

Color and Consumption

Stephen Eskilson

Early in 1928, the *Saturday Evening Post* published a short commentary entitled “The New Age of Color.” This article reveled in the ubiquity of color in all facets of American design, from architecture to clothing.

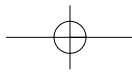
The effects of our chromatic revolution are everywhere apparent. One need not leave his own fireside to observe equally striking signs of the new invasion. Hangings, draperies, and floor coverings tell the same new story. The craze for colored glassware for table and parlor use has produced new hues and effects. Even the humble agate-ware of pantry and kitchen refuses to be denied a part in the general symphony of color. Motor cars are borrowing their hues from the waters of the Nile, from the sands of Arabia, the plumage of birds and the fire of gems.¹

This article examines the different manifestations of this “chromatic revolution” which took place in the United States during the period 1914–1934, and which has been largely overlooked by scholars of the history of design. During this period, while artists sought to create new universal languages of abstraction via color, commodity sellers utilized colors as signifiers of progress, novelty, and affluence in a successful attempt to increase consumption. Through an explanation of the use of color in both artistic and market-oriented endeavors, it will become apparent how these seemingly disparate practices thrived side by side. In terms of chronology, the artistic use of color generally precedes its commercial employment. However, the scenario is not a simple one of cause and effect; rather, throughout this period, a dialogue developed between the different color producers. While retailers benefited from the artistic aura surrounding color, artists also profited from the glamorous spectacles of consumption that the commercial world constructed.

Fortune magazine reported in 1934 that industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss “likes to design one show on Broadway every season because his clients like to see his name in theater programs.”² The theater arts contributed to the visual code of color in two important ways. First, the theater provided a talent pool of people experienced in the manipulation of color. Stage designers such as Dreyfuss, Josef Urban, Norman Bel Geddes, Lee Simonson, and Robert Edmond Jones won lucrative contracts in the retailing industry throughout the 1920s based on their success in the theater. Second, the artistic aura surrounding the world of theater bestowed

1 “The New Age of Color,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (January 21, 1928): 22.

2 “Both Fish and Fowl,” *Fortune* (February 1934): 40–43, 88, 90, 94, 97–98.



an elevated status on the design and marketing of commodities, spurring consumption by lending a patina of glamour to products that shared the same visual language.

In order to understand the resonance of the new stagecraft in the United States during the period of 1912 to 1925, it is necessary to consider a brief history of its technological and ideological circumstances. In the 1880s, theater critics had deplored the unconvincing character of illusionistically painted backdrops, wings, and borders. Although many artists decried the emotional limitations of standard scenery in the late nineteenth century, *trompe l'oeil* illusionism remained the standard for set design until circa 1905 in Europe and 1915 in the United States.³ The imprimatur of tradition, however, was insufficient to sustain conventions that were increasingly perceived as superannated, and the early decades of the twentieth century saw new practices and new technologies rapidly become widespread in the theater arts. Many of these changes can be traced to the years between 1895 and 1905, when the publications and stage productions of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig shifted the focus of European stagecraft towards expressionist lighting and three-dimensional settings. "Expressionist lighting" per Appia and Craig can be defined as colored light designed to enhance the emotional power of a performance. Using elaborate electromechanical equipment, designers sought to construct a "spiritual" environment that complemented the action on the stage.

Appia felt that opera could best be served by simple settings coupled with dramatic lighting effects. His *La Mise en Scène du Drame Wagnérien* (1895) and *La Musique et La Mise en Scène* (1898) outlined a stagecraft consisting of three-dimensional settings united by an environment of colored light.⁴ Appia argued that light had a power of expression akin to that of music, able to represent and explore emotional depths. "Light is to the production what music is to the score: the expressive element in opposition to literal signs; and, like music, light can express only what belongs to 'the inner essence of all vision.'" ⁵ This "expressionist" definition of theater lighting became widely accepted in the decades following the publication of Appia's work.

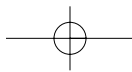
The second initiator of expressionist lighting was the Englishman, Edward Gordon Craig. Craig staged many influential productions, published prolifically, and trained several young designers in accordance with his beliefs. His pamphlet, *The Art of the Theater* (1905, republished as a book in 1911), a book titled *The Theatre Advancing* (1919, published in the United States), and two magazines, *The Mask* (1914–19) and *Scene* (1923), all were important circulators of Craig's ideas.⁶ Among his students was producer/director Sam Hume, who founded the Arts and Crafts Theater in Detroit, along with Sheldon Cheney, in 1916. Hume sponsored Cheney's *Theatre Arts Magazine* while, in 1914, Hume also curated an important exhibition of modern design in Boston that focused on

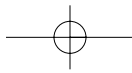
3 Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, *The Living Stage: A History of the World Theater* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1955), 433 passim. Macgowan was an influential drama critic, editor, and producer; as well as a director, along with Jones and Eugene O'Neill, of the Provincetown Playhouse, a prominent "little theater."

