

# A Medley in the Spectrum: Color Names

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[To my mentor and my friend Wilhelm Nicolaisen, who has many times dragged me clear of onomastic disasters, I dedicate this small token of my respect for his great mastery of scholarship in many disciplines and also for his witty and colorful personality]

Color names can all be called metaphorical and have come about in accord with human concepts of reality or realities. They are also arbitrary; and probably in common with all names, they have no real relationship with the material, but they take on a reification of their own. So far, lexicographers have not accepted the advertising nomenclature, preferring to rely on earlier names and on chemical synthetic bases of natural pigments. Occasionally, the base or original color combinations take on the name of the mixer, *Bice* being an instance, from the name of the originator, Nathan Bice, although advertisers generally ignore original names and freely substitute their own preferences.

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Recently, after mentioning that I had collected a folder of clippings that list color names, Sean Bice, a student, told me that his father, Norman Bice, had blended some hues that now carry his name. A check of the National Bureau of Standard's listings showed the entries of Blue Bice (Bice Blue), Bice Green, and Light Bice Green. I also learned that the trained human eye in good daylight can distinguish about ten million surface colors.<sup>1</sup> Only a small fraction have been given names. In fact, color names seem to have come into existence slowly. Bernard Groom claims that the "Primitive Indo-European vocabulary contains only one or two names of colours; these are represented by the Anglo-Saxon *read* (red) and *geolu* (yellow)."<sup>2</sup> This assertion should be challenged, but certainly until recent years color names were in short supply.

For many purposes, colors need to be understood with degrees of accuracy and within systems, color being only an approximation of the ingredients but capable of being described in practice and measurements of reflected light. Colors, then, are categorized into dimensions or scales. These are hues (red, yellow, purple, etc.), value (lightness--light, dark, very dark), and chroma (saturation--grayish, strong, vivid).<sup>3</sup> The generic colors (elementary ones) are purple, red, yellow, blue, and green, with shades of black, white, and gray, plus five neutrals between the solids to give thirteen basics, known as level 1. At level 2 of color interpretation, all hues and neutrals are designated, to give 29. An example would be "yellowish brown." At level 3, modifiers are added, such as "light yellowish brown," to give 269 types. Beyond that, levels 4, 5, and 6 make use of color-order systems and visual interpolation. At level 6 colors are instrumentally

interpolated and numbered. In the Munsell system, about 5,000,000 designations have resulted from instrumental measurement.

Obviously, these designations have numbers; but in a looser system, we make do with names in linear print or in timed speech. Such names in English number in the thousands, with more being added constantly. The *Color Dictionary (ISCC-NBS)* lists about 7,500 approved names, some of which overlap, reducing the hues themselves to the 269 types. My own collection includes a few thousand more which are not keyed to color measurements or accepted by the ISCC.<sup>4</sup> The proliferation of color names (not to be confused with hues, values, and chromas) parallels the “explosion” in technology and industry, especially those of fashion, ceramics, printing, and packaging, the latter a function of advertising promotion.

For instance, an advertisement for dog leashes indicates that they come in colors of Airedale Gold, Beagle White, Cocker Green, Hound Gray, Kerry Blue, Poodle Pink, Scotty Black, and Setter Red, the leash to match the dog.<sup>5</sup> Such names reflect cultural concepts that do not always exist in reality, but no doubt the advertiser believed that a relationship could be established between the name and the color and an owner of a dog in need of a leash. Brown, the name of one of my childhood dogs, is no longer good enough for Fido. Deconstructing these names would be a good exercise, although little would be gained. Nevertheless, poodles are cute, and in our culture so are pink things, usually, and here alliteration helps. Hounds are gray, sort of, while airedales have black-and-tan fur, near enough to gold. Beagles come in black, tan, or white, but “white” is a purity symbol. Green has nothing to do with cocker spaniels, nor to the underlying “wood-cock” starter with Spanish origin. The kerry does have a bluish fur, while some setters are tannish, and some scotties are black.

