

# FOREWORD

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A world without colour is not just a drab and dreary world, it is also a dangerous, **unpredictable** world in which it is easy to be poisoned. Colour, as Angela Wright emphasizes in this book, is in some way telling us about the chemical compositions of objects – if you like, a form of psychological spectroscopy. That colour alone is the principal cue to composition is easily seen by changing the colour of objects and observing our response to them. The Colour Museum, based in Bradford, had an advertising leaflet which showed simply a plate of attractive-looking food in one half, and in the other half a monochrome version of the same plate. Now the peas were grey, the broccoli almost black, and the off-white potatoes marked with grey patches. If we were presented with that wrongly coloured food, although rationally we would all know it was the same food, more than likely it would still stick in our throat. As a medical student in Birmingham, I remember boiling potatoes, dividing them into four batches, dyeing them red, orange, green and blue with food colouring and then putting them in the oven for a few minutes to toughen the outsides a little and disguise their origin. At dinner, the guests were told that the vegetables had been bought at a range of the local ethnic shops. The red and orange potatoes were much enjoyed, the green were not so popular and the blue were hardly touched.

This may seem logically irrational, but actually it makes immensely good biological sense. We have many million years of evolution helping us to spot those foods which are good to eat – the ripe, red apples – rather than those which will make us ill – the meat that is green in colour, or the potatoes with blue-black patches on the outside. Without colour, those tasks would not be possible and we would have survived less well. It is therefore hardly surprising that we have innate responses to colour, and that these are often difficult to verbalize. Nevertheless, that does not make them any less real or any less important.

What is surprising – and again Angela emphasizes the point correctly – is how little psychologists have been concerned with the effects of colour upon behaviour. Of course physicists, biochemists, physiologists and neuroscientists now have an exquisitely sophisticated theory of how we see colour, but there the theories stop. Few colour scientists seem to have

any theory of what colour is really for and how it affects people beyond its mere perception. Few would be willing to go into a do-it-yourself store on a Saturday afternoon and say anything terribly sensible about the behaviour of the myriads of people all trying to find 'just the right colour' to paint the bathroom, the kitchen or the bedroom; or to explain the behaviour of shoppers looking for the right combination of blouse and skirt, or shirt and tie, so that the colours 'go together'. Most scientists simply do not see such questions as important. Just because a bathroom could, in principle, be painted any colour, it therefore does not seem sensible or worthwhile to ask why it **matters** which particular colour has in fact been used. But of course it does matter. It matters not because the functionality of the bathroom, as a room for removing the dirt and grime of everyday life, would be affected, but because colour tells us something important about ourselves, about the underlying **way** we are organized and, probably, about how we got to be this **way over** aeons of evolution. Colour also, of course, properly used, makes us feel better and makes the world look better, and that is no mean result either.

Angela Wright is, as she says herself 'obviously passionate about colour'. She also trained as a psychologist, although, as she candidly admits, that taught her almost nothing about colour, since there were then and still are few psychologists who consider colour psychology – or indeed questions of aesthetics and beauty in general – as important, and the topic is still hardly mentioned in degree courses. What is important about Angela is that she has 'a good eye for colour' and that, like any scientist, she likes continually to ask, 'Why?' When she sees colours that work well together she asks why their particular combination is successful, she asks why the multitude of blues are all different from one another in their effects, and she asks why the same colour works well in one environment, such as a supermarket, but not in another, such as a maximum security prison. And of course over the years she has developed her own theory as to why these things happen.

It is that theory which is presented in this book. Perhaps the central innovation of Angela's theory is that it does not **emphasize** the difference between colours for which we have words – **red, blue, yellow**, etc. – but the differences between the many forms of each of those colours – the slightly greenish blue which is a little darker and a little less saturated than the other one. This is relatively unexplored territory, in part because of the very obvious difficulty of description. It is not, however, a scientific theory. There are no experiments, no proofs, no careful testing of claims and counter-claims, no statistics, no graphs, no tables of figures. Instead there is just the encapsulated experience of someone who has spent

many years pondering what colour is really about, and what are the rules that seem to work for it. As such, it is therefore the product of an artist, not a scientist, someone distilling a lifetime of personal experience. That, of course, does not mean it will not be of use to scientists.

Science in general, and psychology in particular, have changed over the past forty or fifty years. Once it was commonplace to say that if a phenomenon had no obvious scientific explanation then it must be wrong. A nice example concerns walking on a tightrope. Walking on a tightrope one foot above the ground is not that difficult, even for an amateur, but walking on one fifty feet above the ground is exceedingly difficult, as even professional tightrope walkers will explain. The clever theoretical physicist points out that the laws of balance and motion are identical in the two situations and that therefore there is no objective reason why one situation should be more difficult than the other. In fact, the explanation of the environmental psychologist is much more interesting and accepts the experience of the expert as valid. Balance depends critically on visual feedback, principally in the form of the visual flow-field, and that is less effective fifty feet above the ground. The experience of the expert transcends the simplistic view of the theoretical scientist.

Psychologists have learned, therefore, to listen to experts who have spent their lives working on specific problems, and the psychology of expertise also teaches us about the abilities and potentials of non-experts. Angela Wright is one such expert, an expert on colour. In this book she has set down, explicitly, carefully and with a wealth of example, her own formulation of how colours affect us. That is invaluable to the psychologist trying to study the effects of colour. It is also very brave, as it means that we will now be able to ask whether the rules that Angela finds are applicable to all people in all situations (and of course they may not be – that is the risk of setting oneself up for scientific investigation), and, if not, what are their limitations. If they do apply generally, then that will raise questions about process and mechanism. Scientists interested in colour will therefore thank her for her experiences. For everyone else, and that includes the scientists as well, her book will also make us think more carefully about every decision we make in our daily lives about the colours of rooms, clothes or whatever. Instead of acting without thought, we will ask why we are choosing a particular colour. And in so doing we will discover a little more of the richness of the world of colour, a world which artists have known about since the dawn of recorded history.

*THE  
BEGINNER'S  
GUIDE TO  
COLOUR  
PSYCHOLOGY*

ANGELA WRIGHT

with a foreword by Chris McManus,  
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Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all  
ye know on earth, and all ye need to know

*Ode on a Grecian Urn*

John Keats 1795–1821

This book is dedicated to Baba, with love

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