COLOR: THE MAGIC SPIRIT IN THE HOME:
BY MARIE HALL

"Color is an agent able to produce effects which to the thoughtful mind must always remain wonderful."

In no other field has the right use of color been so neglected as in the furnishing of the American home, and nowhere else could its influence be so wide or beneficent. For this reason, it is worth while to consider the countless possibilities for its application to our home environment, and to glance at least briefly at its early uses, its picturesque and usually symbolic meanings.

Color was first used symbolically in the hieroglyphics of Egypt. In them, the color of an object meant as much to the reader as the object itself. For instance, a certain king, who had always been well and strong, lost his mind in the latter part of his life. In the hieroglyphics, his portrait was colored entirely red in the story of his early life, but later his head was changed to yellow. The red symbolized strength and vitality, while yellow signified disease and pestilence.

Color played an important part in the religious rites of early peoples. All the colors woven into an Oriental rug were symbolic. The Turk regarded green as a holy color, not to be profaned by believers' or unbelievers' feet—which accounts for the absence of all green from Turkish rugs. Different countries did not always give the same meaning to colors, but to all white was Purity; black was Evil; blue was Virtue and Truth; and yellow, in China, was Royalty.

As we study the historic periods, we find color holding a very
significant place in the furnishings of the royal palaces, chateaux, English halls, and in the homes of the people. The colors used in the court of Louis Quinze and also in the chateaux of the late eighteenth century express the gay frivolity and sham of the ruling classes. One cannot imagine dark colors in a Louis Seize room; neither would the light colors of Marie Antoinette have been pleasing to Elizabeth, who loved the somber massiveness of a Tudor hall. The different styles were the temperamental expressions of those who created or lived among them.

This individual, spontaneous choice of color, however, is not always best or wisest in the furnishing of a home. First, the mental influences of color must be taken into account. Consider, for example, the effects of the three elemental primary colors—yellow, red and blue.

Yellow is nearest to sunlight. Morbid dispositions require this color, although they do not choose it. Yellow brings cheer and light into a dark, gloomy room. I have in mind a small breakfast room in a city house which is a particularly pleasing example of this fact. Although high buildings shut off the sunlight, there is a light, cheerful, sunny atmosphere. For the walls are hung with a striped cream and yellow paper; the enameled woodwork, furniture and rugs are in tones of old ivory; a printed linen with a decorative pattern on a bright yellow ground is used at the French windows, and repeated at the opposite side of the room in the covering of a comfortable chair; the yellow tones are echoed in the seats of the other chairs, while the lamp and candleshades are of black-and-yellow striped silk. The room has been carried out almost exclusively in one tone, yet monotony has been avoided, and the place possesses not only light and cheerfulness, but also an air of definite distinction.

Red is symbolic of blood, fire and excitement. Even an animal is excited by red, for the sight of it actually irritates the nerves. Therefore, since the keynote of all homes should be rest, and red in any large area destroys restfulness, it should be handled with special caution. It may be introduced successfully into drawing rooms, club rooms and dance halls, where gaiety and a certain amount of
excitement are desirable, but for other interiors it should be employed only in occasional details. Often mothers choose red for the nursery because the children like it; but the normal child is naturally excitable and nervous, and does not need this rousing note.

Rarely in public buildings, and almost never in private homes, is a red room advisable. When it is attempted, however, the red should be allowed to completely dominate. There is a large Italian Renaissance dining room in one of the New York hotels which all decorators consider a success. Its color scheme is red, and the fact that the room has a distinctly architectural quality makes this treatment pleasing. The ceiling is beamed in Italian walnut, the walls are hung with red velvet, and the same coloring is used in the floor covering. At one end of the room is a large stone fireplace, and all the furniture is heavy in design, the Italian chairs having red velvet seats. The whole effect is rich, luxurious and dignified.