Sociologists and psychologists have answers to the reasons why colors appeal to women or why they are believed to. Perhaps they appeal to men more, and women have culturally adjusted to the lavish use of splashy color to attract them. Although men turn to jellyfish in the presence of certain scents, they also become goggle-eyed and randy when fanciful and appealing colors somehow move into their vision. Whatever the reasons, women’s clothes and toiletries contain “sexy” names, ones that suggest a range of physical activities and psychological tingles. Whether men pay much attention to nail polish is a moot point, but Nude nails may carry perilous possibilities, much as ones painted by the “Nail Color Wand” with Winking Star, a “flirtatious saucy pink,” or Cupid’s Dart, “a pearlescent coral, flecked with lights,” all making appropriate hormones scurry to their ultrasensitive positions. As far as body painting goes, and it can go a long way, nail painting surely does not move the universe very much. Something, nonetheless, lurks behind such names as Captive Lightning, Cupid’s Moon, Electra, Celestial Fire, Lucifer (Fallen Angel), Pulse of Venus, Holocaust (“from the first of infinity. . . mysterious, deep, compulsive”), and Liquid Stars.<sup>6</sup> These metaphorical names carry throbbing connotations, made

wonderfully illicit by their satanic references to blood images of “clear red with sinful warmth” and body pulsations. A hint of sexual kinkiness quivers tantalizingly over suggestive “flecks,” “flaming deep red, “restless fire,” “charged with impulses,” and the like descriptions of the colors.

Lately approved ISCC names include many that supposedly allure or, the advertiser hopes, seduce the buyer. If the name is affective, then it follows in advertising reason that the product will be effective. Nocturne Murmur will nudge out Asphalt Black every time. The approved names contain ones that can be either thought of as applied to both feminine and masculine traits. For women can be included Allure (a light blue), Flirtation, Blue Tease, Nude, Love Light, Essence of Romance, Hooker’s Green, Bunny, Pick-me-up, Stormy Night, Bewitch, among hundreds more, plus Jealousy, a sour note. Among the many macho attributes are Ascot, Billiard, Cowboy, Cigarette, Executive Black, Heather, Fairway, Galleon, Lariat, Blue Denim, Mogul, Mesa, Pampas, and Saddle. Nevertheless, most of the color names usually are attached to feminine objects and needs.

The names do not categorize easily, for they are concerned with things and emotions together. Metonymical names show to best advantage when they are categorized, although many resist listing into groups. As color mixers worked, they had to give visual names to their results, which led to sometimes erotic ones that namers associated, often freely, with persons, objects, emotions, and conditions, connotations far removed from the mixtures themselves. Some, too, are theme categories. For instance, the “New French Revolution” in hair color and styling allowed copywriters to indulge in a bit of French history: Marie Antoinette Apricot, Danton Brown, Robespierre Red, and Revolutionarie Black.<sup>7</sup> In some groupings, however, the names of colors have some kind of color relationship with the color name that is displaced. When plant names, for instance, become substitutes for color hues, the color relations pertains to the flower or the fruit, such as Ageratum, Canna, Arbutus, Campanula (Bellflower), Canary (flower), and Apple blossom are examples. Color substitutes that involve colors of fruits, nuts, bark, or foliage include Acorn, Alfalfa, Blackberry, Cedar, Eggplant, Gooseberry, Tomato, Tobacco, and Wheat as examples.

Animals, fowl, and fish have long made their contributions, generally in reference to the color of their hair, feathers, or skin: Beaver, Bear, Canary, Chinchilla, Chipmunk, Hummingbird, Flea (same as Eureka Red), Fox, Pink Shrimp, Shagbark, and Quail serve as a small selection of the many such color names. A few derive from faunal partials, such as Pigeon’s Blood, Pigskin, Beaver Pelt, Dragon’s Blood (if faunal and not fantastical), Oxheart, Coquelicot (“cock’s comb”), Sheepskin, Kitten’s Ear, and Sang de Boeuf. Golden Fleece still appears, too. Pigskin could be placed in a sports category, along with Basketball (a vivid violet, which makes no sense, even after the experiment with red, white, and blue colored basketballs a few years ago), Hockey (a vivid red, just as mysterious), and Tennis (Yellow).

