Fearless Color for Quilters

Become a better quilter and artistically elevate your projects! Learn how color – the most powerful and least understood design element – works by itself and within quilt designs.

Adapted from the book...

A Fiber Artist’s Guide to Color & Design
The basics & beyond
by Heather Thomas
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This handy guide to color includes the basic terminology used to describe color in all its glory, plus an introduction to the ways that colors can interact with each other, their surroundings, and with the viewer. The guide will introduce you to the many possibilities of color in your quilts so that you choose your fabrics to create cohesive, relatable color stories.

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He who wants to become a master of color must see, feel, and experience each individual color in its many endless combinations with all other colors.” Johannnes Itten

The first step to learning about color is to become familiar with the language used to describe its many attributes. It is a language that is often misused and misunderstood. As you become familiar with these terms you will grow to understand their unique meanings and will learn to personalize them with your own artistic adventure.

Color as a system, part of a universal visual language. Color theory is a set of ideas or principles with a scientific/correlative basis that is used to create artistic harmonious color combinations. That’s it.

As you look at the quilts included on the following pages, try to really see their colors and harmonies reflect the terminology being explained. This is the beginning of your color journey!
Color Categories in the classic “Painters Color Wheel”
The 12 colors of the color wheel can be separated into three important categories; primary, secondary and tertiary.

The Primary Colors
These colors cannot be made by mixing together any of the other colors, but are used to make every other color.

The Secondary Colors
These colors are less visually strong than the primaries that form them as more of the visible spectrum is subtracted.

The Tertiary Colors
The tertiary colors are made by blending a primary and secondary color and are visually less strong than both the primary and secondary colors.

12 Stage Painter’s Primary Color Wheel
Red, yellow and blue are the historical set of primary colors used for mixing pigments. The Painter’s Primary color wheel has been used in art, arts education and manufacturing for hundreds of years.
Expanding the Color Wheel

The Color Scale

Color can be expanded into what is called the color scale: pure hue, shade, tone and tint. Using color scale terminology can be a good way to describe value as the two are closely linked. The color scale is used to describe the millions of variables of the 12 colors of the color wheel.

How to read the Color Scale Wheel

The fabric color wheel below shows the pure hues modified by adding black, gray or white to the color.

Outer ring
- Pure Hues - Colors are fully saturated and bright

2nd Ring
- Shade - Pure hues mixed with black

3nd Ring
- Tone - Pure hues mixed with gray

Inner Ring
- Tint - Pure hues mixed with white

Fabric color wheel showing pure hues, shades, tones and tints

This 12 stage color wheel was made using various commercially available fabrics. It also positions the pure hues in the outer ring, shades in the next ring, tones in the next and tints in the center-most ring.
Pure Hues

Pure colors are referred to as hues. Hues are fully saturated, bright colors that have nothing added to them to deplete their visual prowess. Colors are considered pure when they are not diluted in any way. We use the basic names of the twelve colors to describe pure hue. A pure-hued green implies fresh green grass. A pure-hued red is that of a fire engine and a pure-hued yellow is the color of a ripe lemon.

Magna Chroma

by Heather Thomas

30" × 30"

This quilt uses hand-dyed fabric in pure hued versions of all twelve colors. Some of the sections are filled with highly saturated color while others use the pure hues in a lighter, lower saturation. All the colors play well off the dark, black background.

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Shades

When black is added to pure hues, shades are created. Shades can range in value from just slightly darker than the pure hue to extremely dark, all depending on the amount of black that is added. All shades are darker than the pure hues that form them. Shades are usually rich and dramatic, crisp and clear rather than dull and subdued like tones. Shades can be described as warm or cool. The cool shades are deep and rich such as navy, forest green and grape. The warm shades include the colors of autumn; pumpkin, rust, brown, burnt sienna and olive.

Star Flowers

by Heather Thomas

28-1/2" x 22-1/2"

This quilt features rich shades along with shaded tints. The colors sit boldly on the neutral, parchment colored background.

