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Color: The Spirit of Painting

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Abstract: Color exists in the presence of light. Light not only brings forth the existence of color but also helps to perceive its reality. Color is a powerful medium to express our feelings, and that also evokes emotional responses which attract and keep the attention of a beholder. Color combination in painting is concerned with aesthetic aspects. The color beauty sustains the undivided attention to the beholder. Color amplifies the degree of emotion that touches and influences the human body, mind and soul directly which leads towards contemplation. The contemplation opens up the way to the journey of eternity. All this is possible through the combination of harmonious and contrastive colors that awakens a corresponding sensation, which directly works upon the soul. Therefore, color is the spirit of painting that makes the work of painting lively by putting breath into it. This article, thus, attempts to trace how color becomes the spirit of painting. Color as the spirit of painting will be the center of research focusing on the influence of color upon human beings. The main objective of this article is to study the role of color in painting. The study explains the impact and aesthetic value of color in painting. It is relevant to explore the strength of color application in painting. The qualitative model of research is adopted to analyze and interpret the artworks.

Keywords: Color, painting, spirit, combinations, harmony, aesthetic

Introduction

From the very beginning of the history of art, color has played a pivotal role in paintings. Whether it is concerned with the ancient Aboriginal rock painting in Australia, Lascaux cave paintings and Altamira cave paintings or paintings of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome; all created the fascinating spectacle by the application of primitive colors, derived from nature. It is evidential therefore that color has been the primordial fundamentals of human interest (See. Figure1). The prime interest of pre-historic paintings submits color as one of the significant elements of art. Vishny (2008) says of ancient paintings: “The leaping cow and group of small horses were painted with red and yellow ochre that was either blown through reeds onto the wall or mixed with animal fat and applied with reeds or thistles” (Encarta). The passion of the color might have compelled them to paint their rudimentary paintings despite the hardships they had to have fought with.

Ancient Egypt also had many mural paintings (Figure2). The paintings can be seen in temples and buildings, and other painted illustrations on papyrus, the early writing material. They also painted on linen, remnants of which sustain nowadays. Egyptians might have carried on the legacy left behind their ancestors. They used to paint the tombs to honor and thank their deceased and even to associate their departed souls with painted colorful images, both verbal and visual. Consequently, color has become a significant element for this life and afterlife. Thus, it has embodied mundane and eternal life simultaneously.



Figure 1 Aboriginal Rock Art, Super Stock/age footstock. (Encarta_



Figure 2. Toreador Fresco, Bridgeman Art Library, London/New York. (Encarta)

After Egyptian, Grecian art comes under scrutiny. It has such qualities as surpassing time and space. *Grecian Urns*, which evoked the innermost emotion of later literary figures like Keats, reflects spiritual melodies to which the young lady seems to be confronted. Thus, the contemporary society that the artist sculpted on the surface of the urn seems mesmerized by the powerful harmony of musical instruments, the other art form. Britannica writes:

The interior modelling of Zeuxis' figures would appear strongly realistic as compared with the flat volumes of the older method, and this revolutionary illusionism was probably the basis of such stories as that of the pictorial contest in which Zeuxis painted a bunch of grapes so realistic that birds flew toward it to take a nibble (Britannica.com).

This all shows the linear chronology of art history from the Prehistoric period of the Ice Age and Stone Age to the Bronze Age of Greek and Egyptian civilizations. They have focused on a common element, color, either for decorative purposes or otherwise. This paper *Color: The Spirit of Painting* attempts to delineate how color becomes the spirit of painting. Along with the definition, meaning, classification of color, combination, harmony, and aesthetics. Color as the spirit of painting will be the center of research focusing on the influence of color upon human beings.

