

The Astrology of Colour

by [David McCann](#)

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Everybody loves a list, and astrologers are no exception. Even Jeff Mayo could not resist ending his book *The Planets and Human Behaviour* with nineteen pages of traditional associations, including planetary colours. Nor, of course, could he resist distancing himself from such apparent frivolities:

"The following list of colours associated with the Sun, Moon and planets has not been compiled for the purpose of satisfying the curiosity of any reader whose interest in astrology is still on the fortune-telling level, but as a straightforward presentation of evidence as to how confused and nonsensical many astrologers past and present can be in their applications of astrology. "

At first glance, this scepticism may seem justified. Venus, for example, has been associated with the colours blue, green, yellow, and white; Taurus, with all of these, plus orange and brown. Some attributions may indeed be nonsense, and others may have arisen from a confusion of the colours of the planets with those of their signs, but behind the apparent confusion and nonsense I believe we can find pattern and reason.

The first point to grasp is the distinction between colours as transmitters of astrological influences, and astrological factors as signifiers of colours. These sound the same, but they are not. In the first case, we have colour used for its

effect on man. Thus the colour therapist, interior designer, and magician all use red to produce a sense energy and warmth: to produce a Martian effect. In the second case, Mars as a significator, usually in a horary chart, is interpreted as referring to an object or person characterised by the colour red. In these two examples the equation of red and Mars works both ways, but that is not always the case.

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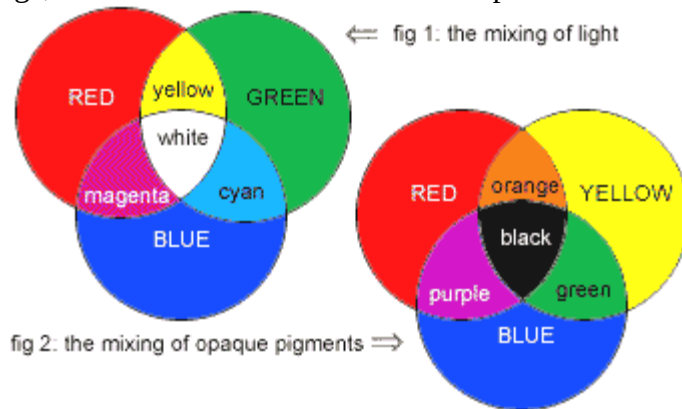
The Nature of Colour

School textbooks inform us that colour is produced by the wavelength of light: the light at the blue end of the spectrum has a shorter wavelength than that at the red end. This is actually a half-truth, since the eye cannot assign incoming light to a wavelength. Instead it has three types of receptors with their maximum sensitivity at the ends and middle of the range of visible light: blue, green, and red. As Goethe claimed, in opposition to the teachings of Newton, colour perception is a matter for the mind, not the eye. This was proved by Edwin Land (inventor of the Polaroid camera) who showed that we could see a full range of colours when presented with a picture of a landscape projected with red and yellow lights alone. In that experiment, all the receptors are stimulated to some extent, even though no blue light is actually received; the viewer therefore interprets the picture as fully polychrome on the basis of what it depicts.

This initial analysis into blue, green, and red means that other colours can be produced by mixing these three primaries. Figure 1 shows the mixing of light. From any two of the primaries we obtain a secondary - yellow, magenta (crimson), or cyan (turquoise); from all three we get white light. Figure 2 shows the mixing of opaque pigments. Red paint is red because it absorbs most green and blue light and so reflects mostly red; blue paint is blue because it absorbs most red and green. If the two are mixed, the result will absorb almost all green and the reflected light will be a mixture of red and blue: purple. In other words, mixing lights is additive - all the components are seen - but mixing pigments is subtractive - it lessens the amount of light reflected. For transparent pigments, such as printers' ink, the primaries are the same as the secondaries for light, and vice versa.

The complement of a colour is its opposite in the diagram. That of a primary colour will be a mixture of the two other primaries: the additive complement of red is cyan, the subtractive complement is green. The complement of a secondary will be the primary not involved in its composition. Mixing complementary lights will produce white, as all three primaries will be present. A mixture of

complementary pigments will produce something approaching black: either of the neutral colours, grey or brown. If you stare at a bright colour for a time and then look at a white surface, you will see an after-image, which will be the subtractive complement.



