BRIGHT MODERNITY: COLOR, COMMERCE, AND CONSUMPTION IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Conference at the GHI, June 21-23. Conveners: Regina Lee Blaszczyk (GHI) and Uwe Spiekermann (GHI). Participants: Joyce Bedi (National Museum of American History, Washington), Isabella Campagnol (Rubelli Historical Collections and Archives), Augustine Cerveaux (Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia), Alexander Engel (Harvard University/University of Göttingen), Eva Eis (Kremer Pigments), Nicholas Gaskill (University of Chicago), Mary Lisa Gavenas (New York), Ingrid Giertz-Martenson (Centre for Business History, Stockholm), Dominique Grisard (University of Basel/New School for Social Research, New York), Jessica Jenkins (Royal College of Art, London), Carolyn Kane (City University of New York), Laura Anne Kalba (Smith College), Prakash Kumar (Colorado State University), Margaret Maile Petty (Victoria University of Wellington), Charlotte Crosby Nicklas (University of Brighton), Melissa Renn (Harvard Art Museums), Michael Paul Rossi (École Normale Supérieure de Cachane, Paris), Alex J. Taylor (University of Oxford), Lesley Whitworth (University of Brighton Design Archives).

Color is one of the most striking and yet under-researched topics of the modern history of consumption. Preindustrial societies featured an astonishing variety of natural dye stuffs, and color was used as a marker of social stratification and prestige. From the middle of the nineteenth century, however, color production changed fundamentally. New colors emerged, while synthetic dyes replaced — at least in the long run — most of the natural substances. The number of dyes grew from less than 50 in 1870 to around 1,300 by 1913. Western science, namely organic chemistry, became a decisive force for refiguring the color branch, first on a regional level, then in the Western world, and finally on a global scale.

These changes were described and discussed in the conference first panel “Working for a Colored World: Scientific Innovation and Industrial Perspectives, 1850-1914.” Alexander Engel’s presentation offered a concise overview of the transformation of the international dye business, using artificial indigo as an example. In contrast to heroic narratives of inventor-entrepreneurs, like William Henry Perkin, it has to be realized that artificial dyes had no noticeable price advantage over natural ones and that early producers aimed at specific high-end markets. Instead, the success of the new colors was based on an elaborate system of marketing. Specifically, the German
producers were able to offer a broad variety of coal-tar dyes, established systems of developing new products, and could use economies of scale. In addition, however, their salespersons were in close contact both with the customers and the chemists. The latter were praised in histories of innovation, but the merchants were crucial for economic success. Engel concluded his presentation with a detailed analysis of the introduction of new artificial blue by BASF in the late 1890s. The dye industry is a good example of the rise of large-scale business. The color market, however, was also served by smaller firms.

Eva Eis presented the history of the Farbenfabrik Heinrich Wiesel, a pigment producer from Thuringia, Germany. Although focusing on the niche market of painting, Wiesel did intense research and developed many varieties well recognized not only in Germany and by its neighbors but also by many customers in Canada and the U.S. Similar to Engel, Eis stressed the importance of marketing with sales agents and direct producer-customer relations for the success of the Wiesel family business.

While German firms were setting the standards of the new artificial dye business, it is also necessary to think about the (re)actions of the producers of natural dyes, often located in colonial dependence. Prakash Kumar gave intriguing insights into the countermeasures of Bengal indigo producers and British textile firms. The conflict concerned not primarily on prices but knowledge regimes. The Indians questioned the validity of “scientific” tests, condemning this as reductionist. Chemists, they argued, could realize the “real value” of natural dyes, the variety of non-standardized shades and nuances. However, most of the large textile producers disagreed. Natural indigo could defend its position only in the field of wool dyeing, where skills, practical experience, and artistry were still important. The Indian producers had a second chance during the First World War, but even then they were not able to change their critical attitude toward chemically standardized products and failed to improve their distribution networks.

Discussing the relevance of knowledge enriches not only business history but can also offer links between individual scientists and the general change of the color branches. Laura A. Kalba presented the work of the French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul, who was a celebrity in his lifetime. A physiologist by training, he thought about the effects of the intensely visual nature of modernity and tried to establish a new order of color. Chevreul’s color wheel contained
14,400 colors — a number smaller than the mixtures already available in mid-nineteenth-century France. It functioned, however, as an important taste-maker arguing for harmony and balance. The system caused lots of tension between fashion experts and the public, a typical struggle for modern consumer and knowledge societies.

