



# THE MEANING OF COLOUR

A Special Report by Alison Dunn, Caboo Design

What's in a colour? Despite our concern for equality and diversity, little attention has been paid to the meaning of colour for different cultures, religions and ethnic groups. Here we pull together some 'meanings' from a variety of sources, and include some advice for designers.

You do not need to be a designer to have a relationship with colour. Everyone has their favourite colours and some people have extremely strong feelings or superstitions about colour in their lives. It can have a rational basis: for example, red doesn't suit your hair colour or skin tone. Or it can be completely irrational: green is unlucky.

Years ago when I became editor of *Nursing Times*, without a nursing background, the nurse editors on the team severely warned me off using red and white together on the cover. Deeply rooted in nursing superstition was the belief that red and white flowers should never be put together on a hospital ward: it was an almost pathological obsession because it was associated with death on the ward. Where did this come from? One explanation is that it represents blood, bandages, First World War and death.

For graphic designers, who have a professional relationship with colour, dealing with the intense emotional feelings that clients may hold about the use of colour can be difficult. Not only are there strong personal preferences, the origins of which may well be unfathomable, buried deep in the psyche of the human mind, but there is also powerful cultural and ethnic colour symbolism.

Even if you are not specifically designing for an international audience, you need to be aware of the way different cultures view colours. In the UK, we live and work in a multi-cultural society and anyway websites do not recognise geographic, cultural or ethnic borders.

Take weddings. In Western culture now, few brides think beyond white or cream but in the Middle Ages the colour you chose related to your display of wealth, with deeper dyes denoting deeper pockets. Red or purple was good, but black was best of all because that was an expensive colour to get right. It all changed in 1840 when Queen Victoria married Albert and went for white.

In China and other Eastern cultures, red is often the colour worn by brides but there are hundreds of cultural variations and traditions. Asian Muslim brides wear brightly coloured clothes and masses of jewellery; Arab Muslim brides, on the other hand, usually wear white like their Western counterparts.

Black is the colour of death and mourning in Western cultures; in Eastern cultures including China, India and Japan, it's white. Red is a mourning colour in South Africa, but in Egypt it is yellow and in Thailand it is purple while blue is the colour associated with death in Iranian culture.

## Here are some cultural colour associations



### Red

**China:** the colour of brides, good luck, celebration, summoning  
**Cherokees:** triumph, success  
**India:** purity  
**South Africa:** mourning colour  
**Eastern:** worn by brides, joy (in combination with white)  
**Western:** excitement, love, passion, stop  
**Europe/USA:** Christmas (with green), Valentine's day (with white)  
**Hebrew:** sacrifice, sin  
**Japan:** life  
**Christian:** sacrifice, passion, love

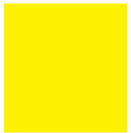
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### Blue

**European:** soothing, 'something blue' bridal tradition, depression  
**Cherokees:** defeat, trouble  
**Iran:** mourning, colour of heaven and spirituality  
**China:** immortality  
**Colombia:** soap  
**Hinduism:** the colour of Krishna  
**Judaism:** holiness  
**Christianity:** Christ's colour, colour of Mary's robe  
**Middle East:** protection  
**Worldwide:** 'safe' colour

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### Yellow

**European:** Easter, happiness, hope, joy, cowardice, hazards, weakness  
**Asia:** imperial, sacred  
**China:** royalty, nourishing  
**Egypt:** mourning  
**Japan:** courage  
**India:** merchants  
**Buddhism:** wisdom

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### Orange

**European:** autumn, harvest, creativity  
**Netherlands:** favourite colour (House of Orange)  
**Ireland:** protestants  
**USA:** Halloween (with black), cheap goods  
**Hinduism:** saffron (peachy orange) is a sacred colour

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### Brown

**Colombia:** discourages sales  
**Australian Aboriginals:** colour of the land, ceremonial ochre

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### Green

**China:** exorcism, green hats indicate a man's wife is cheating on him  
**Japan:** life  
**Islam:** hope - the cloak of the prophet was thought to be green, virtue - only those of perfect faith can wear green  
**Ireland:** symbol of the entire country, Catholics  
**Western:** spring, new birth, go, safe, environmental awareness, Saint Patrick's Day, Christmas (with red)  
**USA:** money