4 Needless to say, the history of colored lighting in the theater does not begin with Appia. As early as the sixteenth century, Sebastiano Serlio was putting light sources behind glass containers of colored liquid to light his productions. Rather, the early twentieth century witnessed an explosion of interest in and use of color and colored light both inside and outside the theater.

5 Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theater (La Musique et La Mise en Scène)* Robert Corrigan and Mary Dirks, trans. (Coral Gables, FL: Miami University Press, 1962 [1898]).

6 According to Simonson, because Appia's volumes were never translated into English [until 1960], Craig was able to "impose himself as a prophet on the English and American Theatre." Lee Simonson, *The Stage Is Set* (New York: Theater Arts Books, 1932), 353.





the work of Appia and Craig. While expressive light was an important element for Craig, reflecting his bias against illusionistic settings and flat illumination, it was only one element of his insistence on dramatic synthesis. However, his high profile in America (compared to Appia) caused many here to consider Craig to be the originator of expressionist lighting.

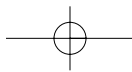
Another important popularizer of colored light in the performing arts was the American dancer Loie Fuller. As early as the 1890s, Fuller was saturating the stage with colored light as an integral part of her dances. “She began by using vertical shafts of light projected upwards from beneath the stage. In these narrow cones of light, the dancers whirled, twisting shreds of gauzy fabric, while the beam was rapidly altered in colour; and the effect was like that of a figure enshrouded in a silent and iridescent column of flame.”⁷ Popular commentary suggests that the effects were stunning. Furthermore, the titles of Fuller’s dances, such as the *Fire Dance*, the *Rainbow*, and the *Radium Dance* (dedicated to Marie Curie), themselves evoke a compelling spectacle—Fuller whirling on the stage swathed in yards of fabric, immersed in an atmosphere of dynamic, colored light.

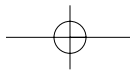
These design strategies rapidly found their way to the United States. The first show utilizing European techniques probably was Winthrop Ames’s 1912 New York production of Max Reinhardt’s pantomime *Sumurun*, which featured colorful orientalist settings. Following Josef Urban’s arrival in America in 1913, and his subsequent opulent designs for the Boston Opera Company, a set of practices was consolidated in America as the “New Stagecraft,” central to which were expressionist lighting effects. The writings of Appia and Craig had been published in American trade magazines as early as 1910, but Urban’s presence accelerated the adoption of new techniques.

The new stagecraft was especially successful in the so-called little theaters—small companies which sought to distance themselves from the overwhelming commercialization of major Broadway productions.⁸ Two of the most famous practitioners of the novel illumination, Lee Simonson and Norman Bel Geddes, first found work in the little theaters. Adaptations of their innovative techniques soon began to surface in Broadway theaters. By 1915, Robert Edmond Jones had designed colorful sets, lighting and costumes for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*, produced in New York by James Barker. These settings often were admired for their ethereal effect. The colorful atmosphere was said to convey an emotional resonance which could not be obtained by perspectival techniques. Leading designers such as Simonson, Jones, Bel Geddes, Henry Dreyfuss, et al., held that there was more meaningful expression in the mystical aura of projected scenery. Discussing Simonson’s design for *Back to Methuselah*, drama critic Kenneth Macgowan and Jones asserted that “[t]he landscapes [of projected

7 Adrian Bernard Klein, *Coloured Light An Art Medium*, 3rd ed. (London: Technical Press, 1937), 179.

8 The little theaters, along with periodicals such as *Theatre Arts Magazine*, defined themselves in opposition to commercial theater. See “What We Stand For,” *Theatre Arts Magazine* 1:4 (August 1917): 149.





color] were not defined like huge oil paintings in false perspective. They went into some new category which, for the moment, defeated our analysis.... Ordinary stage pretenses cannot stand beside the spiritual plastics produced by light.”⁹ Colored light was invested with a quasi-religious dimension, an other-worldly quality unavailable through traditional stagecraft. The theater, now more than ever, offered access to a magical realm of peace and harmony, a mystical utopia of colored light.

