



ART

The Enjoyable Conundrum of Color in 20th-Century European Design

Blissfully, there are no overly odious attempts at scientific explanation of color, just a wide gamut of art and craft achievements to experience and appreciate.

Joseph Nechvatal | 4 days ago



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Installation view of *Oh Couleurs! Le Design au Prisme de la Couleur* (all photos by J. C. Garcia unless otherwise noted)

BORDEAUX, France — I was reminded of an enjoyable enigma in Bordeaux at its Museum of Decorative Arts and Design's excellent exhibition, *Oh Couleurs! Le Design au Prisme de la Couleur*, that surveys an eclectic history of color as used in design. Color does not exist per se, so appreciating our perception of it recalls with renewed vigor the critical skepticism inherent in postmodernism and poststructuralism. Indeed, neither scientists nor philosophers know for sure what color is: it hovers restlessly between the subjective world of sensation and the objective world of fact within a narrow perceptual sweep. It is only discernible when in light, and our impressions of color varies widely

depending on the quantity and quality of light reflecting off it, and the shape of the eyeballs looking at it. Subsequently, about this real-time interactive thing nothing philosophically conclusive can be said — even as we frequently use it artistically and appreciate it intuitively.

Curated by Constance Rubini and handsomely devised by French designer Pierre Charpin, *Oh Couleurs!* is divided into two buildings: the 18th-century Hôtel de Lalande that was built for the parliamentary councilor Pierre de Raymond de Lalande, and a newly renovated 19th-century prison where criminals and sailors and prostitutes were imprisoned pending a verdict by the local public prosecutor. The walls were fresh and stunningly painted solid, vivid colors, but Etienne Tornier, the conservation attaché for their 19th- and 20th-century collection, pointed out to me some scratched graffiti on the cell doors that conjured up that less pristine past. Charpin used the small prisoners' cells most effectively to create color-themed niches, such as the Dutch illustrator and typographer Irma Boom's “Color DNA based on the city of Bordeaux” (2017) where she created a wallpaper design evoking the colors of Bordeaux within which are placed a 16th-century wood dresser from Bordeaux and three romantic faience pieces made by the company Jules Vieillard & Cie.



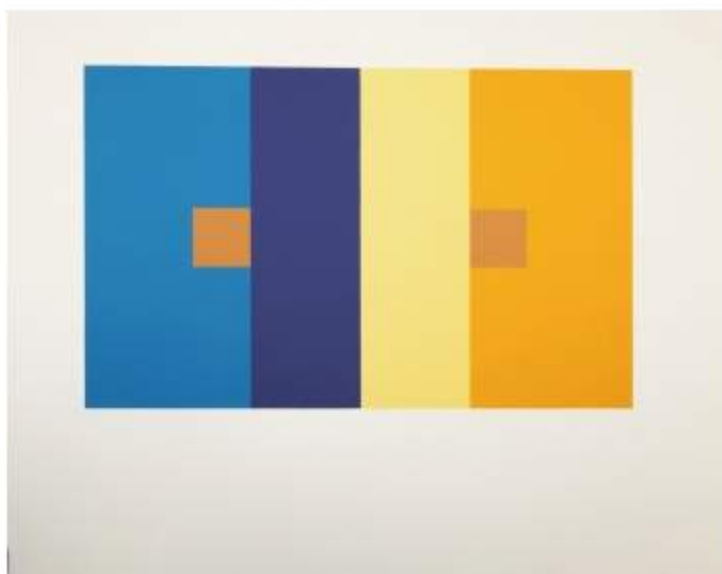
The vertical bars of color within the old prisoners' cell affirmed the truth that we are prisoners of our own spectral limitations when it comes to color, even though that spectrum may *feel* wide when it comes to human color sensitivity. However, of all the photon wavelengths that exist, the portion of them available to our visible spectrum is limited by the



Vue partielle de l'exposition

range of our eyes' cone cells which only detect but a small sliver of these energetic wavelengths. The human eye has three types of cone cells that define that small sliver, each of which that can register about 100 different color shades. Researchers estimate the number of colors the human eye can distinguish to be in the millions, so perhaps we can be satisfied with our all-too-human limitations.

Another cell housed a delightful southern yellow theme announced by a Vincent Van Gogh quote from an 1888 letter to his brother Theo. This bright, buttery cell holds a great many yellow objects that seem to vibrate together in harmony. These include Suzanne Ramié's brightly yellow, glazed ceramics from the mid-1950s made in Vallauris, pastis-maker Paul Ricard's yellow marketing products, Gaetano Pesce's large platter "Old Port Yellow" (1992) and Martin Szekely's sleek "Cold Yellow Vase" (1988) mixed with 18th-century faïences from Marseille.