Definition and Meaning of Color

Color is the property of an object that causes a visual sensation. This sensation in a way determines the other attributes of the same object. Apples, for instance, can be separated from mangoes by looking at their shapes. But they can be separated whether they ripen or not simply by their color. Figure3. for example, differentiates the shapes of different objects, i.e., apple and mangos, whereas Figure4 distinguishes the inherent qualities of the same object, mango, as green and ripening respectively.

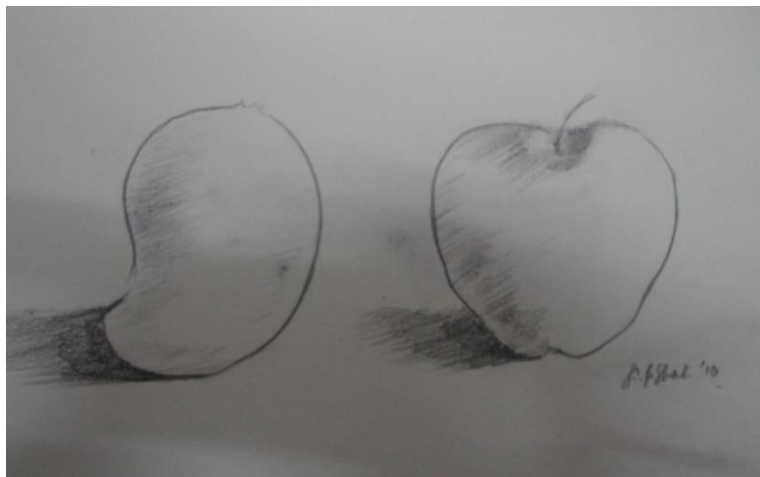


Figure 3 Krishna Prakash Shah, *Form* (2010). Pencil Sketch on Paper.

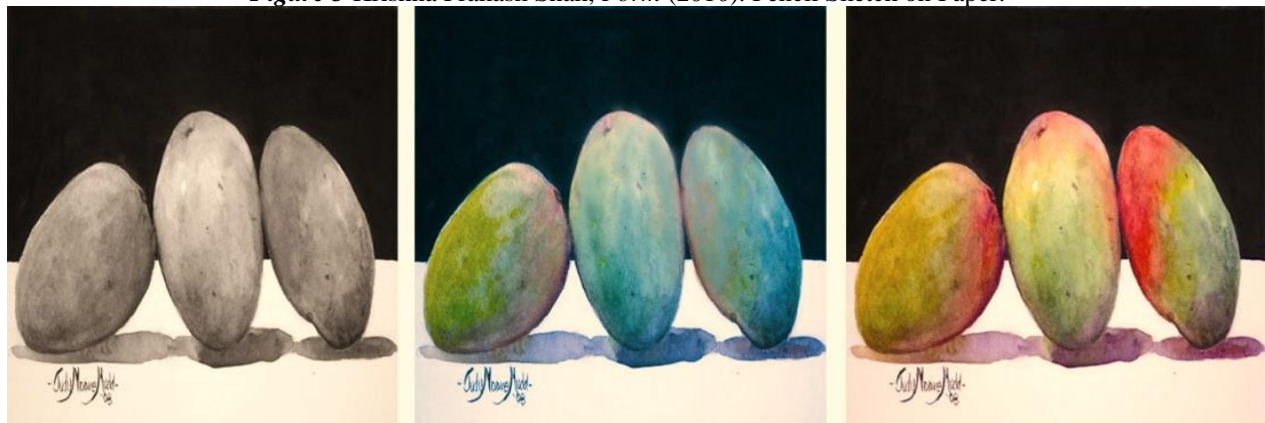


Figure 4 Judy Moore Mudd, *Steal Life* (2008).

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Thus, the same object or event can have different impressions in different color applications. Similarly, color represents different sensations of the same object depicted in different moments of a particular time in a day, for example, Claude Monet's *Haystacks*. Cole and Gealt (1989) say about Monet and his paintings:

By the late 1870s, he had begun to experiment with series of pictures that allowed him to capture the changes from one time of day to another. Famous for painting outside even in the most inclement weather, he devoted his entire life to the single-minded pursuit of capturing the flux of nature. From his views of trains arriving in the Gare Saint-Lazare to his later series of haystacks, poplars, and water lilies, the changing condition of light – affected by the atmosphere, time of day, and seasons – remained his theme (p.246).

