

The distinctive characteristics of color perception in the Eastern and Western cultural tradition

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Abstract. This article examines the diversity of color, from conveying one's esthetic preferences and the ability to make an emotional impact upon the human psyche to its role in getting across amplified figurativeness and informativeness and fulfilling the symbolic function. Color, which sends out signals, having become a sort of a link between the human and cosmological worlds, where light and color were perceived as the attributes of the divine, has turned into a significant information function. In this article, the authors speculate on apprehending the world of color, which is a harmony of color combinations and specific tones perceived by every nation in its own way, depending on its cultural traditions and experience. The authors have made an attempt to investigate the notional-conceptual content of color and identify the distinctive characteristics and role of color symbols in the cultures of the West and the East.

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Introduction

The biological function of color defines its role, as well, in the spiritual life of human society, which is but expressed in the ability to make an emotional impact on the human psyche [1]. The psychology of perception and color are two crucial interrelated and interdependent categories. “Color per se,” wrote Goethe, “arouses great joy in people.” [2]. The fact that color carries great expressiveness is beyond the shadow of a doubt. There have been attempts in the history of science to describe specific moods inherent in color and draw some conclusions concerning their symbolic use in cultures [3]. In functional psychology, which was reflected in the Lüscher color test, the primary meaning of color remains permanent. This structure is construed as color's “objective meaning”. Dark-blue, for instance, stands for “quiescence/rest”. On the contrary, Professor Lüscher used the term “function” to denote a “subjective position relative to color”, which is different for different people. One individual may find a color pleasant, while it can seem boring to another, and a third may be indifferent to it, whereas a fourth may find it absolutely repulsive [4].

Methods

This article employs the historical and descriptive methods and the method of stylistic analysis of works.

Main Part

When studying the history of the arts of various peoples of the world, their rites, we come to apprehend a whole spectrum of color preferences in various cultures, every one of them having its distinctive characteristics. If, according to V. Turner, virtually all primitive cultures in the world evince a predilection for a specific color triad, with time each of the cultures finds its own profile and forms a special notion of the coloristic ideal [5]. Color sends out simple and complex signals, and we reflexively react to them inside. Color can be attractive and repulsive, soothing and disturbing, alluring or exciting [6].

Color can fulfill the role of an informative code. The following relics speak of the significance of color as a sign that carries information. A long javelin near a yurt with a large kerchief tied to it signaled that someone in that yurt had died. If the deceased person was young they would use a red flag, if middle-aged – a black one, and if it was an old person – a white one. And, on the contrary, if a festive white flag decorated with appliques in the form of curls, little circles, triangles, and crosslike shapes made of red, blue, and black cloth, it was a message saying that someone was celebrating. The yurt's exterior design, its color carried important information too. A wedding yurt would be covered with white felt blankets in token of wishing one a happy life and prosperity and was distinguished by a brighter ornamental design of the ribbons and stripes.

The above examples indicate that in people's consciousness there accumulated mythological notions (cosmogony), which have their origins in the color symbolism of primitive peoples, the ancient world, when color was viewed as a symbol of the universal elements.

Since earliest times, color had been a sought-after medium, a symbolic code, and at the later stages of cultural tradition it became a sort of a link between the human and cosmological worlds, where light and color were perceived as attributes of the divine; its pieces were widely captured in various mythological texts and rituals, in rituals related to birth and rearing.

Color was of special interest in Sufi ideology. Color theory exists in almost all Sufi orders – it was, in particular, reflected in the works of Yassawi, Bektash, and Kubra [7]. Followers of Sufism, a mystical strand of Islam, developed popular notions of colors and their essence to the level of shapely theories, which indicates the importance of color in Islamic culture. Al-Farabi (872-950) believed that colors come into being on the surface of a body under the action of a source of light, for colors do not reside but in the body itself. Furthermore, colors are possible only in the mundane world, while celestial bodies, just like the primary elements and elemental bodies do not have color. The color of celestial bodies comes into being as a result of the merging of various elements that form these bodies. The presence of an element of fire element imparts white and that of earth – black.

Ibn Sina (980-1037) dedicated a whole section of his treatise “Kitab Al-Shifa” (“The Book of Healing”) to issues related to visual perception and color. In his view, light forms a necessary part of the visible substance we call “color” (K.S. Vasilsov). Apparently, a color observed by humans is the product of the interaction of light and a potential color.

At the core of a theory by prominent Sufi Ala' ad-Dawla as-Simnani is a path of perfecting one's soul, which consists of seven different substances (each is protected by its own prophet). As a Sufi gets over each station, he sees a certain color, which is an indicator of his level of spiritual perfection. Depending on the type of person, one gets over the stages one by one. Stage 1 – the body (*qalab*) – Prophet Adam – black; Stage 2 – the soul (*nafs*) – Prophet Nuh – blue; Stage 3 – the heart (*qalb*) – Prophet Ibrahim – red; Stage 4 – conscience (*sirr*) – Prophet Musa – white; Stage 5 – the spirit (*ruh*) – Prophet Dawud – yellow; Stage 6 – the hidden/mysterious/arcane (*khafi*) – Prophet Isa – black; Stage 7 – the most hidden arcane/mysterious (*akhfa*) – Prophet Muhammad – green. The last

substance is emerald-green, scintillating, yet again substantiating the privileged status of green [7].