Technological advances facilitated the new aesthetic. Electric border lights were first used in the European theater around 1910, while incandescent lights began to be positioned on the fronts of balconies in 1912. The invention of more powerful incandescent lights in 1914, combined with the new technology of colored gels, provided stage designers with more economical and subtle means of producing colored light environments.¹⁰

For theater artists, color was an emotional language not penetrated by ideology. It also was a communal force, one which could engage an audience in a profound emotional/spiritual experience. This mystical realm which the theater invoked through colored light also was important to the work of many American visual artists, in that color was widely perceived to signify a “higher” realm of feeling. Color was the predominant element in the popular work of the synchromist painters and the artists of “projected color.” The close alliance between the arts of the theater and colorists in the visual arts was enhanced both by personal connections as well as by a shared aesthetic.

Between 1914 and 16, the synchromist artists Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright displayed a series of color-saturated abstractions in New York City. Apart from the obvious formal similarities between their art and the new stagecraft, the two owed a more obvious debt to the theater world, for it was the set designer Lee Simonson who first introduced them to one another.¹¹ Soon after having met, Russell and MacDonald-Wright dedicated themselves to a painting style grounded in colorism. In 1912, Russell coined the term “synchromism” to describe this body of work, meaning literally “with color.” After successful exhibitions in Munich and Paris in 1913, the synchromists’ work was sent to the United States, where it had a considerable impact not only on other American artists, but on the popular consciousness as well. “‘Synchromist’ Art Now Assails the Eye, Large Splashes of Color Found” crowed one New York City newspaper.¹²

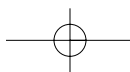
Two years later, Russell and MacDonald-Wright attained their greatest American success at the *Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* at New York’s Anderson Galleries. Organized by Macdonald-Wright’s brother, the critic Willard Huntington Wright, the *Forum Exhibition* presented synchromism as an “art of pure color,” eclipsing the colorism of Parisian modernists. Willard Wright also published two books on the history of art, *Modern Painting: Its*

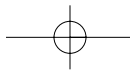
9 Kenneth Macgowan and Robert Edmond Jones, *Continental Stagecraft* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1922), 76.

10 Dozens of new technologies facilitated the employment of color in the United States outside the theater. Synthetic lacquers, phenolic resins, spray-colored bulbs, floodlights, electro-mechanical switching systems, and gas-tube lighting all were introduced during this period.

11 Gail Levin, *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction 1910–1925* Exh. Cat. (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), 14. The Synchromists’ interest in color was already engaged at this time, when Russell and Macdonald-Wright both attended the color-theory classes of Canadian artist Ernest Percyval Tudor-Hart.

12 *New York Press*, cited in Levin, 29.





Tendency and Meaning [1915] and *The Future of Painting* [1923]. In the first book, Wright concluded that synchromism was the logical end of modernist painting, the apotheosis of the easel picture. “Since the art of painting is the art of color, the synchromists depended entirely on primary pigment for the complete expression of formal composition. Thus was brought about the final purification of painting.”¹³

The synchromist artists and their supporters argued publicly that color had a spiritual, uplifting resonance akin to symphonic music. “Mankind has, until now, tried to satisfy its need for the highest spiritual exaltation only in music. Only tones have been able to grip us and transport us to the highest realms.... Yet color is just as capable as music of providing us with the highest ecstasies and delights.”¹⁴ It was this sense of color as having a quasi-spiritual, even utopian, dimension that made it attractive to industrial designers, architects, and advertisers.

Willard Wright’s second art primer, *The Future of Painting*, asserted that the future for the visual arts lay in the realm of projected light. “Already the future of the art of color is evident. The medium of the new art will be light: color in its purest, most intense form.”¹⁵ In this popular book, Wright predicted that the art of colored light would have an almost hypnotic effect on its viewers. “The art of color...is a highly intensified emotional stimulant... There is no escaping the effects of this art, once contact with it has been established. It is distracting and absorbing, and, when successfully conceived and executed, fixes the attention and produces a positive and poignant reaction—both intellectual and emotional.”¹⁶ In fact, this art of “projected color” already was being practiced across the United States. Artists including Van Deering Perrine, G.A. Shook, Mary Hallock-Greenwalt, Claude Bragdon, Thomas Wilfred, and Matthew Luckiesh all sought to make an art of “projected color.”

