visual cortex of the brain, which gives us the conscious sensation of color. So colors do not exist as such. They arise in our minds. Which also explains why they are extraordinarily subjective. Each person perceives color in a slightly different way.

But there is a surprising amount of overlap, such as in the colors people prefer for their cars.

According to surveys, 60 percent of people say that color is one of the main factors they consider when purchasing a car. In this case, however, they don't choose their favorite color but instead generally select something discreet and reserved. A few decades ago, red was the most popular color for cars. Now it's white, followed by black, silver, and gray. Three-quarters of the new cars sold in 2016 were one of these colors.

How do you explain this development?

People simply used to take more pleasure in brighter colors, which also used to signify wealth. Dark suits only started becoming popular for men in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, women's fashion began to lose color as well—one example being Coco Chanel's "little black dress." By the way, you can observe a similar trend in architecture and interior design. Even fifty or sixty years ago, it wouldn't have occurred to anyone to paint the walls of their homes white. That has now become the absolute standard. And we're seeing a similar trend in cars. As an aside, white is a good choice for safety reasons. We know that white cars have the lowest accident rates, which is probably because they're readily visible in all kinds of light.

Is that why white is so popular?

White is a very discreet color. It doesn't clamor for attention. And that's exactly what most people are looking for. If you want to have a low profile, then it's good to choose something like white, black, silver, or gray.

You seem a little sad about that.

Nearly every tourist who visits Havana is thrilled by the colors of the cars on the streets. But that's because those vehicles were made at a time when it was customary to paint them in vibrant colors. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the same was true of cars on the streets of Paris or Stuttgart. People used to make greater use of the symbolism or power of colors than they do now.

What effect do colors have on us?

Countless studies have shown that colors exert considerable influence on us. Mountain climbers feel the cold less when their parkas are red—a color that everyone associates with warmth. People who have a blue desktop on their computers produce around twice as many ideas as those with a red desktop. Colors have incredible power.

Why is that?

Biological, cultural, and individual psychological factors all play a role.

You'll have to explain that in greater detail.

All cultures associate red with aggression and strength. That's also true in the animal kingdom. When finches encounter members of their same species with red feathers, the level of the stress hormone corticosterone in their blood increases by fifty-eight percent. So the color red appears to have a direct physical effect on us, quite simply via the wavelength of red light.

What about cultural factors?

Red warns us of danger. But this effect is surely also learned. Every child learns that prohibition signs are always red. Red is also the color that we associate with Italian sports cars. But this isn't a law of nature. It's historical happenstance. At the famous Gordon Bennett Cup in 1900, the English team got the color green (British Racing Green), France got blue, Germany white, and Italy red. That's why if I bought a Porsche, it wouldn't be red. In my opinion that doesn't fit with a German sports car.

What color would you get?

Orange. Without a doubt. Which might have something to do with my experiences as a child, because I often saw an orange Porsche. That brings us to the individual factors involved. Very minor events can explain why we like a color or why it makes us happy.

Sports cars are less likely to have drab colors.

That's true. People who drive sports cars are a little more open to the mentality of play. It's about pleasure and fun, not just the seriousness of life. Furthermore, many sports cars are simply gorgeous. I can never get enough of the elegant lines of a Porsche 911. You almost have to choose a color that stands out. I think we need more courage again in our choice of color. Walt Disney once said, "Dream your life in colors—it's the secret to happiness."

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