



Thinking about Colour

For me one of the most exciting parts of any project is choosing the colours I'm going to use.

If you're using new fabrics, then designers make this process easy by offering fabric collections - all guaranteed to work with one another - and look beautiful too. These are great and can offer a wonderful starting point when you're deciding upon your palette, but it's fun too to mix and match your own colours, especially if you're working with scraps, remnants or vintage fabrics. And of course, the colour choices available to stitchers working with flosses and threads are almost endless!

Colour is a hugely important part of our day-to-day lives, exerting enormous influence on our mood, feelings and even has the power to suggest hidden messages – whose interpretation may vary depending upon the viewer. We all react to colours in different ways, depending a great deal upon our background and culture.

Most of us have the opportunity to travel more than ever before, and we are surrounded by images of the world around us, so we have plenty of colour combinations, both the familiar and more exotic to choose from, from the hot colours of India and the icy blues of the polar regions, to the hues of nature that surround our homes.

In the west, we associate green with fertility, red with anger, whilst white is the colour of purity and innocence used for brides' dresses and babies' Christening robes. However in China white, not black, is the colour of mourning whilst Indian wives wearing white are considered to be inviting widowhood and unhappiness. We also divide colours into "warm" and "cool" – reds, oranges and yellows as opposed to blues and greens.

Our prehistoric ancestors viewed red as the colour of fire and blood, whilst we continue to view it as the colour of love, seduction and passion. Nobody can be indifferent to red. Indeed, red is one of the top two favourite colours of all people, and is regarded as the colour of good luck in Asia.

In English (and most languages), there are separate words for "green" and "blue" that we learn from our earliest days. But - did you know there are a number of cultures with a completely different system of grouping and naming colours - whose members do not see the (to us obvious) different colours that are blue and green.

It's interesting to think that different people looking at the same photograph will see the same wavelengths of light but, due to cultural differences, they will perceive these colours in very different ways.



Researchers are also discovering that there are many other factors in addition to our cultural background that influence the way we perceive colours, including memories, moods, and feelings.

And we are all aware that colour influences our feelings and emotions in a much deeper way than whether or not something is simply visually appealing to us - what do the colours red, white and blue in combination say to you? Or red and green perhaps?

Maybe that's why we're so anxious to "get it right" when we're starting a new project as sadly the wrong colour choices will spoil a finished piece, no matter how skilled the stitcher or how technically perfect his or her work.



Most people have a natural feeling for colour which we use every day without really thinking about it. When we decide what clothes to wear, paint our walls or even pick and arrange a bunch of flowers we're making colour choices quite naturally without even thinking about it. But somehow when it comes to choosing, or adapting, colours for a piece of stitching it's all too easy to become tense and anxious and lose confidence in our own ability to choose well.



A natural feeling for colour

I've found that sometimes it's much easier to collect together a selection of coloured floss or skeins of wool in my hand, just like a bunch of flowers, rather than arranging them in a design. I've discovered that if the colours work well together when collected together this way, then they are more than likely to do so when I work them into my stitching. I add and eliminate extra colours by holding them next to my main choices, keeping them if they seem to add something to the group, but discarding them if they contribute nothing or, worse, detract from those already chosen.



A simple choice of colours



The colour wheel

When setting out on your project, choose a bold and brilliant, or subtle and understated colour scheme, but whichever you decide upon I would recommend that you try to keep it simple and uncluttered. Pare your colour choices down to the minimum as too many colours can look "bitty".



Only three colours for fur ...

If you're embroidering, and your colour choices, thanks to the variety of flosses and threads available today, are seemingly endless, take even more care in colour selection - be ruthless and discard as many colours as you can. Remember - too many close shadings can make your work look fussy and muddy - just like paints that have been mixed too much. Even fur can be stitched very effectively using just 3 colours of floss - and a little care in blending your stitches together!

Colour effects

When choosing the colours for your design, take a look at the effect they create from the distance at which your work will eventually be seen. It often happens that colours that previously seemed to work well together during the design process suddenly disappear or do other strange things when seen from a distance. You may have decided to incorporate little stitches of contrasting colours into an otherwise plain background to add a little sparkle and life, but they may simply blend into the background when you move away from your work.

Also consider whether your work will be seen mostly in the daytime or by artificial light. I'm sure everyone reading this will have mixed up colours or chosen badly when trying to work by the light of a tungsten bulb! I'm afraid I don't even trust a daylight bulb to make my initial colour choices and so I always sit at a table in front of the window to spread out my collection of fabrics and flosses before choosing those I want to include.