Claude Monet, the founding figure of Impressionist, for example, depicts different visual illusions of the same object or event, the haystacks after harvest, through different colors. Claude Monet, *Haystacks* 1891, (Figure 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10), offer different versions of the same haystacks with different visual perceptions through changing nature of light across various times of day, season, and weathers. Figure 5 depicts the moment captured the effect of the morning, Figure 6 portrays the impression of mid-day and Figure 7 shows the fleeting effect of the evening light. Similarly, Figure 8 represents the seasonal change and Figure 9 the weather. A different effect of the same thing differs because of the colors applied to capture the different momentary depictions of the same object and the events. In a *Marshall Cavendish Weekly Collection* (1995), the columnist writes:

The impressionist Monet, for example, had a scientific interest in color and light. When painting, he tried to forget about the objects in front of him, and to see only in streaks and patches of color, watching how these changed with the varying conditions of light and atmosphere around them. In his late series of waterlilies, he even used color to create a poetic mood.

*Turner like Monet, composed with color rather than contents of tone, and also used color in an abstract way to express a mood. He even used it symbolically, as did Kandinsky himself, painting many dramatic scenes of destruction and salvation with fiery skies. Turner had read and been influenced by Goethe's book *Farben Lehre* ('Theory of Color', 1805-10), which suggests that different colors had different emotional associations. (p. 2538)*

Thus, color can suggest more than any other elements of painting illustrate different states, qualities and natures of the same object and event. Sometimes, the color reveals the external properties of an object, and at times it can render the innermost values. The shapes of certain characters determine some physical attributes of things, but color determines the entirety of the things by adding a more powerful visual sensation. This sensation heightens the emotive expression and intensifies the feelings in the object drawn than the simple sketch of a thing. Similarly, the color becomes the property of an event and idea. That is to say, color represents events, ideas and objects of both of the spheres, i.e., physical and spiritual. This color has meaning and a symbolic function.

The meaning that color carries is universal as well as conventional. It also relies on other than the values that a color implies. Blue refers to the sky, water or nature. It has such a universal meaning that most cultures understand the same. The color white, for instance, suggests happiness and purity in the western convention. According to Sensationalcolor.com, "White projects purity, cleanliness, and neutrality. Doctors don white coats, brides traditionally were white gowns and a white picket fence surrounds a safe and happy home" (Sensationalcolor.com). In the east, it may express quite opposite feature of the cultural significance, sorrow. Kunwar (2064 B. S.) talks of the meaning of white color as "grief and sorrow" (p. 22). The meaning varies according to the variation of space and time. This indicates the arbitrariness of the meaning of color that bears no persistency. At the same time, it also has a pertaining quality that surpasses time and space. That's why color has borne more than its meaning. It has been a visual sign, the metaphor. The meaning that color originates depends upon the type the colors applied.

Classification of Color

Fundamentally, colors are of three types, viz. primary, secondary and tertiary. There are three primary colors. They are red, yellow and blue. The other three are orange, violet and green known as secondary colors which are derived from the combination of the primaries. The third type is identified as tertiary. This category of color consists of six more colors than the first and the second types, but these colors, too, are offshoots of the combination of the primaries and the secondaries. They are red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, and red-violet. Sir Isaac Newton and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe have contributed a lot in the field of light and color.