The first large-scale performance using colored light as an art form occurred when Alexander Scriabin’s tone-poem *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* was performed in New York City’s Carnegie Hall in 1915 by the Russian Symphony Society.¹⁷ Scriabin, a subscriber to theosophical beliefs, had relied upon a strict interpretation of aural/visual synaesthesia, equating the tone C with red, D with yellow, E with blue, A with green, etc.¹⁸ The Theosophical Society originally had been established in New York City by Madame Blavatsky and Henry Olcott in 1875. Theosophists exalted mystical experiences, occult phenomena, and esoteric doctrine in their pursuit of spiritual fulfillment. Among their tenets was the belief that a special relationship existed between colors and emotional/spiritual states. Indeed, in her book *Thought-Forms*, theosophist leader Annie Besant went so far as to assert that mental states were directly translatable into the color spectrum.¹⁹ Clearly, the work of the theosophists helped to popularize in the United States the idea

13 Willard Huntington Wright, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning* (New York: John Day Company, 1914), 331.

14 Levin, 129.

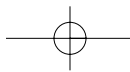
15 Willard Huntington Wright, *The Future of Painting* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, Inc., 1923), 50.

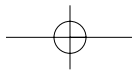
16 Wright, *The Future of Painting*, 30.

17 An attempt at providing a colored-light accompaniment at the premiere in Moscow (1911) was unsuccessful because the equipment failed.

18 For a detailed study of *Prometheus*, see James Baker’s article “*Prometheus* in America: The Significance of the World Premiere of Scriabin’s *Poem of Fire* as Color-Music in New York, March 20, 1915” in Kermit Champa, ed., *Over Here: The First Exile* (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1989), 90–112. Baker contends that “the color-organ part is derived from the basic pitch structure of the work; it provides, in effect, a sort of fundamental-bass analysis of the composition.”

19 Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbetter, *Thought-Forms* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905).





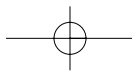
that color had transcendent, spiritual qualities.

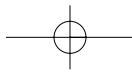
At Carnegie Hall, the mobile color portion of Scriabin's *Prometheus* was projected on a small (eight- by ten-foot) screen constructed of layers of gauze. A projection machine, the "chromola," had been devised for this performance by engineers at New York's Edison Laboratories. At the concert, a sense of depth was obtained by projecting different colors onto different layers of the screen. Critics reported that the projected color portion of the performance was striking, although inadequately related to the music. The music, alas, did not fare as well. "To harmonize with such a score the colors thrown on the screen should therefore be equally hideous, whereas they are really beautiful."²⁰

Scriabin's work achieved a brief moment of fame, but the most successful artist of colored light in the United States undoubtedly was Thomas Wilfred (1889–1968). In the 1920s, his "Lumia" compositions were praised by art critics and performed throughout the country. Wilfred, an acquaintance of Simonson and Jones, spent a lifetime refining his instruments and elaborating his beliefs in an art based on the manipulation of colored light. After his first public performance at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City on January 10, 1922, Wilfred's popularity soared and he toured continuously with his "clavilux" projector through 1933. The clavilux consisted of one or more powerful light projectors with variable focal lengths directing their beams through a carefully devised assortment of prisms, colored gels, and slides mounted on electric rotation devices. Wilfred's recitals of the 1920s often drew audiences in the thousands and received considerable acclaim from such prominent critics as Deems Taylor and Kenneth Macgowan. A typical performance consisted of a short speech outlining the aesthetic philosophy behind Lumia, followed by a presentation of six or eight pieces, each lasting from five to ten minutes. The pieces, such as *Triangular Etude* (1924) or *Study in Rising Forms* (1926), explored themes of movement—"unfolding," "advancing," "rising," etc. Wilfred also designed a number of architectural projects which would utilize Lumia, and while his works in this area were never commissioned, color became a dominant element for many architects of the 1920s.

Inspired partly by the color-atmosphere of the other arts, America's architects strove to produce exciting environments of color and colored light. These spaces were of the utmost importance in creating dazzling backdrops for consumption. Using brilliant color as signifiers of novelty, status, and success, architects and interior designers enlivened America's cityscapes with dramas of abstract beauty. "Terra cotta for the color age—The modern demand for permanent beauty in buildings is readily obtained through the use of COLOR." Advertising like this, which touted the colorful effects of building materials, became ubiquitous in the trade periodicals of the 1920s. In addition to terra cotta, other cladding materials such as brick and granite, inspired their manufacturers to

20 "Untitled," *The Nation* (March 25, 1915).





similar rhetorical excesses. Likewise, the producers of ceramic tile, steel partitions, colored concrete floors, etc., trumpeted the wondrous effects created by colorful interiors.

