The evolution of colour in design from the 1950s to today

Francesca Valan

CMF Design Studio (Colors – Materials - Finishings), Milan, Italy
Email: francesca.valan@tin.it

This project analyses the chromatic evolution of the past sixty years in the world of product design, identifying the most significant colors of each decade. The concept of chromatic cycles is introduced. Their duration depends on the chroma: the higher the chroma the shorter the duration. Neutrals last longer than accents. Owing to differences in cycle duration, accents and neutrals are always combined in different ways. Thus, with the passing of time, innovative combinations are originated. However, the cycle analysis makes it possible to predict future color scenes with good accuracy.

Published online: 29 June 2012

Introduction

Colour is a language in continuous evolution; the big socio-cultural, artistic and technical changes have always influenced the chromatic scenery of our spaces. Looking at the past, it is possible to identify certain colours for each decade of the last century which, in our collective imagination, have become the evocative colours of those years. Generally speaking we could say that in Italy the '50s are associated to pinks and pastel colours, the '60s to the primary colours of Pop Art, the '70s to the achromatisms of grays and browns, and so on.

This project seeks to analyse the chromatic evolution of the past sixty years in the world of product design and to evaluate its sequences and cycles. The chromatic historical cycles are of fundamental importance in colour design when identifying the chromatic scenes of the future. To represent the cycles of chromatic evolution we will here use the *umbrella diagram* (suggested by Clino Castelli for chromatic trends).

Colour presence and colour distribution trends

For each decade the *colour presence* and *colour distribution* [1] were analysed; by colour presence we mean the colours employed (specified in their hue, value and saturation), by colour distribution we allude to their positioning on the object. For example, pastel colour objects with bichromatic schemes are typical of the '50s, while tonal colours and polychromatic schemes characterise the design of the '80s [1].
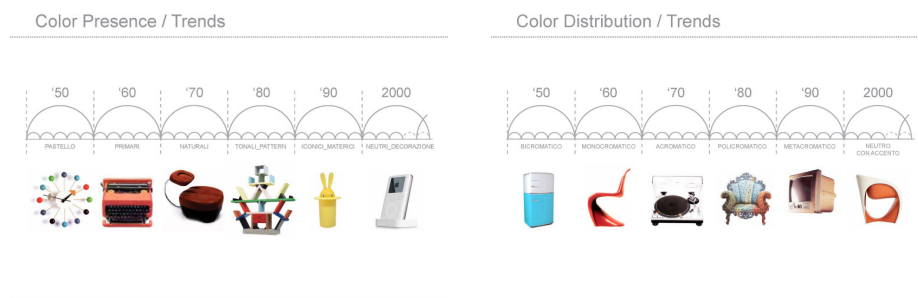

Figure 1: Colour presence (left) and colour distribution (right) decade by decade.

The evolution of colour in the past

The '50s / The newborn pastels

"I want the whole country pink […] banish the black, burn the blue, and bury the beige! […] Think pink! think pink!"

Sang Kay Thompson (1956)

In the early post-war period the age of mass production begins, an age driven by new technologies and the new materials developed by the war industry. The first plastic materials are produced, thanks to the techniques of polymer synthesis, and the automotive industry launches the mass production of automobiles which become affordable to an ever-growing number of families. The end of the war and the beginning of economic recovery generate optimism and initiative.

Modernity penetrates daily life, and colour becomes the symbol of this change. The '50s are characterised by the use of light and very intense colours. Many industrial products, above all household appliances and cars, typically have bichromatic schemes.

Figure 2: The '50s: Chromatic scene (left), Overview (middle) and Chromatic Diagram (right) [1,2].

The '60s / Pop primaries

"As we live a life of easy, every one of us has all we need, sky of blue and sea of green in our yellow submarine! We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine, yellow submarine! We all live in a yellow submarine, yellow submarine, yellow submarine"

Sang the Beatles (1966)

The phenomenon of consumerism is born, spurred on by technologies of mass production and ever-decreasing costs. New behavioral models, in stark contrast to consumerism, develop and pop music asserts itself, strongly influenced by new psychedelic trends. Colour photography is born and, in the industrial field, synthetic and artificial materials dominate the world of design.