Newton has defined seven visible rainbow colors acronym, VIBGYOR, i.e., violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red in his experiment with light and prism, whereas, in *Theory of Colors*, Goethe describes twelve colors in Figure 11. Sutton and Bride (2004) write:

The twelve segments of the color wheel consist of primary, secondary, and tertiary hues and their specific tints and shades. With red at the top, the color wheel identifies the three primary hues of red, yellow, and blue. These three primary colors form an equilateral triangle within the circle. The three secondary hues of orange, violet, and green are located between each primary hue and form another triangle. Red-orange,

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yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, and red-violet are the six tertiary hues. They result from the combination of a primary and a secondary hue. (p. 10)



Figure 5 Claude Monet, *Impression: Haystacks* (1891).



Figure 8 Claude Monet, *Impression: Haystacks* (1891).



Figure 6 Claude Monet, *Impression: Haystacks* (1891) Morning Snow Effect.



Figure 9 Claude Monet, *Impression: Haystacks* (1891) End of summer.



Figure 7 Claude Monet, *Impression: Haystacks* (1891).



Figure 10 Claude Monet, *Impression: Haystacks* (1891).

Newton's spectral description of the prismatic color is based on the physics of light; Figure 12, for example, illustrates VIBGYORE and Goethe's on the sensation of eyes. Both of them have helped to find the source of colors and to categorize them according to their origins.

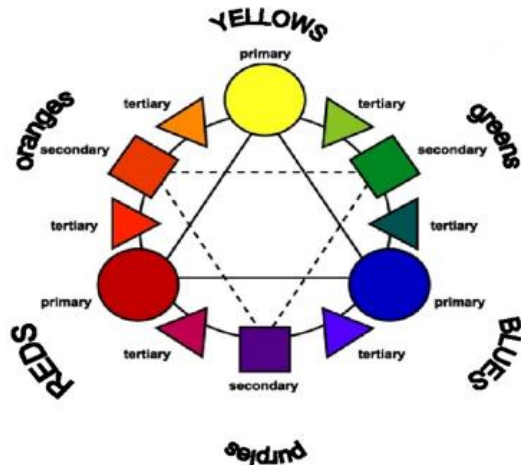


Figure 11 Color wheel. II

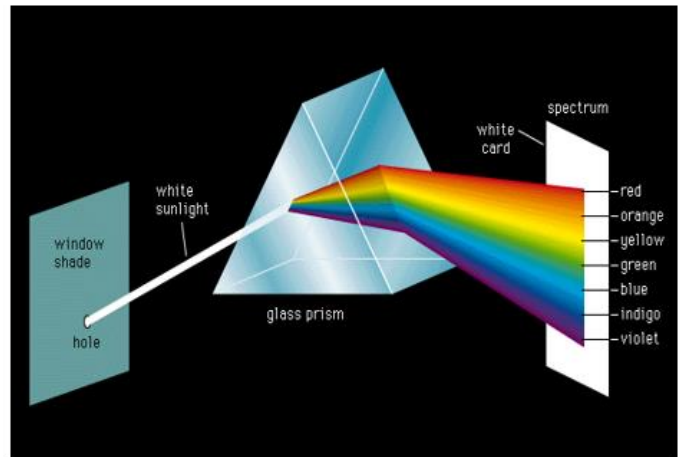


Figure 12 Newton's Prism.

Color Combination, Harmony and Aesthetics

Moreover, further categories of color are originated with color combinations that are known as Aspects of Color. They are the binary oppositions created by the juxtaposed color family. The family of color, too, refers to their roots of origin. Hot and cold, for example, signify the two primary colors red and blue respectively. On the other, warm and cool are the offspring of the same hot and cold. That is to say, all colors containing red are either hot or warm, and those colors which contain blue are cool. There is the uniformity that both of the latter aspects, warm and cool, are based on two primary colors, red and blue. Similarly, both of them need the addition of yellow, another primary color, to be warm and cool. There are other aspects of color. They are light and dark, and pale and bright. The former suggests the absence of visible color and the presence of visible black in composition whereas the latter aspects depend on the amount of white and the amount of pure color that determines pale and bright respectively. Color combinations evoke certain emotional responses because they have influential effects upon the optic receptors. Thus, it is felt and called hot or cold. In *The Complete Color Harmony*, Sutton, and Bride (2004) say:

