



Color and Culture

With their large pools of international students, the School of Visual Arts in New York, California State University at Los Angeles, and the American Film Institute in Los Angeles afforded me, as a faculty member, the opportunity to explore cultural similarities and differences in response to color. I discovered that while students' individual stylistic approaches to color might indeed be different in character, their primary response was instinctual and similar. That is to say, the students tended to choose the same kinds of colors to express the same emotions.

To verify this, I recently invited former students of mine from different countries to participate in this experiment. First, by a vote, the participants selected two different emotional states. They were asked to recall an experience with those emotions that left a lasting impression in their memory. These students visualized not what the external experience looked like (they were instructed to put their left brains on "quit"), but rather, what their inner visceral response looked like. What, for example, were the feeling's colors, direction, size, and texture? They selected Tranquility and Rage.

Paints in the six major spectrum colors plus black and white were set out for their selection. The first three participants painted in Los Angeles at the same place at the same time.¹ As they began to paint, the students became so concentrated that the stillness in the room was palpable. No one knew which emotion the others were interpreting. They completed the paintings in less than an hour.

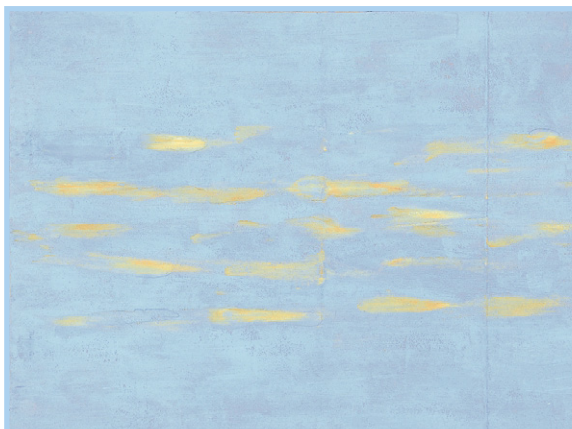
¹ The fourth student painted in the same place on another time by himself. The student from Singapore painted alone in New Jersey and the Mexican student painted alone in Davis, California. All participants had the same exact colors available to them. Many of them painted on brown paper grocery bags.

Here are the results along with the students' comments on their experience:

TRANQUILITY:

Juey Chong Ong
Singapore

I live on the Hudson River waterfront, and whenever I'm in a state of unease, walking by the river always makes me feel better, especially during sunset. The flowing water seems to wash away the stress and the negative feelings and the warmth of the glow from the setting sun is comforting. When I thought of a tranquil moment, I thought of water flowing past my fingers, and of a certain warmth.



Anna Vogt
Berlin, Germany

For me, tranquility is this feeling of calmness deep inside of myself. I always experience a feeling of warmth when I am calm. I guess that's why this tone of peach and pale rose arose within me. When I painted, I got calm myself and almost fell asleep.



Kaido Yamada
Tokyo, Japan

I have no "reason" how and why I picked these colors for "tranquility," they just came to my head. I knew I wanted a lighter color for the center. I felt there was something missing in my painting and this shape came into mind. It's not a tree or smoke. I don't know what it is. I picked up a different brush to do it. It was a brush for Japanese calligraphy. (Author's note This was not Yamada's brush. It was part of a selection of brushes set out by the author.)





Ilya Noe
Mexico City, Mexico

I proceeded to lie down flat on my belly. It was quite obvious to me that I was not going to need any “prosthetics.” My hands sufficed. My movements were liquid, flowing smoothly and continuously for more than 13 minutes. I had at least one hand in contact with the paper at all times. I breathed gently.



Samuel Cordoba
Bogota, Colombia

I envisioned tranquility as a white, smooth color. At first, I filled the paper only with white, but it made me realize that pure white was so overwhelming that it could almost change this feeling to its opposite. Fear of emptiness. So, I just added a little bit of green and black, very much mixed with the white in a very smooth and soft way.



Christiane Benzonelli
Albertville, France

Two things that make me relaxed are the sea and the sky. When I painted the blues of the sea and the sky, I felt the calm in me so strong. It was like my heart was beating with a lightly waving emotion. I felt so relaxed doing it.

**Samuel
Bogata, Colombia**

Rage is an explosion coming from black. I was actually astonished that as I evoked this emotion, I saw a lot of green in it. Green mixed with black and on top, the furious red.