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### Purple

**Thailand:** mourning (widows)  
**European:** royalty  
**Catholicism:** death, mourning, crucifixion

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### White

**European:** marriage, angels, doctors, hospitals, peace  
**Japan:** mourning, white carnation symbolizes death  
**China:** mourning, death,  
**India:** unhappiness  
**Eastern:** funerals

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### Black

**European:** mourning, funerals, death, rebellion, cool, restfulness  
**China:** colour for young boys  
**Thailand:** bad luck, evil, unhappiness,  
**Judaism:** unhappiness, bad luck, evil  
**Australian Aboriginals:** colour of the people, ceremonial ochre

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Healthcare People Management Association logo designed by Caboo design

Blue is widely regarded as a safe colour, associated with healing, health and tranquility. In the UK, blue is the healthcare colour: the NHS logo is blue and nurses' uniforms are often blue. The Department of Health puts blue and green together in its logo and website. Blue also has negative meanings such as being depressed, being cold or unable to breathe. And because blue is very rarely a food colour, it is also associated with appetite suppression.

Pink can be more dangerous. In an early bit of powerful branding in 1937, the Italian designer Elsa Schiaparelli, friend of Salvador Dali and Alberto Giacometti, launched the perfume *Shocking*. It had hot pink packaging and a bottle in the shape of a woman's torso inspired by Mae West's tailor's dummy. It caused a sensation. The name stuck and now we all know exactly what shocking pink is. It can be the designer's best friend.

Here at Caboo we used it for the logo of the Healthcare People Management Association, which has proved popular and versatile. In a way it suggests an organisation which can punch above its weight. But, warns US nurse entrepreneur Patricia Ann Bemis (*Alternative Journal of Nursing July 2006*), pink is tranquilizing and can sap people's energy. 'Locker rooms of opposing teams are sometimes painted bright pink so the opponents will lose energy,' she writes.

She reckons that colours have particular connotations in business. For example, green, she says, is used to communicate status and wealth whereas yellow appeals to intellectual types. Beware of the feminine implications of pink. Purple is high value, grey suggests a traditional, conservative company and red is great for boldness.

And there's orange, a tricky colour to work with. In the States, orange is associated with the bargain basement although it makes a more dramatic appearance at Halloween teamed up with black. A major international mobile phone company chose Orange as its entire brand and it's easyJet's corporate colour. For many of its staff it must be a tricky combination of a difficult-to-wear colour and a difficult-to-wear uniform.

Fashion and trends play a part too: on websites for example, the bold blocks of colour which so often characterised sites in the past have now given way to a much lighter look with pastel colours. Trends in colour go across design media: lime green on the catwalk turns up as lime green in cushions and curtains in the portfolios of the interior design stylists. And graphic designers like it too, judging by our own Caboo logo, and other design agencies clearly like its bold freshness, too.

So how do you go about directing a designer on what type of colours you might like for a new report, brand or corporate identity? It's the designer's stock in trade to select from 1,371 total solid colours in the Pantone chart and to understand how colours work together.

But you also need a clear idea of what you want the colours to achieve and you need to think about the different impact that different colours could have.

**Using colours carefully can help you to:**

- Reflect what you feel is important about your brand eg do you want a vibrant look eg red or a more sophisticated feel eg grey
- Link your new corporate identity with your old to give continuity
- Develop your brand 'architecture', ie differentiate the parts of your organisation under one banner
- Avoid any cultural or ethnic sensitivities
- Show whether you want a fashionable look with the latest colours or a more longer-living look with colours that rarely go out of fashion

Do you agree? What colours do you think always work and which do you think are best avoided? We welcome ideas, comments and... superstitions.

**Alison Dunn** has been involved in healthcare communications for over thirty years. She was editor of *Nursing Times* and *HSJ*, before becoming director of communications at the Royal College of Nursing. She then set up the RCN's publishing company and launched *Nursing Standard* as a weekly magazine. For the past fifteen years she has been joint managing director, with Will Chamberlain-Webber, of Chamberlain Dunn and Caboo Design.



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