

Coordinating Colour

Choosing the colours for a quilt should be the most creative and fun part of designing, yet many of us baulk when it comes to coordinating colours.

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Red Flower by Ruth Buchanan (APQ 10/6) is in a combination of cool colours except for the striking bright red flowers.



A range of print sizes add visual interest to a quilt.

Over time, colours have come to symbolise different things in different cultures. For example, in China, yellow was a symbol of enlightenment and wisdom and could only be worn by the emperor, while in the Roman Empire, only the emperor and high-ranking officials could wear purple – hence it is known as royal purple. At that time purple was made from molluscs and expensively produced and to this day it is still commonly associated with royalty – as is its counterpart ‘royal’ blue.

Other age-old customs relating to colour are still widely practised today. In the West, people usually wear black when they are mourning, yet in China, white is worn at funerals and never at weddings. The Catholic Church has a strict colour system, with priests wearing different coloured vestments based on events in the religious calendar year.

Colours also have common meanings in everyday life. Red means danger and passion, blue symbolises the sky and water and is often thought of as calming, green is for nature and yellow – which is the most luminous of colours – represents the sun and happiness because of its brightness.

If colours automatically make us think of feelings or moods, then colour combinations in quilts will have the same effect upon the viewer. A monochromatic blue quilt may be described as calming, while a bright yellow one might evoke a happy mood. A range of oranges, reds and browns will remind us of autumn, while a quilt using reds and greens mixed with white – coincidentally the colours of the holly plant in snow – may remind us

of Christmas, for they are the colours traditionally associated with that time of the year.

In the past, artists and people who worked extensively with colour were told that the only way to become expert colourists was through trial and error. This left many artists with a palette full of mud – the colour achieved when all the colours are mixed together – and not much else. Although experimentation is important, every artist and designer will agree that some level of understanding of colour is crucial.

The Colour Wheel



The 12-part colour wheel is the traditional basis of colour theory. While many colour experts have devised their colour wheels which may contain 24, 36 or even 100 colours, the theory behind them all is the same.

Every colour wheel begins with the primary colours, see diagram 1, which are red, blue and yellow. These colours are the foundation from which every other colour is formed. Secondary colours, see diagram 2, are simply two primary colours mixed together. For example primary blue and yellow make secondary green and at this stage our colour wheel has six colours.

Tertiary colours, see diagram 3, are based on a mixture of a primary and a secondary colour. For example a mixture between primary yellow and secondary orange produces a tertiary yellow-orange

colour. This now becomes a 12-part colour wheel on which to base our colour theory.

You may like to make your own colour wheel. To do this, grab the kids' colouring pencils and colour your own, or just use the one provided in this book. Another useful exercise is to make a colour wheel using your fabric stash as this will also help you identify what colours are most prominent in your collection and which ones you will need to add to the mix.

Because many fabrics used in quilting are prints, they may fall into more than one colour. For instance a fabric with a cream background, green leaves and bright red flowers could be used in both the red and green parts of the colour wheel. Or, you may have a blue print which has a variety of shades including bright blue and aqua-blue. This is a bonus in patchwork fabric as you can get twice the use.

Warm and Cool Colours



Looking at a colour wheel, it is easy to see how it splits into a warm and a cool side. The cool side comprises blues and greens while the warm side has reds, yellows and oranges. Cool colours usually denote feelings of serenity and calmness and they have a tendency to recede into the background. For an example of a quilt comprised entirely of cool colours, turn to page 20 for Perhaps they're Irises.

Warm colours usually inspire happy and cheerful moods and they also tend to have more impact and stand out.

Remember that, while some colours appear warm at first, they can look cool when paired with other colours. The colour yellow-green is considered to be a cool colour but when placed with orange it is clearly the cooler of the two. But when yellow-green is placed next to blue, then it is the warmer colour.



This autumn leaf block displays a slight change in values as well as utilising prints of various size.