The second panel, “Developing a New World of Goods: Color and Consumption, 1850-1930,” focused on the market and the (female) consumer. It is still an open question whether the fashion industry was one of the pioneers of consumer-oriented marketing, or whether this was introduced mainly by department stores. Based on colorists’ notebooks, dye manuals and middle-class women’s magazines, Charlotte Crosby Nicklas analyzed the British fashion market as a new “world laid by art and science” at the feet of the consumers. Triggered by new synthetic dyes, change and novelty became crucial to the discourse of fashion and women’s clothing. From the late 1850s, mauve, magenta, shades of blue and purple were among the most fashionable colors and, combined with white and black, established growing fashion markets and new standards of bourgeois respectability. But again, intermediates were decisive actors in this transformation, based on a growing number of standardized dye brands and fashion experts. Manufacturers still played a role here, especially if they produced for a high-quality market. Isabella Compagnol presented the example of the Venetian textile company Rubelli. In the late nineteenth century, its fabrics offered traditional regional colors, like crimson and savoy blue. Changes occurred, but the artisanal tradition did not allow radical changes to the range of colors, despite the strong influence of the Modernist movement on twentieth-century design. A break with the traditional Venetian textile spectrum came about not before the late Fascist era, when Rubelli included even a newly invented shocking pink in a selection of fabrics presented at the Milan Triennale in 1940. This Italian example showed that the textile markets of artisanal and historical traditions led to a broad variety of colors, styles, and fabrics in a dynamic market, where a glorified and imagined past opened new opportunities for high-value products.

Augustin Cerveaux’s analysis of the U.S. paint and varnish industry confirmed this trend toward a growing variety of colors and colored products. Paints had been selected predominantly for their usefulness. Yet after the Civil War, new ready-mixed paints transcended the old emphasis on durability and protection and allowed a more individualistic and aesthetic use of paints first by painters, and later by
consumers. However, this shift did not last very long. Master painters, now organized in powerful interest groups, advocated “pure” colors and favored consumer education. Utilitarian arguments became more important even before World War I and dominated during the 1920s — at least in Du Pont’s Duco advertisements: Scientific progress and the painter as color expert were promoted as the dominant forces in the market. This reminds us to broaden our definition of consumers (away from the individual end user) and the use of colors (not only in fashion but also in housing and construction).

Knowledge seems to be a crucial analytical category for understanding color, commerce, and consumption within a global perspective. Consequently, the third panel focused on the “Knowledge Base for Endless Novelties: The American Example.” Changing production patterns, consumer markets, and aesthetics derived from the ways colors were perceived and defined by experts and consumers. Nicholas Gaskill used the case of the entrepreneur and educator Milton Bradley (1836-1911) to explore the role of childhood education in the formation of color markets. His manuals on color pedagogy, published in the 1890s, formulated a model of color perception based on a simple and logical nomenclature and the solar spectrum; they also provided the equipment for teaching his ideas. Learning such elementary skills was expected to allow the pupil to resist the lure of modern color advertisements and designed products — and it made Bradley one of the most successful U.S. toy producers. However, he was only one of many U.S. academics who developed new systems to fight the “color anarchy” of the late nineteenth century and to establish more nuanced terms and theories for dealing with bright modernity. Michel Rossi discussed the contributions of U.S. psychologist Christine Ladd-Franklin (a theory of color vision based on evolution), ornithologist Robert Ridgway (an “objective” nomenclature of colors), and painter Albert Henry Munsell (a numerical description of colors, which served as a model for many international color schemes). Rossi emphasized the fundamental linguistic problems of defining colors and producers’ and distributors’ need for a standardized nomenclature. At the same time, the contrasts of different systems made it clear that any color system, although derived from similar anthropological expressions in most human languages, results from cultural evolution and therefore expresses power relations and interests.

“Color” not only tells us more about the construction of modern consumer societies but can be a very helpful tool for analyzing “Desires
and Determination: The Gendered World of Color and Consumption,” the title of the fourth panel. Margaret Maile Petty gave instructive insight into leading U.S. firms’ use of gender roles in marketing light bulbs from the 1920s to the 1950s. Colored lampshades were presented as giving the home a feminine identity related to the personality of the housewife and her understanding of the “right” look. Homes were often decorated like retail window displays; standardization and variety went hand in hand. Such marketing strategies were not only pushed by the use of light effects in the visual media and the variations of wall colors but also by the invention of colored incandescent bulbs by General Electric in 1955. “Bulb-snatching” was a rather typical part of the lifestyle choice in the postwar period. The housewives’ choices of seasonal colors and color-tailored interior lit up the male breadwinners’ homes.