The aspects, or qualities of color, refer to colors and color combinations that evoke certain emotional responses. We use many words to describe the properties of individual colors and to compare and contrast them, but light and dark is the basic distinction. Without sunlight or artificial light, there is no color. We depend on light for color, which we use in countless combinations to express our ideas and emotions. (p. 15)

It is the combinations of color that express our feelings, and that also evokes certain emotional responses reciprocally. Graham-Dixon (2008) writes:

Many Color Field paintings were intended to create transcendental feelings of awe and wonder... Rothko said his work was about "the basic human emotions – tragedy, ecstasy, doom" ... Color Field painting was intended to create a heightened state of consciousness on the part of the viewer" (p. 502).

The reciprocity of expressions and responses establishes a strong relationship between the visual sensation and the visual sensory receptor. Consequently, it stimulates the nervous system. Sutton and Bride (2004) further say: "Hot colors are strong and aggressive and seem to vibrate within their own space. The power of hot colors affects people in many ways, such as, increasing blood pressure and stimulating the nervous system" (p. 16). It means to say that the expressions and responses both exist within color combinations. The combinations are of two types. One is a combination of harmonious colors, and the other is a combination of contrastive colors. Ocvirk et al. (2002) state:

When listening to music, we find a single note played for a long period of time rather boring. It is not until the composer begins to combine notes in chords that the harmonic relationship of sound is created. All sounds work together differently; some are better than others at creating unique harmonic effects. The same is true for an artist working with color. No color is important in itself; each is always seen on the picture surface in a dynamic interaction with other colors. Combinations and arrangements of color express contrast or meaning. Consequently, any arrangement-objective or nonobjective ought to evoke sensations of pleasure or discomfort because of its well-ordered presentation. (p. 158)

The combination of opposite color families results in contrast. The combination of the intra-color family produces harmony. Harmony is one of the fundamentals of paintings. It avoids incongruity and creates unity in a work of art. Congruent elements of painting coherence and harmonize the whole work. Thus, the harmony comprises forms, colors, textures, and ideas; which are the basics of paintings that constitute organic unity. This color harmony is one of the

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most significant principles of “the inner need”. The harmony, rhythm, and note are the elemental properties of music. This indicates that painting has some attributes of music. These musical properties of painting reside in the combination of color. That results in a positive impact upon the soul. By the same token, color has become one of the aesthetics.

Color as Spirit of Painting

The aesthetic value that colors embodies is best illustrated by Kandinsky in his seminal work, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Kandinsky elaborates color as a means to an end. According to him, eternity is the ultimate destination of painting, especially abstract painting. For color is the spirit of painting, he focuses on color harmony. His dictum dwells on the effect that color produces. He says color produces a dual result, namely, *physical* and *psychic effects*. The first result causes a short-lived superficial sensation that influences the body. Figure 13 has such an effect. The second impresses the mind and the soul deeply. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Arts*, Kandinsky (1977) says:

In the first place, one receives *a purely physical impression*, one of pleasure and contentment at the varied beautiful colors. The eye is warmed or else soothed and cooled. But these physical sensations can only be of short duration. They are merely superficial and leave no lasting impression, for the soul is unaffected. (p. 23)

The first result that color produces is *a purely physical impression* that is superficial and leaves no lasting impression. Kandinsky parallels this to ‘the impression caused by very familiar objects on the ordinary man’.