Placenames occur often: Aden (in Saudi Arabia), Afghan, African,

Aegean Mist, London Fog, Bermuda, Baghdad (grayish red), Baltic (black), Arctic (black), Nubian (black), Persian Pink, Dutch Blue, and Monticello. Native Americans have a fair representation, usually attributive: Aztec (tan and maroon), Inca Gold, Cuyahoga Red, Yucatan (brownish orange), Mohawk (moderate reddish brown and moderate brown), Mohawk Trail (green), And Navaho (vivid orange for "sun"). Apache, Pueblo, Seminole, and Toltec are browns. Hiawatha probably belongs in a literary category and is personal, not tribal, but alludes to the pastoral, hence "moderate bluish green." Wigwam is a brown.

Major places of education are usually represented by school colors: Cambridge Red and blue, Eton Blue, Harvard Crimson, Rugby Tan, Princeton Orange, Vassar Rose and Tan, Yale Blue, and Oxford (blue, chrome, gray, and ochre, all depending on what the object is). ISCC includes the Army-Navy-Air Force standard colors: Academy Blue, Admiral (black and darkish purple), Air Blue, Aircraft Gray, Army Brown, Boottopping (gray, green), Cartridge Buff (same as color of putty), Olive Drab, Engine Gray, Gunmetal, Insignia Blue, and Navy (several hues). Religious vocabulary has provided many color names, among them Bishop (eight hues with the name), Cardinal (reinforced by the name of the bird), Cloister, Angel Blue, Celestial Blue, Monkshood, Madonna, Vatican, Sistine, Puritan Grey, Promised Land, and Padre Brown. Satan has a representation, including Devil's Red and Demon Blue.

Minerals and chemicals, including dyes, have become prominent as suppliers of names. Some come directly from the laboratory and have multiplied in profusion, while the minerals have been around for the ages. Editorial space precludes the listing of and commenting on many of the names, although a short selection will suffice to intimate their modernity and importance. Parenthetically, glosses of most of the ones noted here can be found in modern dictionaries (*Random House*, *Webster's*, *Webster's New World*), although it may be necessary in some cases to use an unabridged one. Acetin Blue, a chemical name, is a colorless, thick, gyroscopic liquid, used chiefly in explosives. Acier (light grayish olive) is French, "steel." Traditional and synthetic colors include such names as Alizarine, Aluminum, Aniline, Annatto, Anthracene, Arsenate, Azurite, Aureolin, Aurantiacus, Chrysoprase, Cartouche, Magenta, Testaceus (from shells), Plumbago, Tumeric, Kermes (a red dye from dried bodies of female insects, *Kermes ilices*), Curcuma, Ethyl Blue, Soot, Indigo (dye of various hues), Javel, Epsom, Ferruginous (iron rust), Thulite, Verdigris, Verditer, Wad ("a soft earthy black to dark-brown mass of manganese oxide minerals"), and Zinc.

Classical names have been popular with advertisers for many years; their use to sell spoons, houses, automobiles, television sets, neckties, and all "things" is well known. Objects called "classical" carry prestige value because of certain traditions and mind sets. The symbol is being sold, not necessarily the object. The color names in this category tend to carry connotations of perfection, a patina of gloss that appeals and makes the

material more desirable to some persons: Classic, Pan, Aphrodite, Athena, Bacchus, Olympia, Urania, King Neptune, Atlantis, Mars, Venus, and the whole pantheon of gods imagined by the Greeks. State names occur: Arizona, Indiana, California, Virginia, and Michigan. All seasons appear (Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter), with many varieties. Liquors and wines lead themselves easily to splash and high spirits: Liquor Green, Liquor, Absinthe, Mirabelle (dry, white plum brandy from the Alsace region), Marsala, Alkermes (brandy flavored with nutmeg), Bordeaux, Burgundy, plus many more.

