

## Cross-Culture Color

### Deep-Rooted Associations Shape Reaction to Color

By DENISE TURNER

The meanings of some colors cross the boundaries of culture and language, representing a shared bank of memories that go back to our distant ancestors, while others are specific to cultures, locations and time. And throughout history our response to art, clothing, nature and the built environment is in large part related to the symbolic associations we have with color. ¶ Colors are the magical threads that weave throughout every culture. Color experts, historians and anthropologists generally agree on color’s broad meaning, but there are still disagreements about specific meanings. This is primarily due to the fact that every color has both positive and negative connotations. So although color meanings are often ambiguous and difficult to pin down, that does not negate their importance. Given the growing importance of non-Eurocentric cultures, it’s worth exploring the varied meanings colors have in India, the Middle East and many different Pacific Rim countries.



Photo by Denise Turner

**RED:** For the Japanese, red is a national symbol of blood and passion on one hand, and a religious symbol on the other, as the color is reserved for the robes of the second highest abbot in Zen Buddhist practices.

For those who practice Feng Shui, red is used to attract positive energy and many Chinese (and other Feng Shui adherents) paint their doors red to welcome chi to their homes. A new coat of red for the front door is a traditional New Year’s practice.

In China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, red is the symbol of fire, summer, the south, good luck, joy, fertility and fortune, all good reasons why red is the traditional color for Chinese brides. Packages wrapped in red are given on happy occasions and red envelopes containing money are traditional gifts for children on the Lunar New Year.

However, across Southeast Asia, a letter written in red ink means the writer is angry or the relationship is severed, and to sign your name in red ink is considered unlucky.

Many Indian brides also wear red wedding gowns, as red is the color associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and beauty. Here red symbolizes the birth of a new phase of their life, to be filled with wealth and fertility.

A tint of red, but carrying far different connotations, pink is typically the color of celebration, hope and happiness. And perhaps nowhere is this color more cherished than in India. At the Ganesh festival, which celebrates the Hindu god of good omens, pink dust is tossed onto the spectators at the conclusion of the parade.



Photo by Timothy Showalter

**ORANGE:** Throughout Asia, orange, particularly a warm saffron, is freighted with symbolism, as it is among the most common color of Buddhist monk's robes. One legend links the orange, rust and yellow robes of the monks to the changing colors of leaves, a constant reminder of the need to let go. A more prosaic explanation is that very early in Buddhist history the robes were dyed with familiar vegetable dyes including jackfruit, cumin and saffron and that these colors became standardized even as the religion spread out from its roots in northern India across Asia.

For most of Asia, orange symbolizes happiness, plenty and good health, while peach, a tint of orange, represents immortality.

**YELLOW:** Revered in China as a color of honor, reserved for royalty and high priests, yellow also represents the gods and power. According to legend, yellow became the symbol for the earth and creation because of the yellow soil in northern China, home of the earliest of ruling dynasties.

In Malaysia, yellow is also associated with royalty and the Malay sultans; it also represents Islam, the country's official religion. In Indonesia, yellow is the color of Garuda, the mythical bird that is the country's national symbol. In Zen monasteries, yellow is worn by the third most senior abbot.

At spring festivals in India yellow is omnipresent: Participants wear yellow clothing, eat yellow food and sprinkle yellow turmeric powder over statues of the gods associated with the spring holidays. In many traditional Indian weddings, the couple smears turmeric extract on their skin, essentially dying themselves yellow, a practice believed to bring them good luck, health, wealth and many children.



Photo by Denise Turner

**GREEN:** Across China, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan, soft jade greens, influenced by nature, are prized. In China's Forbidden City, green roof tiles cover the wing where the young princes resided. A Chinese tradition holds that to dream in green is a sign that good fortune is on its way, but if the color pervades the entire dream, it signifies that he would soon find himself in peril. In Muslim tradition green signifies the Prophet Muhammad and therefore represents the entire religion. Being Islam's sacred color, green is reserved as a special sign of respect and worship in Malaysia and Singapore.



Photo by Susan Schultz



Photo by Timothy Showalter

**BLUE:** Surprisingly for a color that surrounds us through sea and sky and, in the form of indigo, is one of our earliest dyestuffs, the word for blue appeared in all the world's languages long after the words for black, white, brown, red, green and yellow. The linking of blue with water and heaven runs through almost every culture, but in India the color is especially revered. It symbolizes the heavens, mercy, love and the mysterious nature of truth. Lord Vishnu and his many aspects, including Shiva and Krishna, are often depicted with blue skin, where the darker the color means the deeper the mystery.



Photo by Anastasya Lvova

**PURPLE:** In ancient times, a mollusk native to the Mediterranean was the primary source for the color purple. It took over 12,000 mollusks to gather a few drops of colorant and therefore, the extremely expensive color became associated with royalty and the upper echelons of religion. The secret to this particular color was kept by the Phoenicians for centuries, further enhancing its mystique that even far-off cultures such as India, China and Japan came to regard purple as an imperial color. For example, purple (violet) robes are reserved for the highest ranking Zen Buddhist abbot while many Chinese associate purple with propitious omens.

**BROWN:** The color of rich, fertile soil and the bark of trees, brown surrounds us in many ways, so it makes sense that it is one of few colors besides the main primary and secondary colors to be named in early languages. In contrast to European cultures where brown was often viewed as drab, other cultures found a particular beauty in brown. In Japan, brown and other earthy hues play a significant role in Shibui tradition, an aesthetic that honors simple, subtle and unobtrusive beauty. While in Arabic languages the word for brown is derived from the same root as that of the word for coffee (bunn), while the word for dust, which in most of the Arab world meant desert sand, is khaak, from which we get khaki.

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Photo by Joseph Banjo

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