Najmuddin Kubra, a prominent Sufi of the 8th century, a scholar who left behind a rich legacy in multiple sciences, the author of Laṭā'if theory, also viewed a Sufi's state of spirit in its correspondence with specific color characteristics.

According to Kubra's teaching, “the Cosmos consists of an invisible center, which is in the midst of consciousness, feelings, the spirit, and the body”. A Sufi, by means of special exercises, has to feel and see that center, which is the product of changing the state, form, and color. The spiritual state of a *murid* (a disciple) has to go through three component parts: the circle, the spot, and the dot. The circle is the Universe, the spot is the image of the world, and the dot is the center (*wahdat*) of the Universe. The apprehension of the dot's essence is the apprehension of the essence of the divine world. This scheme comprising the circle, the spot, and the dot is in constant motion and is also associated with specific colors interchanging from the periphery to the center. According to Kubra, colors interchange in the following way: “white – yellow – blue – green – red – black. These seven colors are linked with *murid*'s seven states of spirit. White – Islam, yellow – *yiman* (conscience), blue – *eheon* (gift), blue – *imtinon* (faith), green – *yimon* (full faith), red – *irfon* (knowledge), black – *hairat*, *hayazhon* (astonishment, admiration), i.e. each color has a specific meaning, denotes a certain symbol” [7]. A special focus in Kubra's theory is on colorlessness. It symbolizes the attainment of the goal “*haqiqat*” – a true unity with the divine world, the truth. The soul's consistent transition from one state to another (from one color to another) is the perfection of the soul. The development of the theory of a “color” state of mind (based on Kubra's teaching) is called “*Ta'awwun*”, and a state of true unification with the divine world is called “*Tamkin*” [7]. On the whole, Laṭā'if theory reflects the special role of artistic-religious thinking, which reproduces the path of perfecting the human soul in correspondence with specific color gradations. Such theories, which are based on earliest cosmological notions, where each of the celestial spheres had its own specific color, testify to how high the status of color was in the system of medieval religious-worldview notions.

Items of Moslem decorative-and-applied art are distinguished by contrastive combinations of local tones (cloths, rugs, ceramic dishware, jewelry, etc.). The aspiration towards working out the subtlest tinctures, the use of complex coloristic combinations underlining the artistic merit of rugs indicate that colors now played a decorative – not symbolic – role.

White, black, and red are considered the ABC of color or “ancient” colors.

In different cultures, the number of “primary” colors is different. The Ancient East saw the path of perfecting the human soul being in correspondence with specific color gradations of the 7-element world, and, on the contrary, Leonardo, for instance, has 6 colors (red, yellow, blue, green, white, and black), Newton has 7, and Itten (a “Bauhaus” school teacher) has singled out 3 primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. The color spectrum is a harmony of color combinations and specific tones, which are perceived and apprehended by various nations in their own way.

Moving on to the Western perception of color, we would like to note that the Old Testament construes white as nearness to and kinship with the Divine light. Therefore, the significance of white in Christianity is really high; white is equated to white light, light being associated in Christianity with all kinds of good, pureness, mind, virtue, and, first and foremost, God.

The hypothesis on Divine energy emanating from the icons during a prayer has its origins in Byzantine culture. There were three esthetic categories in Byzantium: light, beauty, and the wonderful. Light was the main category and was divided into visible and spiritual. Since icons were one of the means of cognizing God, communicating with Him, they also served as an artistic-esthetic form of embodying Divine Light. In Christianity, there was created a whole system of symbols denoting its most essential principles. The color symbolism of garments in the Catholic Church spoke of the status of its owner: purple – for the cardinal, white – for the popes. Purple is a symbol of power, clergy, and grandeur. When white was added to red, the purport of color symbolism remained the same, but it added information on the roots of one’s aristocratic, noble descent. White horses were yoked to chariots when they celebrated the triumph of a victor, who was wearing a red coat [8].

Red is a symbol of war, prowess, courage, fearlessness. Red in Christianity is ambivalent – it symbolizes Christ’s loyalty to and love for people and his blood shed in the name and for the sake of saving people, but it also symbolizes the sinful blood of the devil, hell and death, anger, vengeance, retaliation.

Purple, just like in Ancient Rome, was a kingly color, a sign of the highest merit, power, might, and nobility.

