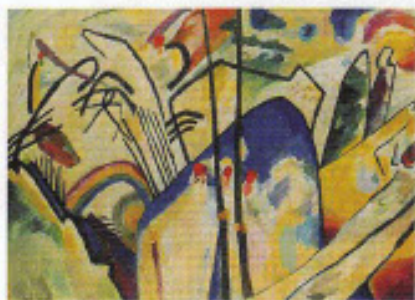


# Color Sense

by Arlene Distler



Henri Matisse, *Portrait of Madame Alakaa*, 1900  
Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark



Wassily Kandinsky, *Transvase Uta*, 1923  
Kunststiftung Nordhain/Wedekind, Düsseldorf



Arthur Dove, *Sunrise*, 1924  
Milwaukee Art Museum



Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jack in the Pulpit*, 1930  
Alfred Steigler Collection, Washington, USA



Medieval Christian icon — Virgin and child

**It's a magic time in Vermont, especially when the setting sun plays upon a hillside and bathes it in a golden light or sets an entire hillside ablaze in orange — a good time to explore what can't be ignored in autumn: color. Let us consider what it does to us and for us — the delectable, sensual and subtle part it plays in our lives.**

First, an artist's perspective. The twentieth century was a time when it seemed the world suddenly woke up to the expressive, exquisite possibilities of color. There had been the impressionists in the last decades of the nineteenth century, who set the stage for the freeing of color from the simply descriptive, breaking up the light of the natural world as if with a prism. Then the fauves ("wild beasts") took that conceit even further, exploding color with determined abandon.

But it was artists who came to maturity in the second decade of the twentieth century who really took the notion of the liberation of color as its own mission. In 1914 the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky came out with the very influential book *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*. This book is behind glass and part of the exhibit at the show held this summer at the Clark Museum in Williamstown, Mass., "Dove/O'Keeffe: Circles of Influence." "Colour is a power which directly influences the soul... colour is the keyboard, eyes the hammers, soul the piano. The artist is the hand that plays."

These painters, from the second decade of the century on, drove each other to greater expressive heights, mainly through the radical use of color. The painter Charles Demuth has said of O'Keeffe's paintings, "...each color almost regains the fun it must have felt within itself on forming the first rainbow."

Dr. Max Luscher, a Swiss psychotherapist, played a part in the early twentieth century's new-found fascination with color, which dovetailed, as it were, with the new field of psychology. Luscher devoted his life to discovering how color affects behavior and how it makes us feel, through conducting hundreds of thousands of tests worldwide.

In the seventies my husband and I and a group of friends discovered "The Luscher Color Test," which, I am learning these many years later, was the parlor game version of Luscher's work. In the game, one is given a "hand" of color cards and asked to choose them in order of preference. The results—Luscher claimed color choice represents one's psychological state—were often jarringly, sometimes embarrassingly, accurate. Through research done for this article I have learned that this test is used in Europe by "psychologists, doctors, government agencies, and universities to screen candidates." Perhaps a bit too 1984 for my taste!

It does lend credence, however, to Leatrice Eiseman's line of work. Eiseman is a noted authority on color. She's the executive director at Pantone, the company whose color swatches are a designer's best friend. She counsels marketers and designers on color trends — what colors on their product or in advertising will entice people to buy.

There is even a "color of the year," chosen as a result of a rather complex set of influences, from movies and Broadway shows (there will be a new Shrek film, as well as a still-playing Broadway show, so yellow-green, says Eiseman, "is not going away soon"), to the national mood to who knows what all. The green movement produced a lot of...what else? Green. But hopefully, according to Eiseman, that is a thing of the past. Pantone's color maven explains: "Green is more than a color today, it is an entire social awareness issue... To prevent boredom with the color bleeding over to boredom with the movement," the folks at Pantone chose "iris blue," a medium blue tinged with purple, as the color for 2008. In fact, according to the article "Setting A New Tone" in the on-line magazine FLYP, "blue is the new green."

For 2010 Eiseman and the Pantone Color Institute have picked "Mimosa," a bright yellow. Yellow was also picked by the largest and most influential color forecasting group, the Alexandria, Virginia-based Color Marketing Group. The idea here seems to be that we need all the help we can get these days to feel optimistic and "sunny," emotions documented to be stimulated by yellow. Perhaps if the economy picks up we have the researchers at Pantone to thank!

