

## An Analysis of the Scandinavian Colour Scales as a Tool in Colour Design

**Berit Bergström**

*Berit Bergström, NCS Colour AB/Swedish Colour Centre Foundation, Stockholm, SWEDEN*

*\*berit.bergstrom@ncscolour.com*

### ABSTRACT

In recent years the simplistic and functional concept of Scandinavian design has seen a revival worldwide. Internationally Scandinavian and Swedish design and their colours will probably always be synonymous with tasteful minimalism, ash blond furniture, lots of whitish and pale colours and light blond interiors. The minimalist roots can be traced back hundreds of years to a time when Sweden was a country of extreme poverty. The most important factors for choosing colours within Scandinavian Colour Design seem to be the light, the space, the colours of nature and our history. Do we really know how these colours look like? Where they so whitish and light? Investigations of the nature's colour palette and the heritage colours of different periods will give valuable knowledge for the colour designer of today. These natural colour scales are important references when designing our interiors today. We have learnt to appreciate them and this paper will highlight where in the colour space we should find ourselves in order to associate to the traditional Scandinavian colour scales.

**KEYWORDS:** colour analysis, traditional colours, colour design

### INTRODUCTION

The Nordic light is probably one of the reasons for the pale colours, functionality, wooden furniture and plain textiles. During winter time the light, in the northern parts of Scandinavia, is not shown in more than a couple of hours. Naturally, the choice will then be light blond colours to get as much light as possible. In the summer time, the Swedish nights are never pitch-dark in the opposite of the ones in the winter.

The colours that can be found in nature form a natural reference for our perception and judgment of colours. They affect our feelings, our associations and they give us information about the time of the year. The colours of nature form the basis for our colour history. In the past, when the paint materials were made of plants and earth and was a very limited colour scale. Objects received the natural colour scale, which were determined by the availability of natural pigments found in nature. They have created frames of reference, especially the Neoclassicism period, which we have learned to appreciate and to which many people want to relate to today.

### EXPERIMENTAL

How do we know how these traditional colours looked like? It is difficult to identify them just by looking in a book. That is why we have analysed the existing colours in genuine environments where we have a good representation of historical colours. The NCS Colour System has been used to analyse the colours and to find the typical colour areas for different time periods. Visual assessments have been made through comparison with NCS colour samples parallel with a wireless colour reader.

This visual analyses have been compared with "Kulturkulör". This is a special colour collection of historical colours formulated by the Swedish National Heritage Board who leads the work of the cultural heritage sector. The goal with Kulturkulör is to be able to relate to both new and older colour schemes. We need



*Figure 1: "Kulturkulör"*

to know what colours were possible to accomplish with traditional pigments in linseed oil. The traditional colour scales are a frame of reference and a part of our history and are an obvious source of knowledge and inspiration in the colour design of both old and new environments.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pale and the nature's colour palette have always been important elements in the Swedish design history which we can find in the Neo-classical time period 1775 – 1810, named the Gustavian style in Sweden. The Neoclassical style with its beautiful interiors are of unique value of today, not only as historical value but also as an inspiration to contemporary interiors of today. The colour schemes of a Swedish room in Gustavian style were light in colours, often light grey walls with gilded mouldings that reflected the sun rays. It had tall windows for the daylight to come in, and sparkling crystal chandeliers for festivities in the evenings. It was enhanced by plain white or decorated ceilings and plain wooden floors. Typical Gustavian light white and grey colours could be S 1002-Y, S 1005-Y40R, S 2005-Y20R and S 2502-Y. The yellow ochre in addition to these pale colours were influences from France, which had a much stronger colour palette compared to Sweden. Sweden has always been inspired by Italy and France among others but always convert the colours to our Swedish cultural heritage where nature's colour palette and our light are important factors. The colours have been toned down, in the "Swedish way" into a more muted colour palette.



*Figure 2: Skogaholms Mansion, Gustavian style*

In the end 19<sup>th</sup> century the industrialism had made its entry and the craft guild was not that important any longer. At this time we could see overdone interiors like dark brown, red and green colours in a lot of different patterns and layers of textiles, wallpapers and carpets. It was the "time period of the dust". We began to get tired of all the dark interiors and the eclecticism with all industrial made furniture copies from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Art Nouveau was introduced but with a Nordic colour touch with a lot of pastels interpreted in our way depending on light and nature.

The artist Carl Larsson and his wife Karin, textile designer, were inspired by William Morris. William Morris, textile designer, was associated with the English Arts and Crafts movement. Morris was influenced by the artist John Ruskin and adopted his philosophy of rejecting industrial manufacture of decorative arts and architecture and was in favour of a return to hand-craftsmanship. The Larsson home in Sundborn was designed by Karin and showed a unique way of using light and colour. Karin's interior design has become a basic principal in Swedish interior design and has its influence today. It said that one rainy summer Carl couldn't paint the nature and Karin suggested to use the home as a motive for his paintings. These interior paintings by Carl were exhibited 1897. This exhibition attracted broad international attention and the interiors are still associated with the quintessence of Swedish design. Karin and Carl presented this new style in the book "A home". The purpose was to reshape the Swedish home interior with the illustrations of Carl's paintings. In his paintings you could experience the family's every-day life.

At this time it was declared that if we were surrounded with beautiful things and interiors we would be happier and feeling better. This has become a guiding principle in Swedish Colour Design. The Swedish author and aesthete Ellen Kay was inspired of Larsson's interiors and wrote an essay entitled "Beauty for all" which still is important together with "Better things for everyday life – Design for everybody?" by Gregor Paulsson, Swedish art historian, educator, and interdisciplinary theorist. They have been important for the development of Swedish design because design is for everyone and not just for wealthy people.