In literary tradition, in the words of M. Surina, “purple (purpureal) inks were a traditional symbol suggestive of Christ’s upcoming sacrifice. At the same time, they could symbolize not revival

and freedom but the killing of a human being (Niketas Choniates, the 12th c.). In this regard, the purple color of royal garments was perceived as the color of blood and executions”.

Brown and grey were the colors of common people. Their symbolic meaning, especially in the early Middle Ages, was really negative. They stood for poverty, hopelessness, malignity, hideousness, etc. During that period, the attitude towards color as a magical medium persevered. This, above all, pertains to medieval alchemy. Colors in alchemy were divided into the “highest” and “lowest”. The “highest” colors included the colors of the known “triad” – white, black, and red [8]. They symbolized the three stages of the “Great Transformation”, the primal matter (black), quicksilver (white), and sulfur (red), the end-result of which was the creation of the “stone” (gold). Black corresponds to the stage of fermentation, decay, darkening, contrition, white – a state of enlightenment, ascendance, revelation, and forgiveness, and red – the stage of suffering, exaltation, and love. Gold stood for glory [8]. Black was considered the main, original color (begetting the rest of the colors) in this triad. The rest of the colors made up the group of the “lowest” or “secondary”. In the art of the Roman period, we still trace the attitude towards color as the carrier of particular symbolic notions. The visual art of this period includes mosaics, frescos, and icons. Wall painting was represented by two major schools: the “school of light tones” and the “school of blue tones”. The schools differed in the color of the background. The “school of light tones” was mainly dominated by the pale yellow background in drawings, while the “school of blue tones”, accordingly, adhered to having the blue background against the backdrop of vegetation ornament. The color scheme is dominated by: yellow ochre, red ochre, carmine, white lead, black and grey. Gold, as was noted above, was the material carrier of light.

In the design of churches, major emphasis was on colored stained glass, which let through light and filled spaces with a colorful glimmer associated with transcendental beauty, the divine world.

The age of the High Renaissance is associated with a new stage in the development of color symbolism. Thus, in particular, there came into being the first color systems dealing with man’s psychological qualities. In the works of Gian Paolo Lomazzo (the 15th c.), a certain color corresponded to the mould of a person’s character, his temperament: white – phlegmatic, black – melancholic, red – sanguine, and yellow – choleric. Garments in that period are characterized by the contrast of color combinations: red and green with a white finish. The

rich wore garments in three-four or more colors: blue, red with green, gold and white.

During the Baroque and Rococo period, the color scheme of interiors was built on a combination of dilute pastel shades: white, red, pink, and blue with a yellow accent.

During the period of Classicism (Empire), interiors were dominated by the following color scheme: green, pink, purple with a gold accent, sky-blue; color again became the object of interest for scientists. Thus, in 1676 Sir Isaac Newton [9], using a three-faceted prism, dispersed white sunlight into a rainbow of colors. This spectrum of colors contained all colors but purple.

The 18th century saw the emergence of one more science that deals with color – physiological optics. G. de Buffon introduced the concept of “subjective colors”, i.e. colors which some external object does not match. Subjective colors were construed as various color illusions – for instance, color sensations occurring when pressing the eyebulb. The 18th century can be considered the starting point for the third component of teachings on color – the psychology of color.

In 1810, Johann Wolfgang Goethe published his 1400-page “Treatise on Color”. Goethe viewed color in an integrated fashion – within the context of psychology and physiology.

Conclusion

Proceeding from the above, we should note that certain patterns and phenomena, which were expressed through sign-symbols, were laid down in the origins of the cultural traditions of various peoples. Mankind was concerned with color’s energetic nature (physics), processes of the human eye’s perception of light and its transformation into color (physiology), the perception of light and its action upon the psyche (psychology), and color’s role in the life activity of living and vegetable organisms (biology). But still a special mission had been reserved for color in art, customs, and rites [10].

On the whole, the history of the Western culture of color, the role of its symbolism in cultural tradition has substantial distinctive characteristics, compared with, for instance, the symbolism of color in the East. Yet, at the same time, there can also be traced an affinity of a number of views. We shall examine them in some detail below.

For instance, green had been in many cultures a symbol of blooming nature and rejuvenation. In Scythian culture, a white horse symbolized might and the well-being of the people,

and Romans would yoke only white horses to their chariots during victory celebrations.

Still, the main thing we would like to stress is exalting the merit of white to the level of the divine. In icon painting, they covered with gold the composition’s elements which were the carriers of divine Light. The Eastern cultural tradition is distinguished by a similar approach to using white. Light in the East is the world’s highest and single principle; light turns into a cosmological principle, pours out its beauty upon the world, making it wonderful.

Results

Summing up, we would like to note that in terms of the notional-conceptual content of color, in European culture color was, first and foremost, a sign of the esthetic principle, while in Eastern – sacral. Such an attitude towards color, as the carrier of sacral mysteries, has been maintained at all stages of the development of Eastern civilizations, irrespective of which interchanging religious systems ruled.

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