12



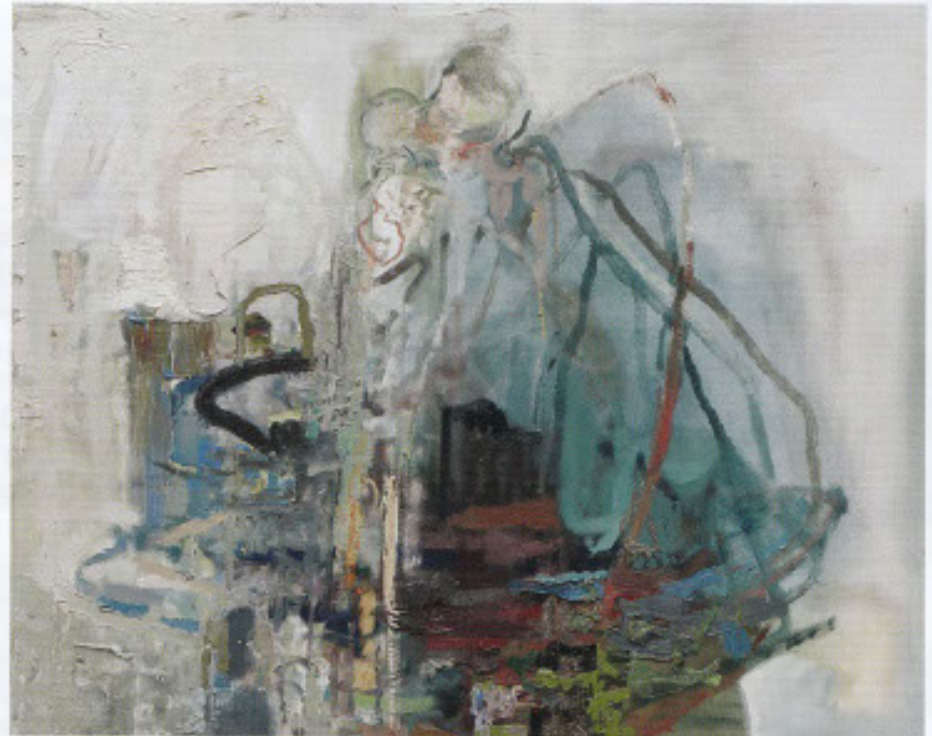
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To that sunny-ness of yellow, soft or hard-bright, the painter Renée Bouchard would say, "Been there, done that." This young artist, who is to have a show at the Bennington Art Center this Fall, calls color the "machine that drives my work." She recalls her golden-toned palette some years back, a period that ultimately led to her giving up painting for a while. "I grew bored. (The paintings) were too happy, even if that wasn't the theme. I wanted a balance in feelings... Bright colors are optimistic, but I didn't want that to interfere with what I wanted to say."

Bouchard's recent work, which will comprise the show in Bennington, tends toward blues and white off-set by earth tones. To my eyes a somewhat melancholy palette, but also ethereal, dancing with calligraphic marks that Bouchard calls "doodles." Yet if one were to ascribe to these paintings the symbology of the Native American plains tribes, for example, the blue would represent the wisdom of the elders and the realm of heaven.

According to another artist, Brattleboro native Scot Borofsky, whose "Wall of the Americas" is featured elsewhere in this issue of SVAL, elders of the Navajo tribe wear a lot of turquoise to help them "find their way to heaven." In Native American art, colors also stand for the four directions, which are imbued with spiritual significance: East-yellow, South-red, West-blue (perhaps the setting sun of the west is tied into old age and heavenly after-life), and North-white. The Native-American's color system is but one of the influences that determines Borofsky's color choices. He is influenced as well by Mexican weavings (which are in turn influenced by nationalist colors, along with wool's natural earthy hues). He says he is also strongly affected and influenced by the colors of Tibetan Tangkhas, which ascribe healing properties to particular colors.

Christian iconography from the Medieval era had its own color-codes that all people of



Renée Bouchard, Our Thoughts

the time, most of whom were illiterate, understood. Everyone who looked at a painting of "madonna and child" would have expected Mary to be wearing blue, which stood for "heavenly grace"; figures in depictions of the crucifixion wore red robes, the color of the Holy Spirit and the Pentecost; deeper crimson red represented the presence of God and the blood of martyrs.

Far from the formalized color schemes of ancient traditions, world-renowned painter and Vermonter Wolf Kahn, and his wife, Emily Mason, carry on the modern painters' inquiry into color with an "intuitive" process. At a talk given at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center this summer, Kahn digressed for a few moments from his topic to answer an audience member's question about his use of vivid pigments. He said, "Color liberates me from being ordinary or boring," and described it as being the door to the imagination, to spontaneity. "Painting grass green or the sky blue doesn't tell you anything about color, what one color does to another, nor tell you anything about yourself." Once students of Hans Hoffman whose teachings on color inspired the generation of abstract expressionist painters, color is the throbbing heart of Kahn's and Mason's oeuvre.

As I drive the back roads, the scenes that greet my senses instill fresh wonder at nature's palette, brazen and beautiful as any artist's — and inspiration for color mavens worldwide.



Wolf Kahn, Green Ground, Yellow Sky

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