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# CHAPTER 19

## *Colour and feeling*

### **Introductory**

*This chapter is concerned with the fundamentally important though elusive subject of colour-generated feelings. One of the leitmotifs running through the scientific ideas presented in, “What the Scientists can learn from the Artists” is the pivotal part played by the feeling centres of the brain. These are involved in determining the criteria for making the choices that underpin our responses to absolutely everything. One consequence of this is that the feeling centres are integral to processes of learning at all levels and of all sorts. In particular, they play an indispensable part in the development of:*

- *Habits and skills.*
- *Thought, which is usually treated separately from other habits and skills even though from the neurophysiological point of view it is an action-based skill, like the rest of them.*
- *Creativity, which involves using habit and skill to go beyond existing habits and skills.*

*In a nutshell, the feeling centres, besides having a key role in our survival as a species, is the bedrock of our daily existence.*

*Unfortunately, while it is easy to acknowledge the importance of feeling in our lives, it is very difficult to pin it down in any of its manifestations. For example, although we can state with complete confidence that feeling is at the root of all meaningful colour experience, our knowledge of quite what this means remains extremely hazy. Faced with the challenge of giving a flavour of how feeling integrates itself into the experience of painting, I could think of no better way than to do so than by a combination of artist’s quotes, used to illustrate the widespread recognition of its key importance, and personal experience.*

### What the artists say

As explained in the *Introductory*, the purpose of this chapter is to underline the central importance of *feeling* in artistic creativity. It is no wonder so many distinguished artists have shown empathy with John Constable's assertion that, "*Painting is just another word for feeling.*" Here are some examples:

- Degas: "*Drawing is not shapes, it is one's feelings.*"
- Cézanne: "*Painting from nature is not copying the object, it is realising one's sensations.*"
- Monet: "*I want to succeed in expressing what I feel.*"
- Bonnard: "*You can take any liberty with line, with form, with proportions, with colours, in order that the feeling is intelligible.*"
- Matisse: "*My choice of colours... is based on observation, on sensitivity, on felt experience.*"

The strongest feelings of different artists relate to different things. At the risk of serious oversimplification, it could be said that Constable and Cézanne were under the thrall of colours in nature; Gauguin and Kandinsky were stirred by the symbolic, spiritual or psychological charge of colours;<sup>1</sup> and, Bonnard and Matisse were excited by the dynamics of abstract relations.

### Personal anecdotes

Feelings are not easy to analyse scientifically because Science depends on finding commonalities whereas feelings are to such an important degree idiosyncratic. They always occur in the context of the amazingly complex fabric of personal and cultural experience that makes us all unique individuals. The personal component has been primed by genetic factors and developed over a lifetime, while the cultural one has evolved over the millennia. Both have been forged out of so many different evolutionary, historical, social, educational and geographical factors, that pinning them down is extremely difficult. Certainly it is beyond my capacity to add anything of importance to what has already been said and written by others. Instead I will give a flavour of the subject by offering a few brief anecdotes.

When I was a child, I used to be asked, "*What is your favourite colour?*" My answer was always "*yellow*" and I recall feeling quite strongly about it. Most

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1 Wassily Kandinsky, 1910, *On the Spiritual in Art*.

of my friends seemed to prefer “red”. A few liked “blue” or “green”. I cannot remember anyone choosing “orange” or “purple”. Later in life, I came across the Lüscher Colour Test,<sup>2</sup> which brought back memories of this simple-minded childhood questioning. It uses colour preference as a guide to personality. People are asked to rank-order a set of single-colour cards, starting with their favourite and finishing with the one they like least. According to the proponents of the test, the choice made reveals much about the psychology of person making it. To back up their beliefs they have done an incredible amount of research. Whether their findings are valid is a matter of opinion but, as a person who is convinced of the central importance of context and not least of colour-context to colour-generated feelings, I regard them with deep suspicion.

Now that I am an adult, I hear people talking about their colour preferences in the plural. People say they like blues, purples or browns, or talk about favourite combinations, usually in relation to their choice of clothes or house furnishings, etc.. At least this is a tacit recognition of the importance of complexity and therefore, according to my way of seeing things, a step in the right direction. For some reason (possibly the level of difficulty inherent in doing any such thing), the subject of feelings for complex colour arrangements of the kind that are found in paintings has hardly received any attention from researchers. Indeed, as far as I know, there are no serious studies of the emotional correlates of responses to arrays of colours in real world environments.<sup>3</sup> If somebody were to embark upon one, they would, no doubt find the task extremely daunting, but at least they would be dealing with a genuinely interesting topic.

## Two examples

Perhaps this lack of controlled experiments is not so very important for it hardly needs them to prove that personal feelings about colour can have a very important part to play in the production of paintings. It is evident not only from the above quotations but also from the following two anecdotes concerning the responses of two particular people I have known well.

The first person used to be my wife.<sup>4</sup> She dearly loved her extensive collection of dry-pastels and would take them out of the box one by one and fondle

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2 Lüscher Colour Test. Max Lüscher also wrote, “*The Law of Harmony Within Us*”, ECON pocket book, 6th edition.

3 Perhaps I am being a little hard on all the many studies that focus on using colour to improve the home or work environment.

4 Now Ann Agnew, formerly Ann Sinnett and Ann Pratt

each with the reverence of someone holding a valuable object. Some she loved especially. She seemed to regard these favourites as her special friends and was always excited whenever the opportunity arose for using one of them in a painting. Her reverence was transferred to the marks she made as she stroked the beloved stick of colour across the paper surface. This whole-being-absorbing-sensitivity contributed much to the magic of the beautiful pastel paintings she was making. The resulting images were rather small, as-if-knitted, jewel-like and representational.

The second person is the artist Basil Beattie, who one day wanted to tell me of the virtues of a certain brand of colours which he had discovered. He was enthusing about a particular earth-yellow. In his excitement, he could not resist dipping a palette knife into the pot and lifting the paint upwards before letting it run back down to where it came from, demonstrating, by every nuance of his movement, some mysterious link between colour experience and tactile quality. “*Look at that*”, he said, with eyes aglow. His evident enthusiasm left no doubt that he was experiencing something that plays a fundamental role in his obsession with painting. In contrast to my ex-wife, Basil is at his happiest making huge abstract paintings, measuring many metres in all directions and using grand gestures and expansive brush marks.

While feelings of this kind about the materials being handled are not necessary for making good painting, feelings of some kind are. It would be a shame if anyone who has developed special sensibilities were to resist making use of them: the best paintings stem from experiences of deep importance to their maker.

### ***Implications***

*This has been a short chapter about a subject whose importance to the understanding of colour can hardly be exaggerated. We should never forget that colour provides an experience that invariably engages the feelings and that are at the core of personal experience and creativity.*