

# Color and Design



Wild Apple Graphics: Fara Bell, "Odyssey of Red and Yellow"

By Vivian Kistler, CPF, GCF

**A**s a new season of design approaches, manufacturers must grapple once again with decisions about the shape, size, style, and color of their new products.

Color is often the most difficult choice. The color of a product is more significant than its shape. When entering a room the color is seen first, and the shapes and design follow. If I passed around a jar containing 10 different colored pencils and asked each person to take one, all would pause—some consciously, others without even realizing it—to select their “favorite” colors. Even in this seemingly insignificant task, color is important to our internal satisfaction.

Despite the sophistication of media-savvy consumers, people are often unaware of their own preferences and do not realize that color choices guide many daily decisions. What determines which colors a person prefers? It’s a combination of age, cultural heritage, education, worldliness, and exposure to visual media—magazines, catalogues, movies, and television.

## New Colors

“New” colors attract attention, so manufacturers are often willing to take a chance on a color that is not currently in style in an effort to grab attention. But getting attention is only part of the challenge. Just because customers notice the color doesn’t mean they will purchase it. Correctly predicting which colors will actually sell is another key element of the “new” color marketing plan.

What makes a new color appealing? Why are some new colors readily accepted while others are not even offered? The answers are complex, and

# A Look at Today's Trends and a Glimpse at Tomorrow

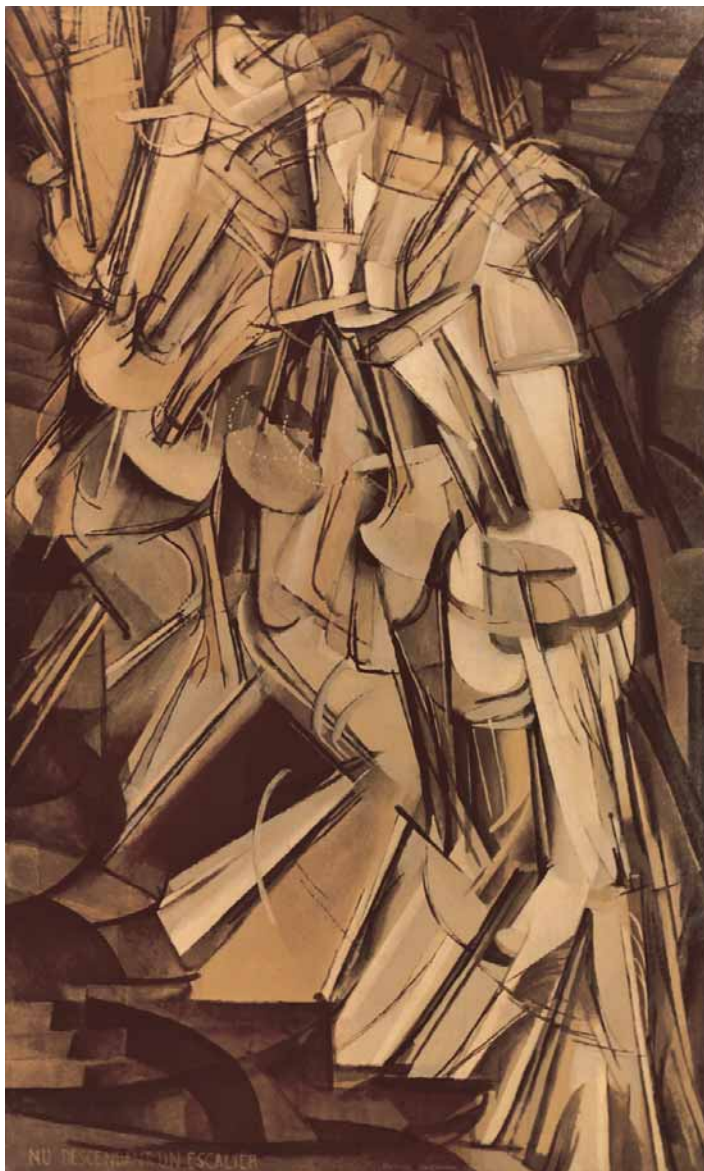
they depend on an elusive “audience readiness.” Determining this receptiveness is part of the science of professional color forecasting, which uses a diverse range of sources to observe and measure cultural trends and to predict which colors will be desired in the foreseeable future.