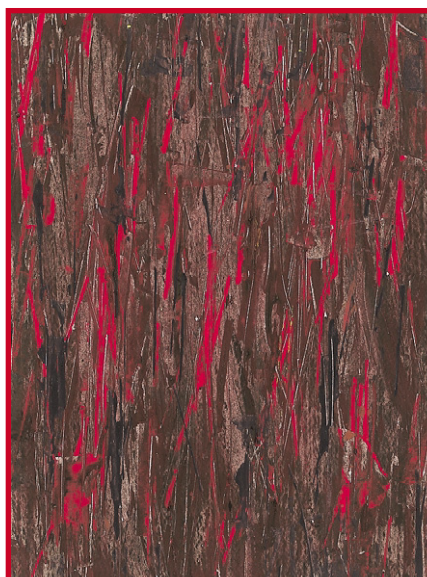
**Kaido
Tokyo Japan**

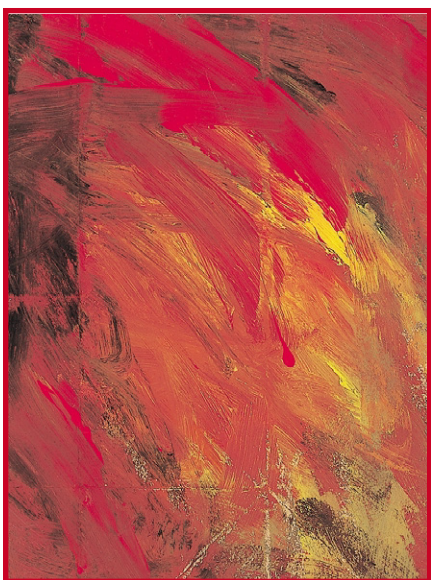
Again, I have no reasons why I picked black, red, and yellow. I painted spontaneously with no vertical or horizontal lines. I put some pattern in based on my feelings.



**Ilya
Mexico City, Mexico**

The painting was done standing up and in 4 minutes at the most. A spatula, a pair of scissors, and a utility blade were the tools I chose to extend my body. My strokes were forceful sharp and spastic. I scraped and injured the paper with blacks and different shades of reds. My heartbeat sped up and my breathing became agitated.





Anna
Berlin, Germany

It is almost like an explosion for me coming from the lower parts of my body, moving up. Red came up immediately to me, but also black and yellow.

Christiane
Albertville, France

On a sunny day (which is why I use the yellow), something explodes in my heart for a moment. I bleed (red). I hurt deeply (black).



Juey
Singapore

There was a time in my life when I had a hot temper. I remembered the times when I felt so angry that I lost control and became more physical than I should. At those moments, I just blew up. It felt irrational, out of control, explosive. The end result wasn't pretty. Today, I painted an ugly red and repeatedly pounded my fist dipped in black at the paper.

My seven-year-old noticed "Rage" when I was packing the paintings to bring to the FedEx office. In two seconds, she stunned me by saying, "That looks like mad." I hadn't told her what I was painting. She just knew.



It is important to remember that none of the participants knew what choices the others made for their interpretations. Note how red is included for the expression of “Rage” in all of the pieces. Red may be the celebratory color of weddings in India or the color worn by neighborhood vigilantes in New York. Whatever emotion this color affects, however, whether it’s rage, fear, or euphoria, it is a powerful and passionate response. And there is no doubt, as these pieces (and many others) show, that tranquility is a horizontal state of mind.

So in the end, we find that the more we experience color as it finds expression in all cultures, the more we can be able to find our visual expression more finely tuned within ourselves.

Art director and workshop participant Anna Vogt, from Berlin, made this extraordinary observation:

Going through that experiment and realizing that these basic emotions are felt if not in the same, then in a similar way, is exiting. In times where solitude has become the basic condition of all of us, this experience gives comfort because it creates a sense of community—a community not based on external confessions or regulations but on the inner condition of each individual.

WHY NOT TRY THIS EXPERIMENT YOURSELVES?

Simply buy inexpensive red, yellow, blue, black, and white tempera paint and one inexpensive one-inch brush from your local art store. Have the bottles open and the brush ready to use. Use brown grocery bags as your paper. (This eliminates the cost intimidation factor, as well as the fear of the blank white page.) Like a frame, tape off an area on your paper with one-inch masking tape. Use a plate or cookie tray as a palette for your paint.

You are going to recall an emotional experience that left an indelible imprint on you. Feel it in your body. Is it warm or cold, vertical or horizontal, fast or slow, narrow or wide, etc.? Stay there in that place and let the memory of that emotion guide what colors you choose and how you move your painting implement. You don't have to use a brush; you can use a knife, fork, and spoon if you want to. Anything that will put paint on paper will do. First, pick a color (you will automatically know which one to choose), and paint a base coat on the paper. Immediately begin to put other colors down, either mixing them into the first coat or placing them on top of it. Your painting is a direct translation of your physical and emotional experience. You will know what to do. You will know when you are finished.

You can do this in a group or by yourself. However you do this experiment, it will affect your awareness of how color and emotion are inextricably bound, no matter where you are or where you come from. With what you learned from this experience, you have the information to be able to take charge of the emotions generated in your environment, whether on or off screen. You have the proof that it works. The rest is up to you.

—Patti Bellantoni