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Tones

Tones are hues that have gray added to them. Because gray comes in so many varieties there are also many, many varieties in tones. Gray can be formed by mixing black and white or by mixing pairs of direct complements to make brownish grays. With mixing just the pairs of direct complements alone, we can come up with a huge variety of grays. That number increases dramatically when we add the versions of gray that can be made when mixing black and white. Tones can range in value from light to dark depending on the original hue and how much and what type of gray has been added. They can be darker than or lighter than the hue they originate from and will always be duller or less intense. Some of the names we give to tones are sage, terra cotta and mauve.

Simple Squares

by Chris Lawson, 19” × 25”

This quilt features warm, soft tones in a variety of colors and contrasting warm and cool temperatures.

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Tints

Tints are lighter valued versions of pure hues and are made by adding white to a color. Tints can range in intensity from the palest hint of color to colors that are only slightly lighter than their pure hues. Tints are not just pastels. The color names melon, pink and periwinkle are all names we give to tints. These colors are always lighter in value than the pure hues they originate from. Gray can also be added to a tint making it a toned tint. These variations of colors are always duller and lighter than the pure hue. Some examples of names we give to toned tints are, light gold, pale sienna, dove blue and butter.

Coffee with Friends
by Heather Thomas, 35” x 34-1/2”

This quilt features both tints and toned tints. The colors are all lighter than the pure hues they come from. The tints are clear and the toned tints are dull or murky. Featured, are black and white photographs hand tinted with colored pencils.

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A Look at Each Color

“If it be imagined that this systematic classification of colors and contrasts banishes all difficulties, I should add that the kingdom of colors has within it multidimensional possibilities only partly to be reduced to simple order. Each individual color is a universe in itself. We must therefore content ourselves with an exposition of fundamentals.” Johannes Itten

Color is energy. It is a visual language. It is a tool that we use to express our feelings, dreams, desires and our experiences in the world. Each color has its own power or lack thereof. Each color evokes in us emotional and psychological responses. Getting to know the personalities of each of the twelve colors can help us to harness their energy so we can use them in predictable ways. It is difficult to use a tool that we are unfamiliar with, even more difficult to become friends with or fall in love with something that we don’t understand. The following pages offer you the opportunity to better understand each color and what it has to offer you as a tool.

Batik Pineapples
by Char Lempke,
in the collection of Heather Thomas
24” x 30¼”

From A Fiber Artist’s Guide to Color & Design The basics & beyond
Yellow Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Yellow is a primary color and the lightest on the color wheel. Your eye is drawn to yellow before any other color in a composition.

**Hue** Light, pure, lemon yellow is the most visually fatiguing color. More light is reflected off it than any other color.

**Shade** In shades it becomes what is often referred to as "olive". When black is added, yellow looks more like green.

**Tone** In its tones it becomes dull and much less powerful.

**Tint** In its tinted form it is soft and mellow.

Temperature warm

Inherent Value lightest

Personality the most cheerful color

Yellow Orange Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Yellow orange lacks the visual power of yellow but is a close second. Because it is a tertiary color it has many variations, each dependent on the amount of yellow or orange that is present prior to the change in color scale.

**Hue** Yellow orange is vibrant and energetic.

**Shade** In its shades it becomes delicious, chocolate brown.

**Tone** In its tones it is rich and golden.

**Tint** In its tinted form it becomes soft and buttery.
Orange Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Orange is made by mixing equal amounts of red and yellow. It is less visually strong than the primary colors used to create it.

**Hue** Exuberant and fun, orange promotes creativity and vitality.

**Shade** In its shades it is the color of change, of autumn, of deepening, of arousal.

**Tone** In its tones it is earthy and exotic

**Tint** In its tinted form it becomes apricot and tangerine.

Red Orange Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Red orange is created by mixing visually equal amounts of red and orange. It is the warmest of all the colors. Hue Yellow orange is vibrant and energetic.