Even then, it's worth taking a little extra time to consider your choices in different light conditions to be sure that you are achieving the effects you want.

Understanding colour

The most common way of explaining the relationship between colours is through the colour wheel. (example on previous page)

In the colour wheel, the three primary colours – red, yellow and blue are equally spaced in a circle. Mixing these colours in equal proportions produces secondary colours, shown between the primaries on the colour wheel. We learn as children that mixing yellow and blue creates green, whilst red and yellow together give us orange. Mixing the secondary colours in different proportions will give a full range of colours such as olive green, turquoise blue and so on.

Opposites or complementary colours

You can make your colour scheme much more interesting by placing colour-opposites



Mainly blues ... with a touch of complementary pink

(complementaries) together in your work. A small amount of a complementary colour added to a relatively large area will help make your colours seem much more intense. Once you start to look, you'll discover lots of good examples of complementary colours in nature.



Also think about shades, hues and tints. This simply means how paleness or intensity of the colour you've chosen. Using all pale tints can



make your work appear “wishy-washy” and lacking in confidence, but if you add a strong shade to a collection of tints it will dominate your whole scheme. So, unless this is the effect you’re seeking, keep your colours within a limited range of intensities.

Returning to the idea of complementary colours, think about the flowers in the images above – the purple iris appears to be brighter and more intense because it’s enhanced with a splash of yellow – the red berries of the holly are shown at their brightest against the dark green leaves and yellow daisies with their deep purple centres. Remember that this effect works best when one colour dominates the other. If you use them in equal quantities then they will tend to cancel each other out.

Discords

These occur when colours placed next to each other in a design are altered from how we usually expect to see them. If you take, for example, violet and orange from the colour wheel, you will see that violet normally appears darker than the orange. But if you reverse this using, for example a pale violet and dark orange then the result is known as a discord. Doing this can create uncomfortable feelings in your design – this may be the effect you are seeking – or perhaps knowing this will help you avoid creating such tensions.

Harmonious or analogous colours

Using colours that lie close together on the colour wheel (analogous colours) will create a feeling of peace and tranquillity – such a scheme will

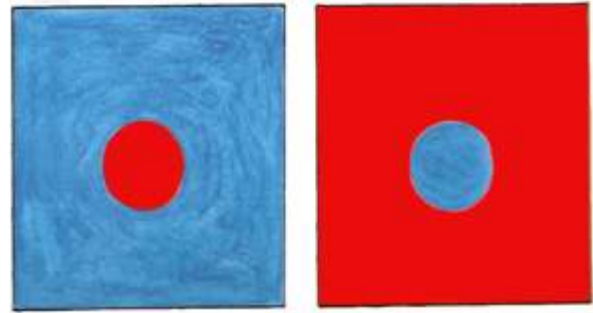
not challenge the viewer in any way. But for many people using these “safe” colours demonstrates a lack of confidence in choosing and using colours, leading to a feeling of boredom rather than tranquillity – don’t be afraid to inject a touch of complementary colour to bring your scheme to life if you feel this is needed.

The analogous groups cannot extend any further than a third of the way around the colour wheel – if you spread your colour range further around then you are leaving the analogous palette.

Countryside Quilt

Just as an aside, I thought I’d mention my Countryside Quilt here - my quilt as you go project that I completed on Christmas Eve 2012. I’m very proud of my quilt (it’s the largest quilting project I’ve ever attempted - and I did it ALL BY MYSELF!) and so every visitor to Coombe Leigh has been taken upstairs to admire it sitting on my bed.

As my visitors are not quilters, they have not commented on the (rather wonky) sashing or the contrast between lines and stippling in the quilting. Without exception they have all commented on the colours, saying “I’d never have thought of using those colours together, but they really work well!” But actually, it’s not at all surprising when you return to the colour wheel and the ideas I mentioned earlier



In fact, my quilt conforms very closely to colour theory - check out the colour wheel above and the images below. You'll see that the main colours are chosen from the yellow to blue-green segment of the colour wheel and there are a few touches of red to bring the quilt to life.

You'll also notice that the majority of the blocks have the same intensity of colour, but to avoid the quilt appearing bland and uninteresting there are a few blocks with some red - a complementary colour. Of course as I'm using fabric this isn't the whole story - there are other colours in there too, but the main ones definitely conform to colour theory:



Advancing and receding colours

To our eyes some colours advance whilst others appear to recede. Look at the spots of red and blue on their backgrounds of opposites to see this effect. The colour which catches the eye first and appears almost to move towards us is red, whilst the blue appears to stay behind, either as a hole or a piece of card slipped behind the red dot.