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Colour and Man

Colours, unlike other symbols, speak directly to our perception and so tend to have similar associations in different cultures. Thus the association of red with both vitality and danger may be found in ancient Egypt as well as in the modern world. Similarly, although devotees of political correctness have deplored the expression "black magic" as racist, the association of evil magic and the colour black is as common in Africa as in Europe: the symbolism refers to the dangers and mysteries of the night.

The basic contrast is between warm and cool colours. The warm are yellow, red, magenta, and brown; the cool are violet, blue, green, and grey. Warm colours are stimulating, cool ones calming. The effect is not purely psychological: red light increases blood pressure and blue decreases it, even if the subject is blindfold.

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Applications of Colour

The simplest application of the effects of colour is in designing interiors whose schemes of decoration will be appropriate to the activity to be carried out in them. This has always been done to some extent, but the systematic study of colour effects in this context was pioneered by Rudolf Steiner for the design of his schools.

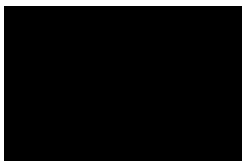
Another use is in colour therapy: the patient is exposed to coloured lights, or even just asked to visualise a colour. Selection of the appropriate colour is usually based on the patient's colour preferences or psychometry, but astrological diagnosis is an obvious possibility.

Treatment of physical problems, particularly chronic ones, is possible as well as psychological therapy.

Colour therapy resembles the practice of the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino, who countered adverse astrological influences by attracting favourable ones with sights, sounds, smells, and tastes appropriate to them. This is, of course, an example of magic, a field in which colour has always been important. It has been said that magic is to metaphysics as engineering is to physics. Now metaphysics is concerned with ideas, and it is ideas and symbols which constitute the tools with which magicians produce their effects. For example, when a magician handles a knife in a ritual associated with the element air, this is to concentrate the mind on the true operation which is being carried out on an inner plane; this is achieved because the knife itself, the yellow which its hilt has been coloured, and the sigils and names drawn upon it, all symbolise air. Similarly, in path-working - the clairvoyant exploration of the inner world along the paths of the Tree of Life - the colours seen, along with other symbols, will confirm by their appropriateness that the explorer is on the right track.

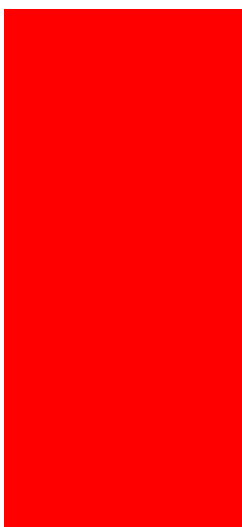
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Colours and their Properties



Black is formal, conventional, and dignified. In ancient Egypt, it symbolised night, death, and magic; it was the opposite of green, the colour of life.


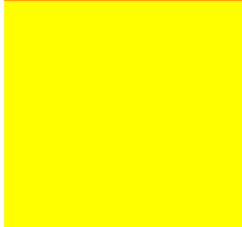
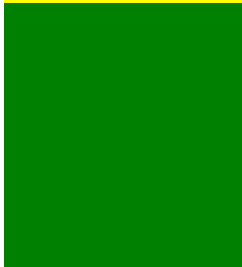

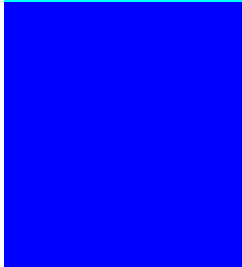

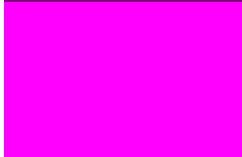


White is precise, critical, and sincere. In Egypt, it symbolised purity, femininity, and the Moon, contrasting with the masculine red.



Red is active, daring, passionate, and optimistic. It enhances alertness and encourages activity. Goethe held red to be the most intense colour, the furthest from both black and white, and it is noteworthy that those languages which only have words for three basic colours always select black, white, and red. In Egypt, red symbolised masculinity, life, and warmth, but also danger. It was the opposite of the feminine white: this can be seen in Egyptian art, where the women are white and the men brown (which was considered a shade of red). Pink is milder and more affectionate than red, feminine rather than masculine; it is good for comfort and healing.