## Color Trends

Once a color becomes popular with consumers, products of that color may dominate the marketplace. Some of these color trends can be loosely defined by decades. Pastel pink and blue in the 50s; avocado and Harvest Gold in the 60s; primary colors in the 70s; mauve and gray in the 80s; and teal, hunter green, and maroon in the 90s.

When a color combination becomes a hot trend, it doesn't matter what is being colored—everything from a cowboy bandana to a teapot will be offered in the trend colors. In home decor, once a “color story” has peaked, remnants of those colors remain in the home for years, requiring manufacturers to design transitional options that will freshen and update a room without requiring removal of the old colors.

It used to take a number of years for color trends to enter at the high-end market then trickle down to the average consumer level. Today that time has condensed significantly. The products, designs, and colors introduced at the spring markets will often be in retail stores in three months. This speed doesn't give colors much time to prove themselves before they hit the mass market. You can find plenty of these leading-edge trend items for sale in the discount outlets because they simply did not connect with the consumer



New York Graphic Society: Marcel Duchamp, “Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2”

right out of the gate.

A commercial space, such as a hospital, office, or hotel, must hold on to a color story for 10 to 20 years or more. Hotels may refresh their top rooms and the lobby more often, but the original colors will live a long life in the standard rooms. The challenge for the designer of commercial spaces is to choose a new design that is years ahead of its maturity while still being acceptable to current inhabitants and patrons.

## Design Themes

Design themes in decor follow a cycle similar to color themes, although the marketplace can tolerate a wide range of design styles at the same time. Some design themes originate in a particular country or culture, such as European, African, British, French, Scandinavian, Asian, or Early American, or during influential political regimes like Queen Victoria or the Kings Louis of France.

Design themes may also be inspired by pop culture or entertainment sources, although many of these, if examined by an expert, are shown to be updated versions of older, traditional styles. Specific motifs, such as ladybugs, angels, or paisley designs, become extremely popular then fade from favor just as quickly.

Unlike colors, popular design themes may take time to become established—and may be given time to do so. First, consumers become aware of a new trend, perhaps in magazine ads or television. If they decide to incorporate this theme into their homes, they may first try an accessory or two. Then gradually, they make a stronger commitment, such as carpeting and furniture. It may take three to five years to complete this theme, and during this time other themes will be rising in popularity. This process doesn't just allow several



Haddad's Fine Arts: Tricia May, "Summer's Promise"

design themes to coexist, it actually requires it, making it more difficult than ever for merchants to select and control inventory.

## Choosing Art

All of the challenges of forecasting color and design come into play when producing and marketing art. Art for art's sake may work well in the museum market and in the narrow niche of art-savvy

consumers; selling art in the commercial marketplace is quite different. In the mass market, art sells for the same reason a sofa sells—it is the right size, color, and design for the space it will occupy. Tulips may be a popular image, but the color of the tulips and the surrounding landscape will influence its sale. Art salespeople often hear remarks like this: "I really like the picture with the red flowers; do you have the same picture with yellow flowers?" Yes, there are galleries that do very well selling important art to educated art buyers. But the majority of today's art images are sold as part of a decorative product.

The marketplace for framed art has grown significantly. There are more images, more mouldings, and more places to sell them. In addition to galleries and frame shops, the consumer marketplace includes department stores, specialty retailers, home design catalogs, home sales, television, discount stores, furniture stores, gift stores, and accessory stores.

The commercial marketplace includes owners,

architects, and designers of hotels, offices, sports arenas, hospitals, schools, and the many levels within those markets. The art that appeals to these diverse markets may be quite different from the images that sell to the general consumer because this art must be acceptable, yet leading edge, to a wide audience and still remain acceptable for many years. For example, an image



Bentley House: Virginia Howlett, "Blue Moon"

that shows small children playing in the sand may be perfect for home sales, but if used in a hospital or retirement home it may trigger tears. Pleasant or sophisticated “neutral” subject matter is preferred for the hospitality market, especially landscapes, seascapes, and abstract art.

## TODAY'S TRENDS

### Colors

Although consumers are attracted to bright colors, few are willing to commit to a lime green sofa or bright yellow carpets. When it comes to major purchases in home decor, the current preference is to choose neutral colors then look to accessories to add brightness and bring trend colors into a room.

Brown has been serving as a comfortable neutral color for several years and continues to grow in popularity. Brown feels strong, safe, and dependable and tends to be popular in threatening economic, social, or political times. It is a color liked by both men and women, so it works well for couples trying to agree on colors for their home decor. Since there are warm and cool browns, pale tans, and rich dark chocolate browns, there are a wide variety of options within the brown color family and all are part of the current color story.

