

Module 13: "Color and Society"

Lecture 33: "Color and Culture"

The Lecture Contains:

- About Culture
- Color and Culture
- The Symbolism of Color
- Taboo
- Anthropology of Color

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About Culture

Before discussing about 'Color and its relationship with Culture' we need to clarify the meaning of culture. We need to understand the genesis and spirit of culture that revolves around human life. Culture can be defined as the behaviour, way of life, its beliefs, artistic expression, and societal institutions that is passed from generation to generations. In traditional societies culture is considered 'the way of life for the entire society (community)'. We need to understand the characteristics of culture and its relationship.

The spirit of culture is expressed through tradition. In this connection UNESCO 2002 bulletin on culture writes, "...culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs". Diversity in geographical conditions has produced enormous varieties in cultural diversity. Culture is one of the cornerstones of human civilization. Human civilization produced enormous cultural diversity. Cultural diversity and richness inspired human beings to produce diverse artifacts. Thus, the cultural diversity has produced the harvest of rich artifacts throughout the world. The artefact created by such cultures for ages have also indicated their nature of close *interactiveness*.

Human civilization from the very early period had built a respectful harmonious relationship with the 'land community'. Every ancient traditional society had created an *interactive bond* between man and nature. Incas, Mayans, Pre-Colombian American-Indians, Benin culture, Polynesians, Australian aborigines, Indian sub-continent, Chinese, etc. have exhibited the strong interactive relationship between man and nature through various artifacts and social activities. Every myth and tale is based on natural sciences through experience and observation. Such relationship is strongly built on the close cultural, ritualistic and community interactive participations.



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Through generations in human civilization, color has displayed its especial significance based on tradition, culture, geographical conditions, and social evolution.



Plate2 Color in Cave Paintings

(<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2011/11/cave-painting-colors/> 17 March 2012)

Color is an important component in non-verbal symbol helps to communicate from early human history. The perception and visual expression illustrate the unique characteristic and style of the primitive cultures.

Color has become the most powerful mode of visual non-verbal communication since the dawn human civilization. The above cave paintings are typically naturalistic style (Heraldic) of paintings. Primitive artists tried to imitate the natural colors rather than symbolic colors. The paintings of spotted color of horses or other characteristics of horses have shown the power of visual communication since 25000 years ago. 'Naturalistic art' is the visual representation of experience. Primitive artist (plate 2) have depicted the perception of that time. Symbolism is introduced during the cave art through simplicity of form and shape. Color is not applied in term symbolism at that early period, which requires fairly good amount of cognitive refinement.

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Taboo

Human beings are helpless in hostile nature from the very early civilization. Human being had to depend and believe on certain natural phenomenon. The enormous power of natural events had to be respected. Hence, the introduction of symbol and worshipping them in the form of taboo became evident. The psychological dependence helped human being to survive. However, in the modern days the same taboo has taken different shapes and stylization. The urban taboo is prevailing through fashion, household products and practices.

The term comes from the Tongan word *tabu*, meaning set apart or forbidden, and appears in many Polynesian cultures. In those cultures, a *tabu* (or *tapu* or *kapu*) often has specific religious associations. In the modern world designers have extensively conducted research and articulated on relationship between culture, taboo and art and design. Psychologically mourning (plate 3) related to grief, death and sadness that obviously reject the choice of colorful environment. Departed soul has left the colourful earth and to show the solidarity with the soul, in most cases white or black is the preferred colors. In most cases it swings between either 'white' or 'black'. Interestingly in the northern part of India women would symbolically put on dark-brown color clothing for mourning. Hence, as long as human civilization survives *taboo* (social) would continue to leave in different form. From the Primitive Cultures human beings have created in support of social need and for the purpose of survival. From the ancient time, the expression of taboo is conceived with the help of visual language. In modern days social taboo may exist in fashion design to architecture to gastronomy in various ways.



Plates3 Japanese Funeral arrangement



Widow



Queen Victoria, 1879



Mourning- Hindu

(Source: http://www.google.co.in/search?hl=en&q=Color+in+Funeral&bav=on.2.or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf.cf.osb&biw=1350&bih=559&um=1&ie=UTF-8&tbn=isch&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi&ei=Uv_VT_OPO4a4rAfi8938Dw ; June 11, 2012)

http://www.google.co.in/search?hl=en&q=Color+in+Funeral&bav=on.2.or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf.cf.osb&biw=1350&bih=559&um=1&ie=UTF-8&tbn=isch&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi&ei=Uv_VT_OPO4a4rAfi8938Dw ; June 11, 2012)

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Anthropology of Color

"The anthropology of colour covers the study of the colour aesthetic systems of different countries, the cultural symbolisms of colour and the optical differences in the psychology and perception of colour, as well as different geographical colour naming concepts such as those of a recent researcher, Paul Kay, on colour naming in different cultures."

(ref. (<http://www.coloracademy.co.uk/ColorAcademy%202006/subjects/anthropology/anthropology.htm> ; 16th March 2012)

Because of custom, taboos, national association or religious reasons colors may be accepted or rejected. However, the modern world has made wonderful effort in creating taboo-free perception due to the global exposure.

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