Orange is more ambitious and self-sufficient than red, and lacks its warmth; it has the intelligence of yellow without its loftiness. It is used

	therapeutically to bring joy and heal grief.
	Yellow is intellectual and communicative. It is used to produce detachment and reduce depression. Goethe observed that yellow was the most positive of colours, the opposite of blue, and the closest to pure light. In Egypt, it symbolised the Sun.
	Green is healing, sympathetic, steadfast, and restrained. In the environment, it reduces stress and movement. Goethe observed that green is soothing because it balances the positive yellow and the negative blue. In Egypt, green symbolised life, growth, and rebirth; it was opposed to black, the colour of death.
	Cyan (or turquoise) combines the effects of green and blue. It is charming but self-absorbed; it enhances self-confidence, calms and refreshes.
	Blue is idealistic, rational, honest, and tranquil. Goethe observed blue to be the most negative colour, the closest colour to black. Many languages do not distinguish between blue and green: in Egypt, light blue was considered green and dark blue, black. Light blue is more spiritual, dark blue more sociable.
	Purple (or violet) is grand, idealistic, and sensitive, but may lack self-criticism and maturity. Goethe considered this to be a disturbing colour, balanced uncertainly between the positive red and the negative blue. In most languages, violet is called blue: "roses are red, violets are blue". Lavender is lighter and more feminine, conveying dignity and encouraging reflection.
	Magenta (or crimson) is less aggressive and more spiritual than red, more practical than purple. It is optimistic, volatile, and affectionate, producing feelings of contentment and self-respect.
	Brown is the warm neutral colour; many languages identify it with red. It is practical, earthy, obstinate, and conscientious.
	Grey is the cold neutral colour; many languages identify it with blue or green. It is calming, but may convey uncertainty and lack of commitment; silver is nobler and more spiritual.

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Colours symbolised Astrologically

Lists of colours to indicate clothing and objects signified in horary charts are given by most medieval astrologers. These lists are based on an older tradition, since Valens gave one for the planets. The assignments are presumably based on the impressions which the items would make and consequently there are many overlaps, the choice often depending on shade and texture. Thus Marsilio Ficino suggested that rich shades of purple are associated with Jupiter and the Sun, pale ones with Venus and the Moon. Practical considerations are also involved: blue was listed infrequently, since good blue dye was expensive, and the colours also had to reflect the fashions of the times. It is hardly surprising that such lists show variations - they need to be worked out afresh for every generation and nation. Modern astrologers, such as Sepharial, have continued to devise them, usually in connection with attempts to predict the winning owner's colours in a horse race!

	PICATRIX	ALBIRUNI	IBN EZRA	LILLY	SEPHARIAL
Moon	orange/ yellow	blue orange/yello w	green white	green orange / yellow white	green orange / yellow white
Mercury	blue	purple mixed		blue grey mixed	blue grey pink yellow
Venus	light blue light green	white yellow	light green	light blue light green white yellow	light blue light green
Sun	yellow	orange	red	red purple	orange
Mars	red	red	red	red	red
Jupiter	green	brown white		green	purple
Saturn	black/dark	black/dark	black/ dark	white / pale / ashy / black / dark	black / dark
Aries	red yellow	white		white	

Taurus	green	white brown	green	yellow white	light blue
Gemini	yellowish green	yellowish green	mixed	white red	light blue
Cancer	white grey	grey	white grey	green brown	green
Leo	yellow brown red	pink	yellow brown	green red	orange
Virgo	crimson white	yellow	purple white	blue	green
Libra	purple green grey	grey	green grey	black / brown	yellow
Scorpio	red grey	red	red grey green	brown	red black
Sagittarius	red grey	red	red yellow grey	yellow green	purple
Capricorn	greensih blue red black		black white	brown black	white
Aquarius	green yellow grey	blue green yellow	green yellow grey	blue blue	
Pisces	green white	white	green white	white	white

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Recommended links on the symbolism of colour:

- ▶ [Color Therapy & Color Meanings](#) from www.myth.com
- ▶ [Color Matters](#) - very comprehensive site on the use of colour
- ▶ [Colour Affects](#). Lovely site, includes colour psychology & history of colour.
- ▶ [Colour Cafe](#). Decorating site, features colour in feng shui and its psychological affect in the home

David McCann is an authoritative expert on the history and philosophy of astrology. His articles have been published in many

international journals of astrology and he was a regular contributor to the *Traditional Astrologer* magazine, where this article first appeared.