Purple has become so well established that it is no longer a trend color per se, yet new interpretations of purple continue to appear on color forecasts, showing confidence that its popularity will continue.

Green, especially yellow green, remains popular, with darker versions like avocado and olive being used extensively. Bright lime is still seen as a fun accessory color.

Orange in its many variations—from dark

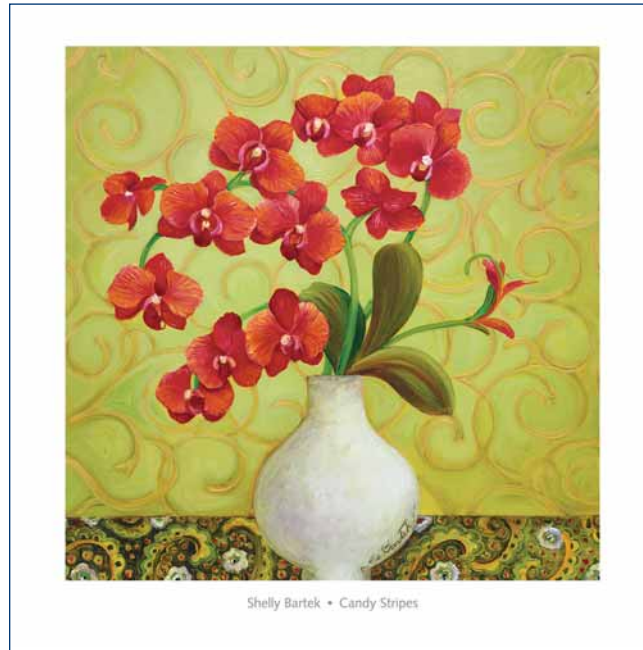


Image Conscious: Shelley Bartek, “Candy Stripes”

pumpkin to tangerine to pale cinnamon—is another favorite in accessories. Pink, from soft to bright, is being used playfully in accessories directed to young women.

### Color Combinations

The wide view of a color story is not just about which colors are becoming popular but also how the colors are used.

Analogous colors continue to attract consumers, especially the red, orange, yellow and blue, green, purple groups. The incoming trend will be monotone—using various versions of one color

together. This can be an easy color scheme to work with because it does not demand matching an exact shade of a color. Instead, it allows many shades, tints, and tones of a color.

Monotone brown has already been established at the beige and tan level, but the deepest representations are still to come. Blue will be the most popular in the monotone group, but look for whites, reds, purples, and greens to find a following as well.

The golden versions of brown are being used extensively in accessories, often in combination with earthy colors like bronze and clay. Brown is part of many popular color combinations, such as brown with blue, brown with yellow green, and brown with orange.

Yellow greens are being used with orange, dark red, or lavender. Orange is being paired with cinnabar, brown, gold, or bronze. Yellow, green, and orange are used together in a combination vaguely reminiscent of the 1970s but freshened to feel new.

Gold and silver play an important role and can be seen as yellow and gray (a popular warm/cool



Joan Cawley Gallery: John Saunders, “Steppin’ Out”

combination); metallics may be shiny or brushed or any variation in between. And don't forget the classic black-and-white combination; whether it's toile or modern graphics, it's cool.

And where is blue? Still the most popular "favorite color" of men and women alike, the blue family always has a spot in home decor.

The current popular version is soft French blue or pale cool blue, and the greener versions like turquoise are also doing well. In color combinations, light blue with Paris green, and turquoise with white are current trends.

## Design Themes

Serenity still sells. Spa colors and tranquility as a lifestyle theme became strong in the late 1990s and are now well established. Teal in many tints, tones, and shades will continue in popularity, with names like Ocean, Sea Spray, and Aqua.

A focus on glamour and luxury continues. Advertisers are portraying "the indulgent life," which includes travel, high-market cars, electronics, and having a "house at the beach" featuring sophisticated decor punctuated by charming seaside accents like seashells...lots of seashells...lots of white seashells. This translates to the mass market as "simple indulgences," encouraging average consumers to upgrade their lives in smaller, more affordable ways like home decor accessories.