**Hue** Red orange has a powerful exuberance in its pure hue.

**Shade** In its shade it is the color of deep autumn, falling leaves and fire.

**Tone** Its tones are the color of earth and brick.

**Tint** In its tinted form it becomes coral-like.
Red

Red Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Red is a high energy primary color that demands attention. However, in art it is considered temperature neutral because it neither advances or recedes; it sits in the mid plane.

**Hue** Pure red is the most dynamic of all the colors.

**Shade** In shades it becomes less aggressive and warmer.

**Tone** In its tones it loses some of its passion.

**Tint** In its tinted form, red is melon rather than true pink.

Artistically speaking red violet is somewhat temperature neutral. However, it will behave like the colors it is interacting with.

**Hue** Red violet’s energy is diluted by the violet.

**Shade** Its shades remind us of rich Burgundy wines, flowers, and Valentine’s Day.

**Tone** In its dusky tones it is old-fashioned and nostalgic.

**Tint** In its pale tints it is sweet and romantic.

Red Violet

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In Red Violet Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint, red violet's energy is diluted by the violet, making it somewhat temperature neutral. Its shades remind us of rich Burgundy wines, flowers, and Valentine’s Day. In its dusky tones, it is old-fashioned and nostalgic, and in its pale tints, it is sweet and romantic.
Violet

Violet Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Sophisticated and mysterious, secondary color violet is made by mixing visually equal amounts of red and blue.

**Hue** In its pure hue violet represents royalty, wealth and power.

**Shade** In its dark shades it loses power.

**Tone** In its tones it becomes muddy and loses its visual punch.

**Tint** In its pale tints it evokes nostalgia and sentimentality as well as sweet smells and tastes.

Blue Violet

Blue Violet Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Blue violet is a tertiary color with endless color variations.

**Hue** It is calm and cool just like blue yet contains the luxurious feel of violet.

**Shade** Its shades are rich and mysterious carrying violet’s sophistication.

**Tone** In its tones it is less intense and takes on the color of the added gray.

**Tint** In its tinted form it is delicate, evoking sentimentality and gentleness.
Blue

Blue Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Primary blue is a soothing color that can become depressing when gray is added.

**Hue** In its pure hue, blue is honest and loyal.

**Shade** In its shades it gives a message of integrity and trust.

**Tone** In its tones it can be depressing.

**Tint** In its tinted form it becomes soft and tranquil.

Blue Green

Blue Green Hue, Shade, Tone, and Tint

Blue green connects us with nature and its elements of sky, water, trees and grasses.

**Hue** In its hue, blue green has a soothing calmness.

**Shade** In its shades it has a gentle strength.

**Tone** In its tones it becomes weak and depleted of its strong natural elements.

**Tint** In its tinted form it resembles clear cool water.
Green

Green is made by mixing visually equal amounts of yellow and blue. It is considered temperature neutral because it does not advance like warm colors or recede like cool colors.

**Hue** In its pure hue, green symbolizes freshness, growth and serenity.

**Shade** In its shades it takes on a more earthy feel.

**Tone** In its tones it becomes dull and muddy.

**Tint** In its tinted form it is restful and soothing.

Yellow Green

Yellow green reminds us of early spring. Like its parent color green, it is neutral and behaves like the colors it is mixing with.

**Hue** It contains yellow’s exuberance and green’s freshness.

**Shade** In its shades it is dark like a forest’s undergrowth.

**Tone** In its tones it reminds us of old growth forests and hikes in the mountains.

**Tint** In its tinted form it is the color of early spring and new growth.
Gallery of Colorful Quilts

All quilts are from *A Fiber Artist’s Guide to Color & Design The basics & beyond* unless otherwise noted.

**One Yellow Flower** by Heather Thomas

**Telling Stories of Happiness and Joy** by Heather Thomas

**Terra** by Crystal Zagnoli

**Ivory Baltimore Wallhanging** by Wendy Sheppard, from *Recreating Antique Quilts*
Red Pinwheels by Gail Eamon

Green Mountains by Terry Simm

Grape by Brenda Diaz

Water Whimsy by Colette Schneider
“Color is life; for a world without color appears to us as dead. Colors are primordial ideas, the children of light.”