He further exemplifies it with the inexperienced child observing and disclosing the reality. He further says: “The first encounter with any new phenomenon exercises immediately an impression on the soul. This is the experience of the child discovering the world, to whom every object is new” (p. 23). As the man experiences, slowly and gradually, there remains no enchantment of the first experience. Kandinsky (1977) again says:

As man develops, the circles of experiences caused by different beings and objects grow ever wider. They acquire an inner meaning and eventually a spiritual harmony. It is the same with colors, which make only a momentary and superficial impression on a soul but slightly developed insensitiveness. (p. 24)

This is how Kandinsky classifies human beings and their souls as average, sensitive and more sensitive in the way of acquiring the inner meaning and spiritual harmony in the realm of color.



Figure 13 Peter Paul Rubens, *Head of a Child* (1618). Oil on Canvas (36.83x26.67cm.)

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The second result that color produces is the *psychic effect*. The effect, which impresses the mind and the soul deeply, is a step forward to spirituality though it is also a basic physical impression heading towards the realm of the spirit. Kandinsky (1977) further talks of the second main result of colors:

But to a more sensitive soul, the effect of the colors is deeper and intensely moving. And so, we come to the second main result of looking at colors: their psychic effect. They produce a corresponding spiritual vibration, and it is only as a step towards this spiritual vibration that the elementary physical impression is of importance. (p.24)

The stratification of the soul and the impression of color on respective souls are associated with the psychic effect of color on the human body, mind and soul. Kandinsky (1977) Continues:

The soul being one with the body, the former may well experience a psychic shock, caused by association acting on the latter. For example, red may cause a sensation analogous to that caused by flame, because red is the color of flame. . . . color awakens a corresponding physical sensation, which undoubtedly works upon the soul. (p.24)

Kandinsky theorizes that how color touches and influences the human body and mind. Besides this, he explains the influence of color upon the soul. He further states:

Generally speaking, color is a power that directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul. (p. 25)

This comparative appraisal shows the significance of color in the realm of painting. This color harmony is the spirit of painting. Before concluding the writing, it will be a justice that what Kandinsky states are a must. He says, "It is evident therefore that color harmony must rest only on a corresponding vibration in the human soul, and this is one of the guiding principles of the inner need" (p. 26). He means to say that the spiritual expression is the inner need or the urges of an artist, and that is possible through color harmony.



Figure 14 Laxman Shrestha, *Untitled*. Oil on Canvas Diptych (191 X 280 cms).

Figure 14 affects the soul because it has such color harmony that must rest only on a corresponding vibration in the human soul. Therefore, color is the spirit of painting that makes the work of art lively by putting breath into it. Moreover, the color harmony provides the painting with the soul. Thus, Singh (2032 B. S.) has come across with a deep feeling and says: "Color is life, yes, I feel the same. Color is the life" (p.124). He means to say, life without color is entirely worthless.

Conclusion

Before summing the whole workup, a bit of discussion on light, color and its aspect is a must. Color exists within the existence of light. Where there is light there is color. It seems strange that the white like a beam of light abides the reality of color. Paradoxically, the colorlessness of light becomes the source of origin for the realm of color. Light not only brings forth the existence of color but also helps to perceive its reality. Thus, light kills two birds with one stone by giving birth to color and simultaneously by helping to perceive it with the optic. The invention of Newton

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has become an axiom since the seventeenth century onwards that no objects have colors of their own; instead, light determines the color of an object. This is clearly illustrated by Impressionist execution of paintings capturing the state of the constant flux of nature, light and atmosphere what Monet calls ‘the most fleeting effects.

Color combination in painting is concerned with Aestheticism. Color attracts the attention of a beholder. The color beauty sustains the undivided attention of the beholder. This is how color invites for constant and willful participation in and within the painting. Thus, the color heightens the degree of emotion and leads to contemplation in a certain magnitude. The contemplation opens up the way to the journey of eternity. All this is possible through the musical elements created by color harmony that becomes able to express the inner need, at the same time; it becomes able to touch the inner feelings. The feelings affect and influence the experience of the spectator. The certain experience is related to the human body, mind and soul. Thus, it reflects upon soul-touching feelings. That’s why color is the spirit of the paintings.

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