Turning now to blue, we find that it is calm, retiring, repressing in character. It is the coldest color note, and makes a room restful and cool. For this reason it is especially pleasing in warm sections of the country, in summer homes, in sunny south rooms, and also in bedrooms—for it is always suggestive of rest. An entirely blue room may prove rather monotonous; but this can be avoided by the introduction of orange, the complementary color, as a decorative note. The orange adds both warmth and interest.

In addition to these primary elements, there are three equally
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powerful ones known as binary colors—orange, violet and green—
each of which is formed by two primaries combined. Orange, the
combination of yellow and red, is symbolic of light and heat, which
makes it the hottest color possible. Since it is the strongest and
most intense of colors, it should be used only in small areas, for
emphasis.

Violet, composed of red and blue, suggests heat and cold combined
—which results in ashes. It is the color of shadows; it expresses
restrained heat, or mystery and gloom, and this is the psychological
reason for its use in mourning and in religious rites. The use of
violet is not often practical in home furnishings, although it may be
used to dim a room having too much sunlight. Violet hangings are
pleasing where there is a large window expanse.

Green, the result of mixing yellow and blue, expresses light and
coolness. Generally speaking, it is the most successful color that
can be used in interior furnishing, for it eliminates the nerve-exciting
red, and combines rest and cheer—than which nothing can be better
for a home.

Just as musical sounds differ in loudness, quality and pitch, so
may colors differ in intensity, value and hue. One color changes
into the next by a vast number of barely perceptible steps, and these
steps are called hues. Thus, the steps between orange and yellow,
called yellow-orange, are hues of orange.

A hue is more interesting than a primary or even a binary color,
as the mind unconsciously seeks to solve its composition. Primitive
people always choose primitive colors, but as culture develops the
more subtle variations are used. Hues were employed for the first
time by the Greeks, when their country was at the height of her
civilization; before that time there had been only unmixed primary
colors. A home in which the hues are used is more pleasing than one
in which there are merely the "plain fact" colors. In rooms where
single schemes dominate, hues are especially valuable in preventing
monotony and adding interest and variety.

Every color has a certain strength or value, and these values are
the steps between the lightest and the darkest possible tints of that
color. Blue-black is the darkest shade or value of blue, while pale
pink is the lightest value of red. Any two colors may be made to
correspond in value by adding the right proportion of either white
or black to one of them. Strong value contrast is apt to be harsh
and vulgar, if incorrectly used. The wood trim in a room is not,
as a rule, especially decorative, and should not, therefore, be allowed
to contrast too greatly in value with the walls, which it does when
either much darker or lighter than the latter. A spotty appearance
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is created, likewise, when the furniture in a room is dark and the walls light. And on the same principle, pictures, when used in a home, should be of the same general color value as the wall on which they are hung.

Color value should be consistent also with scale. That is, pale colors are appropriate for small rooms and for furniture which is light and delicate, while dark colors should be used in large, "architectural" rooms and with furniture which is heavy in build.

The vitality of a color is denoted by its intensity, or its relation to the neutral—gray. Intense color should be used with restraint, for brilliant coloring is pleasing only in small areas, just as "the flash of diamonds is more tolerable on account of their insignificant size." The ceiling, walls and floor of a room are the background or setting for its furnishings, and should always be neutralized. At the same time, their colors should be kept fresh and clear. A bold use of intense coloring is often necessary to make a textile design decorative; but masses of such color should not be allowed to come into contrast in a room, although they may be used to emphasize decorative notes. It should be remembered, also, that "the attempt to emphasize everything emphasizes nothing."

Both intensity and hue change with the variation of light. Therefore, before any fabric, article or color is finally selected for interior furnishing or decoration, it should be viewed in three lights—sunlight, shadow, and artificial light.

If the foregoing points are kept in mind, the home-maker will be able to introduce charm and cheerfulness into even the most unpromising rooms, through a wise use of color. Indeed, when people give the subject a little scientific study, and when a sensitiveness to color harmony is more widely developed, this important element will become a vital factor for beauty and restfulness in our homes.