Johannes Itten

Getting to know the unique personalities of each of the 12 colors is the beginning of understanding color. However, it is gaining an understanding of how colors interact and relate to each other that will really help us create better art.

Experiencing the interaction of colors will help us to become more fluent as we make our art. We can learn how to balance the high energy of a little yellow with a lot of pure violet or how to cool down warm orange by surrounding it with blue green.

Exploring the interaction of colors in their various pure hues, shades, tones, tints, values and intensities can move us toward color maturity which in turn can set us free as artists.
Classic Color Combinations

There is more to learn about color than their individual characteristics. It is more about relationships and the interaction of colors. Experimenting will help you learn more about the ways colors play together, how they react to each other and how they behave in groups. Using the Color Harmonies to the right can help you choose your fabric colors purposefully with pleasing results.

Color Harmonies

Experimenting with these color combinations will help you learn more about the ways colors play together, how they react to each other and how they behave in groups.

Neutral or Achromatic
Includes true neutrals—black, gray and white. Can contain tan, off white, taupe, and other pale brown based colors.

Monochromatic
One color varied by value, color scale, intensity or saturation.

Direct complement
Any two colors that are directly across from each other on the color wheel.

Split complement
Three colors. Select one color and then the two colors on either side of its direct complement.

Double complement
Four colors. Select two adjacent colors and their direct complements.

Double split complement
Four colors. Two pairs of direct complements that are each separated by a color.

Analogous complement
Four to eight colors. One color and an analogous run whose middle color is the direct complement of the first color.

Analogous
Three to seven colors that are next to each other on the color wheel with only one primary included.

Triad
Three colors. Any three colors that are spaced evenly around the color wheel.

Tetrads
Four colors equidistant apart.

Polychromatic
70 to 100 percent of the colors on the color wheel.

Tetrad by Lori Nicholson
From A Fiber Artist’s Guide to Color & Design The basics & beyond
Gallery of Color Harmonies

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Floral Fancy Wallhanging by Wendy Sheppard, an example of Double Complement. From Recreating Antique Quilts.

Pinwheel Table Runner by Sue Voegtlin, an example of Achromatic Color Harmony. From Beginner’s Guide to Quiltmaking.

My Blue Heaven Quilt by Mary M. Hogan, an example of Analogous Color Harmony. From String Quilt Style.

Sweet Baby by Nancy Magnen, an example of Direct Complement
Rainbow Twist Quilt by Janet Pittman, an example of Polychromatic Color Harmony. From Colorful Quilts for Playful Kids.

Farmer’s Market Quilt by Angela Lawrence, an example of Analogous Complement Color Harmony. From Bright & Bold Wool Appliqué.

I love quilts! Wallhanging by Lynn Witzenburg, an example of Analogous Color Harmony. From Machine Quilting The basics and beyond.
Gallery of Color Harmonies

Star Studded Baby Quilt by Lynette Jensen, an example of **Triad Color Harmony**. From *Thimbleberries® Small Wonders*

Three Patch Wall Quilt by Lynette Jensen, an example of **Analogous Compliment Color Harmony**. From *Thimbleberries® Small Wonders*

Bloomin' Paisley Pillow by Angela Lawrence, an example of **Tetrad Color Harmony**. From *Bright & Bold Wool Appliqué*

Candy Blossoms Quilt by Sew Kind of Wonderful, an example of **Double Split Complement**. From *One Wonderful Curve*
A Fiber Artist’s Guide to Color & Design
The basics & beyond

The award-winning book by Heather Thomas covers the language of color and the principles of design. Complete with fabulous examples and 12 workshop lessons, each spectacularly presented to help you become a better artist.

208 pages • Softcover • $29.95

… a thorough, encouraging, and nuanced guide to color and design principles.
- Sarah White, ForeWord Reviews, Fall 2014; Reviewer

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