The attribution of colors to gender roles, however, changed drastically over time. While babies today often live in the gendered spheres of blue or pink, pink was a fairly common male baby color decades ago. The characteristics of today’s cult of pink were analyzed by Dominique Grisard. She discussed current explanations of the “pinkification” of Girl Culture and its relation to modern consumer culture. In modern feminist discourses, the gendering of colors and color preferences is often perceived as a conservative backlash reproducing gender and class inequality. Grisard, however, stressed, in addition, that “pinkification” can also be interpreted as a search for authenticity, resting upon the belief that inner feelings and outer appearance need to correlate. Whatever the answer might be, the process created new markets and added economic value.

Most of the conference contributions focused on national examples. Color, however, was always discussed in a transnational framework, as the fifth panel “Managing Color: The Establishment of National and Transnational Networks” made clear. Fashion, industrial design, and interior design professions established discussion circles, networks, and institutions to manage color mainly in the western world. With this, trade and industry associations played an important role in making a bright modernity, too often understood as the result of the work of some fashion celebrities or individual firms. Lesley Whitworth presented the work of the British Colour Council and the UK Council of Industrial Design from the 1930s to the 1970s. Their goal was to establish color standards for government and industry, which were used mainly by the textile and interior decorations
industry. This was not a *l’art pour l’art* activity but part of a larger European effort to rival the American Munsell system. In addition, these institutions promoted a more harmonious (that is, more successful) balance of color and design. Their success was limited and their financing always precarious; but they were at least part of the broader movement to strengthen British competitiveness during the second wave of globalization.

More successful was MODEUROP, an international fashion network for shoe and leather accessories. Ingrid Giertz-Martenson, who once served in this group as a Swedish representative, gave instructive insights into the origins and objectives of this group, founded in 1960. Based on national initiatives, namely, the Swedish Shoe Fashion Council and the Nordic Fashion Council (founded in 1949), the main task of the fashion experts was to forecast the trends of color and leather materials, to inform local producers, and to enable international cooperation among producers. MODEUROP was located in Switzerland and started by thirteen western European countries. Later, six eastern European countries and India were included as well. Although international in its membership, the network triggered many negotiations on the “right” (national) color proposition, broadly suitable names, and the hierarchies in international shoe business.

Similar topics of fashion and national identity/pride were discussed by Mary Lisa Gavenas, who examined the history of one of the most successful textile and color exhibition and forecasting groups, *Première Vision*. Founded in 1973, it first served as a competitor of the leading Frankfurt/Main-based textile fair Interstoff, which set trends for international mass markets from 1959. Driven by traditional French pride in glamour and fashion, *Première Vision* offered an alternative for a more producer-oriented and trendy fair. Located first in Lyon and then in Paris, it quickly became a center of international color and textile fashion forecasting. As a consequence of the new Frankfurt/Main venture, Texworld, and globalization, additional fairs were established in New York and Shanghai. As a venture of fashion producers for fashion producers, the annual color card results from detailed negotiations among the leading fashion houses and the largest distributors. With this, color experts set dominant trends on a global scale.

Fashion is the dominant field of research for color studies, but it is perhaps not the most important one. Therefore, the sixth and final panel, “Changing the Everyday Life: Architecture and Visual Culture,”
tried to broaden the discussion on the underexamined fields of color printing and architecture. Melissa Renn examined the role of new printing techniques and the reproduction of colored artwork for the success of Life magazine. Although often praised for its photojournalism, Life reported regularly on historic and contemporary art. Using the Donelly rotary press, invented in 1934, the magazine was able to produce high-quality color reproductions, reaching a peak of 13.5 million copies in the 1940s. The magazine cooperated with leading museums and popularized and defined icons of art. In this capacity, it positioned the U.S. as the center of the art world, democratized high art, and paved the way for the poster business. The extensive use of color, however, was not only restricted to the western world.

Jessica Jenkins analyzed the discussion on color, architecture, and urban planning in East Germany during the first Cold War. Based on the discussions of Weimar architects and urban planners on the “colorful city,” the reconstruction of the GDR was supposed to offer the new socialist society a new approach. In the 1960s, architects like Siegfried Tschiersky, Bruno Flier, and Hans Schmidt advocated a new expressiveness and the use of colored walls and facades in prefabricated building. At the same time, they discussed the limits of Buntheit, of overly bright and vivid colors, already used in the production of cars. In addition, they faced the economic constraints and material limitations of the East German construction business. These restrictions became dominant in the 1970s when gray and ocher plattenbau facades dominated the appearance of East German towns.

All of the contributions were the subject of lively and productive discussion. Regina Lee Blaszczyk concluded that the conference had provided important answers to the main questions: What is color, how should color be studied, what are the dominant and most worthwhile research topics, and how should color be embedded in a comparative or even a transnational perspective. A conference volume is in preparation and will be published in the GHI’s “Worlds of Consumption” series with Palgrave Macmillan.

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