Eponyms occur, too, sometimes twice or thrice removed from the person from whom the name is derived. For instance, Begonia, a paint, is a direct transfer from the flower, gardenia, after Michel Begon (1638-1710), French patron of science. The color Camellia extends from the name of the flower, itself for G. J. Camellus, Jesuit missionary who brought the plant from Asia to Europe. Cattleya takes its name from an orchid named for William Cattley (died 1832), English botany enthusiast. Cudbear (violet coloring ingredient from lichens) is based on the name of Dr. Cuthbert Gordon, 18th Century Scottish chemist. A short list, obviously only a sampling, of other color eponyms follows: Dahlia, du Barry, Forsythia, Fuchsia, Gardenia (after Alexander Garden), Gentian (perhaps after Gentiana, an Illyrian king), Gloxenia, Maid of Orleans (pinks), Maintenon, Mazarine Blue, Thenard's Blue, Rejane Green (French actress Gabrielle-Charlotte Reju), Scheele's Green, Saxe green, Lumiere, Pompadour, Lobelia, Raphael, Rembrandt, Sorolla, Monet Blue, Goya, Van Dyke, and Watteau. *The Night Watch* is the only painting that furnished the same name for a color. Painted by Rembrandt in 1642, it is also known as "The Company of Captain Franz Banning Cog" and is a blackish-green.

As expected, many color names come from artists, but few from literature, Byron ("dark grayish yellowish brown") and Dante (three pinks) being the only two poets. A few other allusions include Titania, King Lear, Sleepy Hollow, Blue Prose, Avon, Candide, Fable, Myth, and Poet's Yellow. From dance come Ballerina, Sarabad, Fandango, and Tango. Music and song contribute Fantasia, Fanfare, Lullaby, Ballad Blue, Melodious, Rhapsody, and Sonata. Many oddities appear: Bastard Saffron (same as Artillery), a vivid red, is one, but does not appear in regular dictionary listings, although Bastard Amber does, as a color (pinkish) in stage lighting. Listed are also Post Office Red, Government Wall Green, and National School Bus Chrome, all three facing everyday reality. Feuille Morte (deep orange, brown orange, and brownish orange) comes from the French, but in English it turns up with some folk spellings, such as Fillemot, Phyliamort, Phyllamort, Filemot, with such translations as Dead Leaf, Autumn Leaf, and Withered Leaf. No pattern is discernible in Bikini, Teen Age Pink, Lagoon, Television Blue, Cuisse de Nympe ("thigh of a nymph, colored ivory), Gretna Green (a romantic place in Scotland to which English couples eloped to marry), King, Queen, but no President. It is said that President Ronald Reagan responded to women

reporters who wore red, Nancy Reagan's favorite color. In order to entice the President to respond, "newswomen at Reagan's news conference wore dresses and blouses in rosy hues," but no Reagan Red resulted.<sup>8</sup>

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#### Notes

1. Kenneth L. Kelly and Deane B. Judd, *Color: Universal Language and Dictionary of Names*, National Bureau of Standards Publication 440 (Washington, D. C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1976), p. 2. Also referred to was A. Maerz and M. Rea Paul, *A Dictionary of Color*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1930).
2. *A Short History of English Words* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), p. 14.
3. Kelly and Judd, p. A-1.
4. The Inter-Society Color Council (ISCC) "consists of delegates from 20 societies of national scope interested in color." Kelly and Judd, p. iii. The members and societies are listed.
5. Phon-O-Leash Co., advertisement, *New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1959, pp. 14-S, cols. 6-7.
6. Abraham & Strauss advertisement, *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1960, Sec. 1, p. 17, cols. 5-8.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Watertown, New York, *Daily Times*, Apr. 8, 1982, p. 2, col. 1.