Very saturated colours are used and innovative combinations are explored, in line with the pop and psychedelic trends that dominate youth culture.

Primary colours are predominant and new chemical dies make high saturations possible. The most significant products of these years are in plastic, mono-material and mono-chromatic.

Figure 3: The '60s: Chromatic scene (left), Overview (middle) and Chromatic Diagram (right) [1,3,4].

The '70s / Achromatic schemes

"So, I was saying, I would say the color of the surface around us is comparable to what we observed in orbit: at a 10° angle to the Sun. It's pretty much a color without color, a white gray, very white, and the gray is chalky as you look into the zero phase line. But when you look up 90° to the Sun it's a considerably darker gray, more like ashen gray. Some of the surface rocks close in here that have been fractured or disturbed by the rocket engine are coated with this light gray on the outside, but when they've been broken they display a dark, very dark gray interior, and it looks like it could be country basalt."

Neil Armstrong live (04:57 21st July 1969)

The political crises of the late '60s lead to a radicalisation of social conflicts. The crisis in the Middle East makes oil prices grow unexpectedly and leads the Western world into the energetic crisis. The hippy movement, born in the late '60s pushes young people towards an interest in Oriental cultures and the rediscovery of nature.

The industrial world proposes new objects, above all household appliances, which rapidly spread all over the world and lay the foundations for a radical change in lifestyle: among these are the washing machine and colour television.

New ecological movements and the "austerity" provoked by the energetic crisis lead to the use of natural materials, which mean to substitute plastic materials derived from petroleum. In contrast to

the saturated colours of the '60s, now colours with medium to low saturation are employed together with the areas of warm hues. The use of black starts to announce itself.

Figure 4: The '70s: Chromatic scene (left), Overview (middle) and Chromatic Diagram (right) [1,5].

The '80s / The triumph of colour

"The technology of color television has induced what seems to be the first big change in the history of the perceptive phenomenology of color." [6]

Clino T Castelli (1992)

The 1980s are years of strong economic recovery. Electronic technology revolutionises the world of communication, the personal computer becomes widespread and industry reaches a degree of automation and reduction of the size of objects that seemed unthinkable until only a few years earlier. The rapid development of the high-tech world leads to the affirmation of the colour black, to the use of metals such as aluminum and steel, and aims at the abolition of the purely decorative aspect. Simultaneously the opposite trend develops, which focuses on the surface of objects and leads to the application of even excessive and provocative decorations.

Colour television, born in the '70s, reaches every home and generates a profound change in perception: people start thinking in colour.

Fluorescent colours are born, trying to reproduce the brightness and intensity of the colours seen on TV screens and, in contrast to this, there are tonal colours, intermediate and with low saturation. Objects become polychromatic.
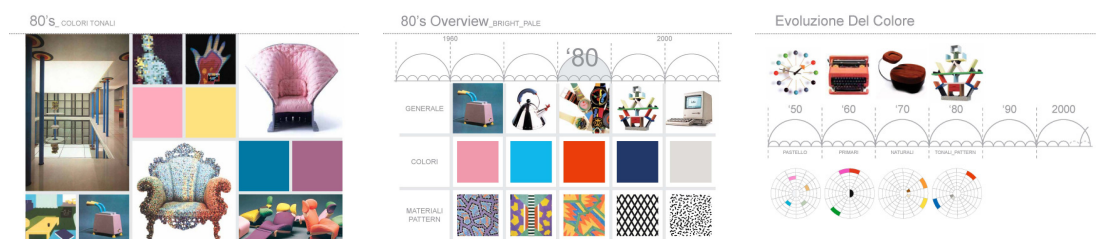

Figure 5: The '80s: Chromatic scene (left), Overview (middle) and Chromatic Diagram (right) [1,6].

The '90s / The year of matter

In the '90s ecological conscience is reborn, as is the search for harmony with nature, after the consumer frenzy of the previous decade. Technologies allow for total freedom in shapes, and these become the center of attention. Aspects related to material prevail over chromatic aspects: we now witness a shift from syntactic to iconic colours.

Coloured plastics acquire new identities: recycled, transparent, translucent. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao becomes the symbol of an era of metalised objects.