In the 1920s, there was enough variety of color choice available in brick, terra cotta, and other synthetic materials such as vitrolite and alate that color became the key to many building designs. One of the most prominent polychrome buildings of this era was Ely Kahn's Park Avenue Building (New York City) of 1928. Kahn had spent years field-testing the tonal values of brick and terra cotta, finally deciding upon an ornamental scheme consisting of magenta red, black, ochre, and blue/turquoise. These colors were then applied systematically in an attempt to integrate them with the general forms and decorative details of the structure.²¹ Ralph Walker designed several more colored buildings on the East Coast. His most famous was New York's Western Union Building (1928), which was constructed of nineteen(!) shades of brick, rose colored at the base and passing through the spectrum to a pinkish orange near the top. The color of the terra cotta for Raymond Hood's McGraw-Hill Building (1931) was carefully controlled by the architect, who was obsessed by the idea of creating a balanced color harmony. "The blue-green glazed surface of the terra cotta responds readily to the changing sky colors. Under a bright blue sky, the color is correspondingly bright and blue. In the light of dawn, it picks up opalescent tints that change radiance with the rising of the sun.... There seems to be some relationship between the blue-green color and the many sky colors, resulting in its color always being a harmonious complement."²²

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Claude Beelman was responsible for two stunning colored exteriors. The Eastern Columbus Building (1930) sported blue and green terra cotta cladding, with gold ornament highlighting the windows, entrances, and cornice. His Banker's Building, also completed in 1930, was clad in a turquoise hue.

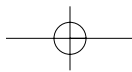
Polychrome architecture often was supplemented by colorful lighting at night. While color had been an important part of floodlighting as early as 1915 at the *Panama Pacific Exposition*, it was not widespread until the early 1920s. In the 1910s, it was generally too expensive to use theatrical lighting outdoors. Glass slides, gels, and naturally colored glass lamps required a great deal of maintenance and were costly to replace. However, in 1922, the invention of the sprayed color lamp allowed for more economical colored light spectacles.

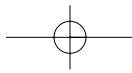
The years 1924 to 1933 saw numerous examples of color floodlighting, sometimes kinetic, throughout the United States. Irwin S. Chanin, owner of the Chanin Construction Company, compared the lighting of his New York City tower to the effects created by stage designers. The Chanin building was illuminated in 1929 with a system that was capable of producing two-hundred and twelve differ-

21 Leon Solon, "The Park Avenue Building, New York City," *The Architectural Record* 63, April 1928, 289–297.

22 Arthur North, "But . . . Is It Architecture?" *American Architect* 141: 2603 (January 1932): 28–31.

23 *New York Times* (January 14, 1929): 42.





ent decorative schemes.²³ Glen W. Parrish's John H. McClatchey Building (Philadelphia, 1929) featured an elaborate mobile color system. The three lower stories were brilliantly lit with static color spotlights. The fourth story, however, featured a crown of mobile lighting that produced thirty color changes every ten minutes. The system consisted of six distinct floodlighting systems, each in a different color. In Los Angeles, the 241-foot Atlantic-Richfield Oil Building (1929) employed almost every method of color and light spectacle available. The structure was faced with gold and black panels which were floodlit at night with three-hundred and eighty two projectors. Spotlights colored with blue and gold accents (the company colors) in the window arches enhanced the polychrome symphony. Finally, the 125-foot tower atop the main building displayed a four-sided colored sign, and was capped with a powerful searchlight.²⁴

The apotheosis of colorful architecture probably was reached in the buildings at Chicago's *Century of Progress* exposition (1933–34). This world's fair, designed by a team of prominent architects with a color scheme by theater artist Josef Urban, was visited by almost fifty million patrons during its two-year run. The exteriors of Urban's polychrome architecture were enhanced by an enormous concentration of artificial light, drawing 3,000 kilowatts of current, and using 150,000 incandescent lamps, as well as miles of neon and mercury vapor tubes. Scattered around the exposition were forty-one three-kilowatt searchlights, 3,200 floodlights, and 277 underwater floodlight projectors, totaling twenty-one billion candlepower.²⁵ By the late 1920s, color and colored-light environments had become ubiquitous in American public spaces. They could be experienced in the theater, the art gallery, on the streets of major cities, and at performances of the popular *clavilux* and its siblings. Nowhere, however, was color more prominent than in the visions of American consumers.