Asian styles remain popular, ranging from simple, ultra-modern designs to more opulent expressions. Kimono patterns inspire many designs, and the traditional deep orange/red/cinnabar coloring with black



Wild Apple Graphics: Kristy Goggio, "Vessels"

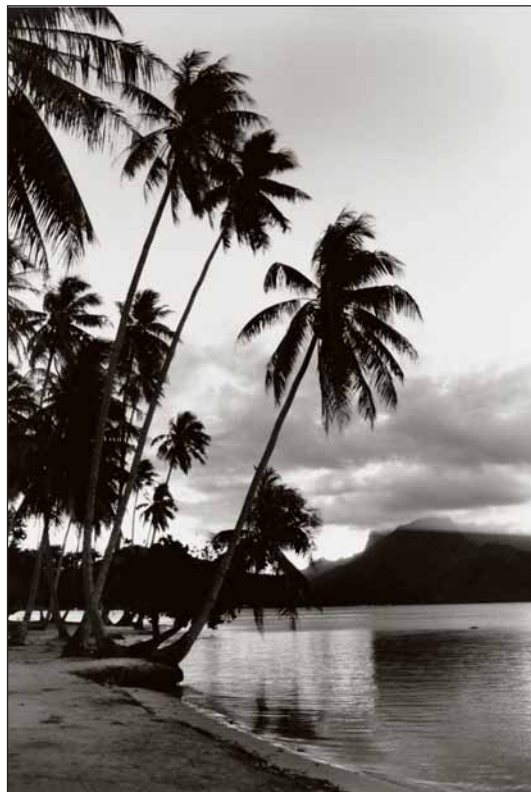
lacquer accents continues to be appealing. Despite years of popularity, the market is apparently not weary of the Tuscany, Provence, European Country look. This trend thrives at both the high- and mass-market levels and translates to everything from furniture and fabric to artwork and dishware.

Mideastern influences of beading and fringe have come under control, while paisley, light reflecting silk, and the colors of red and tan continue to increase in popularity.

## Classic Revival

The revival of browns is bringing a renewed interest in "classic" images, such as Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending Staircase No 2." Other mid-century artists, such as Kandinsky, Vasarely, and Picasso will be popular because their art coordinates with today's trends and designs and because many people recognize the names as famous. Many of the "modern" 20th century artists are thought to be "leading edge" by the younger crowd and "classic" by the boomers, so both groups should be receptive to those images. Other images that will gain new attention: monotone color studies by Albers and some lesser-known Van Goghs that feature yellows and greens.

The enduring popularity of Toile is leading to an interest in the copper engraving images originally used to produce Toile products. These should be printed in a single color on white or cream paper. An oversized Toile image printed with black ink on tan paper will sell in the modern marketplace.



Winn Devon Art Group: Alexis De Vilar, "Islands, French Polynesia"



Wild Apple Graphics: Eng Tay, "Intimacy"



Winn Devon Art Group: Miquela Nicolau, "Autumn"

## Tomorrow's Trends

A bit further out on the horizon, several themes and motifs are brewing into tomorrow's decor trends. Look for monochromatic color schemes to translate to art in simple, solid, images using silkscreen and block print techniques. Painterly style and sketches will be popular, representing "real artist work." Expect a revival of silhouette-style art, one color on a solid background, updated with contemporary colors and subject matter (similar to the recent iPod ads.) The use of single color filigree designs will be one of several variations on the silhouette theme. Look for the circular swirl motif to be replaced by a looser calligraphy swirl, ribbon-like designs, and sometimes an open scribble.

## The Big Picture

The speed and intensity of today's mass media, combined with the color sophistication



Haddad's Fine Arts: Jodi Reeb-Myers, "Musical Tribute I"

of today's consumers, guarantees an exciting and fast-paced future for color and design trends. On one hand, this makes choosing and using colors correctly more challenging than ever. On the other hand, there is broad consumer diversity that allows many very different products to succeed simultaneously in the marketplace. ■

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*Vivian Kistler, CPG, GCF, has been tracking trends for nearly 20 years. As an active member and senior chairholder of the Color Marketing Group, she combines information from CMG, her extensive travels to foreign and American trade shows, and her personal system for tracking trends to evaluate and forecast color and design trends. She is the editor of Color Names Reference, which contains 37,000 color names and other information about colors, as well as [www.coloranddesignreport.com](http://www.coloranddesignreport.com). She can be reached at [vivian@viviankistler.com](mailto:vivian@viviankistler.com). Vivian will also be presenting "Trends in Color and Design" at the West Coast Art & Frame Show in Las Vegas.*