Study of Color

CHAPTER NINE

Color, as has already been mentioned, is one of the vital elements of costume design. By means of color we are able to see the things by which we are surrounded; and if it were not that some things are darker than others, we would not know that they really exist.

All colors originate from the mixing of three elementary or primary colors, with the addition of white or black. These primary colors, as they are technically called, are yellow, blue, and red, and are said to have full strength or intensity.

What does each of these primary colors denote?

Try to visualize yellow. What does it suggest to you? Is it a feeling of light—a glow of warmth—a spirit of content? Or does it give a feeling of coldness—a suggestion of gloom—a sensation of darkness?

Go through the same process of visualizing blue and then red, and analyze your feelings carefully, for in design these colors are used with reference to a definite meaning.

To most people yellow is suggestive of brightness, warmth, and happiness; blue, of repose and peace; while red indicates heat, emotion, violence. Unquestionably, at various times you have assigned specific meanings to certain colors. You know, for example, that red roses are suggestive of love and passion, while
more sombre colored flowers bring to mind quiet and restfulness.

By mixing two of the primary colors in equal proportions, we secure what are known as binary colors. As an illustration of this, dip your brush into a glass of water and touch your yellow paint with it. Put this water-color into another container. After cleaning your brush, touch the blue with it and mix this blue with the yellow water-color you have made. Then test the mixture by using it on a piece of white paper. What have you secured? A deep green.

In the same manner, mix blue and red, and you will have violet. Now try red and yellow, and as a result you will have orange.

Naturally, these binary colors will suggest the feeling one gets through visualizing the primary colors of which they are composed. In other words, green—made up of yellow and blue—will make you feel the light and warmth of yellow and the coolness and repose of blue. Violet, on the other hand, radiates the heat and passion of red, dulled by the coolness and quiet of blue; while orange suggests a combination of the brightness and happiness of yellow, and the heat and violence of red.

Colors of full intensity are not worn by persons with good taste; as a matter of fact, a distinct lack is shown by attiring one’s self in flaming red, deep yellow, bright orange, brilliant blue, intense green.

What are complementary colors?

In general, colors are said to be complementary if they produce gray when mixed together; and no two colors can make gray unless they contain the yellow element, the blue element, and the red element.
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If you mix yellow and violet, you will find the resulting color to be gray; and the same result will be obtained by mixing blue and orange, or red and green. The reason for this is that in the first mixture of yellow and violet we have the yellow element, the blue element, and the red element—the last two being found in violet.

Similarly, in the blue and orange mixture, and in the red and green mixture, we have all three elements. Therefore we say that yellow and violet are complementary colors; and red and green are complementary colors.

Sometimes it is desirable to use one of these colors at full intensity in order to make one part of the costume especially attractive, but an intense color should not be used for large areas or surfaces.

There are various ways in which colors may be dulled or made less intense. Let us first produce gray by mixing a little yellow, blue and red. Since it is apparent to all that gray is the least intense of colors, it logically follows that in order to weaken a color, all that is necessary is to mix it with its complement, so that it is toned towards gray. Grayish red, it is readily seen, is less intense than normal red; and similarly, slightly grayish yellow would be less intense than normal yellow. This same toning of blue, green, violet, and orange would make them less obtrusive.

When a color is toned towards gray, it appears more pleasing, and it is then designated as a neutralized color.

We have also what are known as tints and shades—a tint of a color being any tone lighter than the normal color, and a shade being any tone darker than normal.
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These modifications of color produce finer and more delicate effects than are possible when the normal is used alone. As an example, light red, commonly known as pink, appears much softer looking than the normal red, and so, too, the darker red is less glaring, and consequently more pleasing than the normal red.

When a delicate effect is desired, the tints of colors should be used; while for impressive, reserved effects the shades of color should be selected. In combining one color with another, attention must be given to the general effect that is produced; colors must not clash or conflict with one another; instead, they should produce an easy, comfortable feeling, or as we say in costume design, they should harmonize with one another.

Color harmony consists of three kinds: analogous harmony, complementary harmony and tonal harmony.

In analogous harmony, all the various hues of one color are harmonious with one another. For example, all shades of green harmonize, one with the other, also with blue and yellow, of which green is composed. Blue and yellow, however, do not harmonize with each other.

All hues of violet are harmonious with one another, and with both blue and red—but blue and red are not harmonious.

All hues of orange harmonize with one another, and with both red and yellow—but red and yellow are not harmonious.

Taking complementary harmony into consideration, let us say first that complementary colors at full intensity are in direct contrast, and therefore not in
harmony with each other; but when dulled towards gray, or neutralized, they become harmonious.

To prove this, take two complementary colors—red and green, which, very obviously, do not harmonize. Now, try dulling these towards gray by putting a little red into the green, and a little green into the red, and you will find that they are in harmony. In brief: To produce complementary harmony, which is more pleasing to the eye than analogous harmony, tone two complementary colors toward gray.

Tonal harmony is the last class we have to consider. This is the harmony that exists between two different tones of a color—one tone being naturally lighter than the other. For instance, light blue harmonizes with dark blue. White and black harmonize with all colors; but in applying white and black to costume design, you must be careful not to combine too much white with dark colors, or too much black with light colors.

Exceptions to this color theory may be made in certain instances. Complementary harmony, when a touch of one color is used as trimming on the other, is permissible, and very effective.

Brilliant tones in chiffon or other filmy materials are quite in good taste for evening wear. The transparency of the texture renders the colors less intense. Study this chapter carefully and you will have a definite working idea of colors and their meaning as applied to dress design.