In the 1920's, after the Art Nouveau, the Neoclassicism is reintroduced. Internationally this classical style was named Swedish Grace with inspiration from the Gustavian style but in a more sleek and simplified form.

1930's is the next important year within Swedish colour and design history. Influences came from Le Corbusier with a colourful palette Chromatic Keyboards with colours for architecture based on nature, culture and tradition as well as on distinct and comprehensive experience of a unique architect, artist and designer. The colours are characterized by an impressive depth, are harmonious among themselves and thus can be matched in any combination. In the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 modernism, in Sweden called functionalism, was introduced with light walls, large windows, sparing and moderate furnishing, non-pattern fabrics, clean surfaces and open spatial solutions. The principal colours were white, grey and black with accents of bright "Bauhaus colours" like yellow, red, blue and green. The architect for the exhibition was Gunnar Asplund, a well-known Swedish architect.

Many of the furniture designed during 30's are still in production. Among well-known designers' with craft-oriented and functional furniture design are Bruno Mathsson and Carl Malmsten. Josef Franck, Austrian architect who moved to Sweden is another important designer with classical furniture, lamps, glass, wallpaper and printed textiles, inspired by William Morris. Franck has strongly influenced Swedish interior decoration and is exclusively available in the market. Modernism/Functionalism with a common misconception that functionalism was white. It was, however, more colourful than what we want to believe.

The subsequent years the Scandinavian colour scale was developed to what it is today. 1950's with development of the Scandinavian design, 1960's with bright colours and generous patterns, 1970's with strong colours, simplicity and reuse, 1980's with modernism, white, beige, apricot, black and brown and 1990's with minimalism and accents of yellow, blue and red.

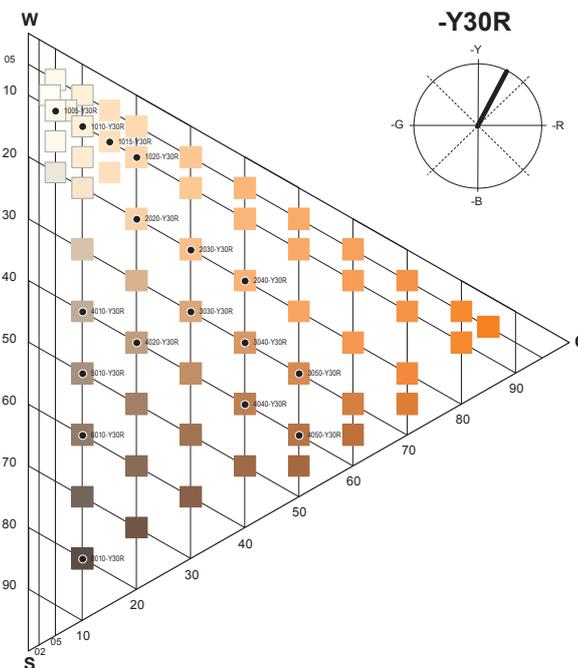


Figure 3: This is a traditional colour palette for a reddish yellow colour Y30R. These are typical colours mostly from the Golden Ochre Pigment in linseed-oil paint with a few colours from the Umbra Pigment. "Kulturkulör".

## CONCLUSION

Today the white colour is still a preferred colour. The ideal from 1930<sup>th</sup> Functionalism was back in 90's and is still alive. But how white was the colour at that time? It was not an ultra-white colour as people want to believe. It was an off-white often with yellow and some blackness like S 1005-Y30R. The white colours in the nature are not pure white, instead they are slightly yellowish, reddish or greenish. These white colours will give much more character and warmth to the interior than white colours. Historically an environment with a lot of painting and decorations where significant for the nobility, to show they could afford this. Now it is the opposite an today we have a very whitish period in Sweden and has been regarded as the most exclusive and trendy colour in interiors.

But now we can see that muted colours, which is the colour scale of nature, are increasing more and more. So we are returning to a colour scale of the Gustavian time period which we always seem to appreciate and which refers to our nature – A colour palette inspired by simplicity, symmetry, elegance, nature, pale colours, open spaces and maximum use of light.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Bergström, B. 2008. *Colour Choices-A Practitioner's guide to Colour Scheming and Design*, Formas T7:2008, Stockholm.
- [2] Fridell Anter, K. 1996. *Nature's Colour Palette. Inherent Colours of vegetation, stones and ground*, Scandinavian Colour Institute, Stockholm.
- [3] Fridell Anter, K. & Svedmyr, Å. 1996. *Colour Scales of Traditional Pigments for External Painting*, Scandinavian Colour Institute, Stockholm.
- [4] Groth, H.1990. *Neoclassicism in the North. Swedish Furniture and Interiors 1770-1850*. Thames and Hudson, London.
- [5] Hårleman, M. 2007. *Daylight influence on Colour design*, KTH, School of Architecture and the Built Environment, Stockholm.
- [6] Lewenhaupt, T. 2003. *Svenska Färger (Swedish Colours)*. Natur och Kultur/LTs Förlag, Värnamo.
- [7] Sivik, L. & Hård, A. & Tonnquist, G. 1996. *Natural Color System-From concept to research and applications. Part I and Part II*. Color Res. App. 21, 180-200 & 200-220.
- [8] Swedish Standards Institute. 2004. *NCS colour Atlas SS 19102:2004*, Scandinavian Colour Institute AB, Stockholm.
- [9] Swedish National Heritage Board. 2013. *Kulturkulör Linoljefärg*, Stockholm.
- [10] Tobler, D. 2003. *Le Corbusier Farbenklaviaturen von 1931/1959*, FLC/ProLitteris, Zürich.