Neutral or non-colours

Colour can be everything, but its absence can be the most important element of the whole piece of work – consider blackwork where your embroidery seems to resemble an etching or pen and ink drawing. Or what about whitework where nothing interferes with the interest created by different stitches and textures?

Lack of colour doesn't mean boring though – a recent survey discovered 1,000 terms used to describe whites, off-whites and beige ... Adjectives such as glistening, pearly, shimmering, blinding, glittering, and gleaming are frequently used to describe white. More common terms, such as ivory, ecru, parchment, vanilla and cream, can be used for off-whites and very light browns

The more black that is added to any colour, the closer that colour will move towards pure black, graduating through different shades on its journey. Adding more white to a colour will take it closer to pure white but with several shades in between.

In fact there are infinite shades of neutral colours – which will add subtlety and texture to your design as well as balancing your colour schemes.

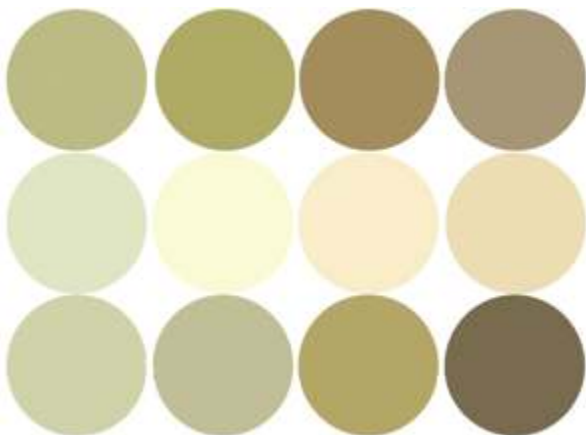
Colour and background

You must always consider your background fabric as part of your colour choices as it forms an integral part of your design. Remember how colours affect one another, and that a colour stitched onto a white background will be perceived totally differently if it is stitched onto a different coloured fabric or even onto black.

It's easiest to start with a natural background to allow more freedom of choice in the colours you use for your design. But whatever colour background you choose, it's a really good idea to gather together all the colours of thread you have chosen and lay them out on the background fabric, ideally in the same proportions as they will appear in the finished work so you can see how well they work together. It's much easier to make substitutions at this stage than to have to unpick parts of your work that just don't seem to work properly with the rest.

Also consider that the more simple the stitch you've chosen, the more intense the colour will appear to be. A close-textured filling stitch will break up the light and make your colour appear darker, whilst an open, lacy textured stitch will naturally blend more into the background and so the colour will be softer and more muted.

The stitch that gives the effect of colour closest to that you see in the skein is satin stitch. This is because the threads are laid down in flat, straight stitches so the colour remains clear and easy to see.



Neutrals .. Good background colours - but these can be warm and cold too...



And finally....

Remember that colour, like taste and smell is a very personal experience. If you and /or the lucky recipient of your completed work like your colour choices and are happy with them, that's the most important thing of all.

Remember: colour is all about your own personal choice - there are no rights and wrongs - so be brave - do it your way!!

There are no rights and wrongs – enjoy the excitement of experimenting with colour – be brave and don't just opt for the “safe” option without at least considering all the rainbow of shades available to you.





Why do we love to stitch? After all, you can purchase mass-produced embroidered items at many high street stores. These days, handmade means something special – a unique item created with love, a gift from the heart, not one that can be bought. Hand stitching is also a great way to personalize an item, or even to breathe new life into an old favourite that has seen better days.



[Bustle & Sew](#) offers my own unique patterns, designed to appeal to all skill levels and bring out your natural creativity. And you can keep up-to-date with all the latest news on the [Bustle & Sew Blog](#).

But none of this would mean anything without you, the stitcher.

PLEASE SHARE THE LOVE: I am happy for you to circulate this short tutorial as widely as you wish – with just two conditions: Firstly that you leave all links to my website and blog in place. And secondly, it is not a commercial publication and must not be reproduced for resale in any form.

Best wishes

Helen xx



PS : If you love stitching then you're sure to enjoy my Bustle & Sew e-zine. It's my own e-zine delivered monthly to your in-box stuffed with ideas, projects, features, articles, patterns and more. Your family and friends will be queuing up to take delivery of your new Bustle & Sew creations.

To learn more, please visit my website.

<http://bustleandsew.com/magazine>