Another enchanting cell formed artist and art theorist Josef Albers's area based on his book Interaction of Color (published in 1963) in which the Bauhaus professor proposed a series of exercises intended to cultivate an understanding of color interaction and the optical effects of color. On the wall is an exercise from *Interaction of Color* where the two small central



Installation view of the Josef Albers room in *Oh Couleurs!*
Le Design au Prisme de la Couleur

squares of the composition seem to be of two different colors, but they are exactly the same. The context changes our perception of them.

The main aisle led straightforwardly to the cell dedicated to [Donald Judd](#) which highlighted his bright, cadmium red, lacquered aluminum

“Corner Chair” (1984) and examples of his sculpture maquettes directly cut from [RAL color charts](#). Judd chose the paint color cadmium red light for “Corner Chair” because, as he explained to [John Coplans](#) in the June 1971 issue of *Artforum*, he thought it the only color that makes an object’s contours and angles look clear and sharp.



Groovy was the hot red cell dedicated to Verner Panton, an evocation of the entrance hall of the restaurant Varna in Aarhus, Denmark he designed in 1971. Creating this restaurant décor gave the Danish designer an opportunity to apply his approach to color on an immersive scale. Another cell contained a vast array of Tupperware plastic ware. This display was historically illustrative in terms of decade styles, showing the color tone preferences of different eras since the '50s to today. Time-based preferences were also demonstrated in a cell dedicated to Le Corbusier's taste in bright color as related to his architecture, and in the display of the little known decorator Paule Marrot who brought muted cool colors and jazzy printed textiles to the Renault automobile company in the early 1960s. All of these dips into dated color were lovely, but I unequivocally loved the classical boro garment cell that held Japanese popular clothing from the collection of Stephen Szczepanek. Boro clothing is made of assembled pieces of fabric bits dyed with indigo sewn into a patchwork. That is why boro derives its name from the Japanese word *boroboro* meaning "rags" or "tatters."





Boro Yogi, kimono-shaped duvet (late 19th C) (collection of Stephen Sczcepanek © madd Bordeaux)

There is also a large, central room that frames the theme of iridescence, where color appears in its most fleeting, indefinable condition (think of the iridescence of a soap bubble or a beetle's shell), as seen in Delphin Massier's wonderful "Night Pitcher" (1910). This sumptuous symbolist ceramic is distinguished by its anthropomorphic form that represents a bearded man's head, while the handle is materialized as a woman pulling his ear. Its colors change depending on the angle of the light, while flowing phallic flowers are bit by bit depicted in pink on the periphery. The ceramic's astonishingly beautiful iridescent hues, that accentuate the entrancing nuances of color, are not generated by pigments but by the microscopic structure of the material itself. This dazzling effect can be relished over and over here in a wide variety of objects including two *haute couture* dresses by Paco Rabanne, a chrysochroa rajah bug from Thailand, and the ceramic "Moustache" (2014) vase by Jean-Baptiste Fastrez. All of these objects illustrate the extent to which color, as a concept, is as elusive as it is enchanting when manifested in tangible artistic objects.



Chinese oxblood vase in 18th-century Rococo rocaille room
(photo by author for Hyperallergic)

Things are more conventional in the Hôtel de Lalande part of the show, with a cobalt blue ceramic collection from Delft and Nevers, but no less beautiful. Extraordinarily striking for me was a single oxblood Chinese vase that was astoundingly sunlit within the greenish, 18th-century Rococo rocaille room setting of the Salon de Gascq. Other oxblood glazed ceramics by Ernest Chaplet, Adrien Dalpayrat and Auguste Delaherche were also on view from the collection of the Cité de la Céramique-Sèvres, a foretaste of the exhibition

L'Expérience de la Couleur to be held in

Sèvres in 2018.

Why we perceive oxblood versus violet versus vermillion depends on the situational energetic wavelengths of the photons influencing the retinas at the back of our eyeballs. Yet blissfully there are no overly odious attempts at scientific explanation in *Oh Couleurs!*, just a wide gamut of art and craft achievements to experience and appreciate. That's cool because scientific efforts to explain color only underline the impossibility of any certainty, anyway. The only certainty is that color is contextual, ephemeral, and enjoyable.

Oh Couleurs! Le Design au Prisme de la Couleur continues at the Musée des Arts décoratifs et du Design (39 rue Bouffard, Bordeaux) through December 5, 2017.