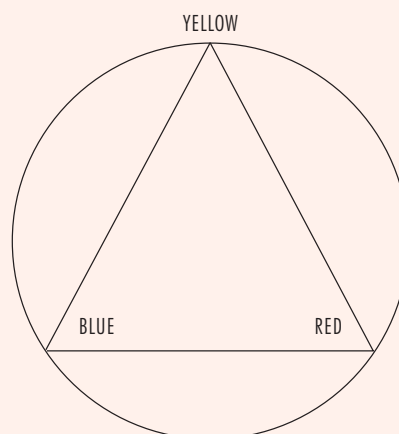


Diagram 1. Primary Colours

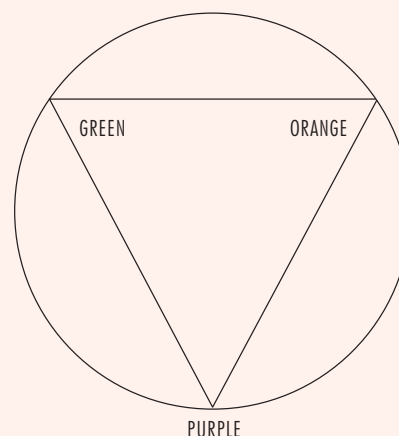


Diagram 2. Secondary Colours

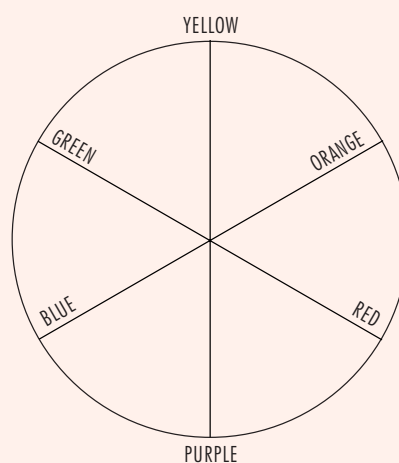


Diagram 3. Complementary or Opposite Colours

Keep in mind that colours affect each other in different ways, not just by looking cooler or warmer. The placement of colours can also affect the visual size of blocks. For instance, placing a yellow square on a white background makes the yellow appear larger than if the same-size yellow square was placed on a black background. Colours also change when placed with other colours. For example, a yellow square on a pale pink background causes the yellow square to lose some of its brilliance and makes it appear more muted. The same yellow square on a green background brings out the yellow in the green and this makes the yellow seem much more radiant.

Right: Apple Orchard by Margaret Smith (APQ 10/7) makes appealing use of complementary colours.

Below: Flowering Appliqué by Sue Dollin (APQ 10/8) is a perfect example of an analogous colour partnership.



Colour Combinations



As mentioned earlier, there are no rules for perfect colour choice but there are tried and tested combinations that work. A simple rule of thumb and a source of constant inspiration is nature.

Mother Nature is never wrong, and if it works in nature then it will work in a quilt. As a case study, take the colour violet.

Picture a brilliant sunset where a sky is streaked with violets, purples and magenta, these colours happen to be analogous on the colour wheel – meaning they are all next to each other.

Quilts using this colourway are almost monochromatic in appearance.

Now take a pansy with violet next to a bright yellow. These colours happen to be complementary – meaning they are opposite each other on the colour wheel.

Violet and yellow quilts (or any quilts using complementary colours) provide the highest degree of contrast.

The most common combination in quilts is called the split-complementary combination. This has a mixture of analogous colours with complementary colours. So, for violet, its analogous colours are purple, blue and magenta and then for contrast a yellow is added.

Another great split-complementary combination is the mixture of ever-popular blue and its analogous partners, which include violet and aqua-blue and with its complementary colour orange.

One good – and easy – way to design a colour combination is to use a large-scale multicoloured print and coordinate colours to suit it.

As an example, imagine a border print using red, yellow and greens. You wouldn't make a quilt using blues or purples with this kind of border print – it wouldn't match. A much more suitable colour combination would be to use different reds with yellow and throw some greens in for contrast.

Value



Once you have chosen your colours, collect your fabrics into colour groups as, at this stage, it's a good idea to look at the value in your collection. In the book, *Fabric Shopping with Alex Anderson*, Alex writes: "Value is the degree of lightness or darkness of a colour. Many fabrics can be categorised as either light, medium or dark. If you want your quilt to have sparkle, it is important to use a complete range of value."

It may not always be simple to determine the value of a colour as some prints seem to fall into two categories.

A great way to find a fabric's value is to take small snippets of all the fabrics you plan to use, glue them to a sheet of paper (first numbering each fabric clearly) and then photocopy it.

The gradations between light, medium and dark – rather than the actual colours – will be clearly visible on the photocopy.

To add 'sparkle' to a quilt, vary the value of your fabric by using light, medium and dark prints. You may even like to use fabrics that don't really fit into your colour group. For example, if you are making a quilt in a split-complementary blue colourway, your aqua-blue may include some yellows. Although these colours are not part of the scheme, they will mix and add interest to the quilt.

You can also vary your prints. Don't just use fabrics with either a small or a large print on them but use small, medium and large prints for a better balance. If you do just use fabrics with a large print, the quilt may lack visual interest because it will have large empty spaces.

On the other hand, if the quilt is made using only small prints then it could look too busy.

Always keep in mind the 'mood' and theme of your fabric. If you were making a replica of an antique quilt, you would stick to reproduction fabrics and prints with a similar style.



On the other hand, when stitching a quilt for a child, the bright polka dots would be ideal, and the reproduction fabrics wouldn't suit it at all. Lastly, don't forget to use black and white in your quilts as they add interest and help your combination to shine.

Above: Naive Star by Judy Gray (APQ 10/7) is comprised entirely of warm colours except for a dash of cool green and blue to add zest.

Below: Flowers Through my Window by Sue Dollin (APQ 12/1) incorporates a good range of values as well as different print sizes.