Figure 6: The '90s: Chromatic scene (left), Overview (middle) and Chromatic Diagram (right) [1,7,8].

The years '00 / The experience of finishings

The end of the millennium introduces doubts and discussions into the world of design: lifestyles are re-examined, values such as authenticity, interiority, and substance rather than appearance are searched for. Objects become lighter and simplified: the minimal style becomes predominant, the aesthetics of lightness is celebrated, and designers design by subtraction. Colours disappear, shapes are cancelled out, surfaces become the true protagonists on objects. Objects become black or white, but surfaces glossy, matt, texturised, translucent, tactile.

Figure 7: The years '00: Chromatic scene (left), Overview (middle) and Chromatic Diagram (right) [1,9].

The evolution of colour in the future

It is possible to guess what colour will be the favorite one in the next years, chromatic preferences do not belong only to the individual sphere, but follow constant and measurable cycles. Obviously we will like a "new" colour more than the ones we get bored by because they are everywhere: this is the case of orange at the beginning of the millennium, its calculated success (as an accent colour it had not appeared for more than twenty years) is exemplary. In fact it was a "must" in the colour variations of products on the market from 2002 to 2005. If until some years ago a new car was promoted in metallic gray, today we use white models and we already know that starting from 2012 the preferred colours will be natural colours – cream, sand, browns – which have been absent since the far-away '70s.

Figure 8: Eco Tech (left), Chromatic (middle) and Timeline (right) [1,10].

Our chromatic panoramas are defined by two colour categories with different lifecycles: neutrals and accents. Neutrals determine the chromatic background, once upon a time they would last ten years, now they last between five and seven; accents are the more saturated hues, used to characterise a product with a colour. They change every three years approximately. Accents drag their own complementary colour; with orange also blues/purples appeared; with greens we had fuchsia pinks; red will bring blues/greens.

Colour determines the aesthetical duration of a product: neutrals are applied on large size products (such as cars) or products which need to last through time; accent colours are applied on products with shorter lives, such as furniture supplements. The future? Turquoises and petroleum light blues are arriving, all of which had disappeared since the '80s and warm and cold yellows will take the place of the oranges.

Conclusions

The analysis of product trends in the past has shown that significant chromatic changes can be registered cyclically. It is thus possible to identify the general chromatic preferences of future years with reasonable certainty.

The definition of chromatic scenes is a fundamental aspect of colour design and contributes to determining the commercial success of industrial products.
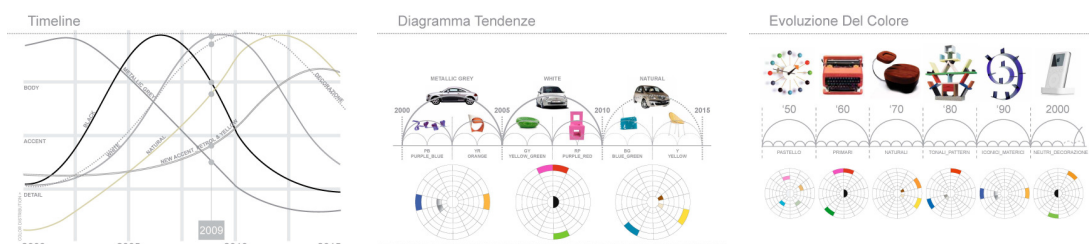

Figure 9: Timeline 2000/2015 (left), Chromatic (middle) and Timeline (right).

References

1. Press P (2006), *Phaidon Design Classics*, Phaidon Press Ltd.

2. Fiell C and Fiell P (2000), *Decorative Art 1950s*, Taschen.

3. Garner P (1996), *Sixties Design*, Taschen.

4. Fiell C and Fiell P (2000), *Decorative Art 1960s*, Taschen.

5. Fiell C and Fiell P (2000), *Decorative Art 1970s*, Taschen.

6. Sottsass E (1993), *Note sul Colore*, Abet Edizioni.

7. Castelli CT (1999), *Transitive Design*, Electa.

8. Branzi A (2007), *Capire il Design*, Giunti Editore.

9. Urquiola P (2007), *The International Design Yearbook 2007*, Laurence King Publishing.

10. Daab Press (2007), *Design Inspirations*, Daab Press.