In the 1920s, American merchandisers vastly increased their deployment of color. Retailers, advertisers, and designers used this visual code to spur the consumption of commodities. The most high-profile industry in the United States in the late 1920s was the automobile industry. It was there that color was first introduced to consumers on a large scale.²⁶ Technologically, the most important development facilitating the widespread introduction of color into consumer goods was the invention by DuPont in 1923 of the nitrocellulose lacquer called by its trade name "Duco." In coordination with General Motors, Duco was used first on GM's 1924 "True Blue" Oakland.²⁷ (Before the introduction of the Oakland, color had been available only in the luxury market.) More important, Duco was quick-drying, cutting almost four weeks off the time it took to complete a car; autos which had previously required two to four weeks to paint could now be completed in a single shift. In 1925, nitrocellulose lacquers were made available to the entire automobile

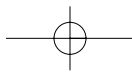
24 For more on this topic, see Timothy Rub, "Lighting up the Town: Architectural Illumination in the Jazz Age," *Architectural Record* (August 1986): 73–77.

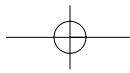
25 Untitled press release from *A Century of Progress* Division of Publications dated September 9, 1933. Chicago Historical Society. *A Century of Progress Collection*.

26 David Gartman. "Harley Earl and the Art and Color Section: The Birth of Styling at General Motors," *Design Issues* 10: 2 (Summer 1994): 3-26 (reprinted in *Design History: An Anthology*, Dennis Doordan, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

27 During the 1920s, the DuPont Corporation owned more than twenty percent of the common stock of General Motors Corporation, explaining GM's early access to this important new color technology. See DuPont de Nemours & Co., *Annual Report 1925* (Wilmington, DE: 1925).

28 The *Saturday Evening Post* article "The New Age of Color" (January 21, 1928): 22 also paid homage to the inventors of lacquers who had made the new age possible. Duco also was utilized to refinish used cars during the late 1920s.





industry and, by 1927, they were used for a variety of consumer goods including kitchen appliances.²⁸ Between 1927 and 1930, the new car market faltered although the consumption of lacquer doubled, as color became a dominant visual code of retailing.

Alfred Sloan, in his autobiography *My Years with General Motors*, described the effects of the introduction of lacquers which made possible “the modern age of color and styling.”²⁹ Sloan, General Motor’s Chairman in the 1930s, recalled that colored lacquer quickly became the fundamental design tool of GM’s Art and Color Section. At GM, the late 1920s saw styling become a scientifically managed part of the production process. By 1927, styling had become, in Sloan’s view, at least as important a part of the corporation’s business as engineering. The engineering of useful automobiles, the precept which had, until then, dominated the automobile industry, was soon eclipsed by the engineering of consumption.³⁰

1927 was a turning point in terms of the use of color in the automobile industry. In that year, production was stopped on the Ford Model T, the car of which Henry Ford reportedly had said, “One could have it in any color so long as it was black.” Ford finally heeded the desires of his customers who “were no longer content...to roar slowly uphill with a weary left foot jammed against the low-speed pedal while robin’s-egg blue Chevrolets swept past in second.”³¹ In 1927, the Ford company began production of its first car available in color, the Model A. Ford’s unprecedented two-million-dollar advertising campaign saturated the print media. “The minute you see the picture of the new Ford, you will be delighted with its low, smart lines and the artistic color combinations. There, you will say, is a truly modern car.”³²

This “chromatic revolution” was amply documented in most popular magazines of the period. It was especially prevalent in advertisements, which often were the only four-color pages in otherwise black and white periodicals.³³ Specialty magazines, and certainly those which specialized in consumer-goods industries, were replete with references to the new age of color. For example, a perusal of *Home Building* (a midwestern contractor’s magazine) for the years 1927 to 1928 finds a plethora of color-focused advertisements. Industries such as the Maple Flooring Manufacturers Association (“The new color enchantment in hard maple floors”), Cyclone Safety Shingles (“Colored roofs add to beauty”), Face Brick (“Endless blends of everlasting color”), Logan-Long Roofs (“Color! What a wonderful range the Logan-Long line offers!”), and the Crane Company (“A tiny bathroom, or one as big as a double bedroom; both are given beauty by the wizardry of color.”) predicated their advertisements on the desirability of color in one’s surroundings.³⁴ However, the most significant discussion of the commercial uses of color occurred in the pages of magazines geared toward businessmen.

29 Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., *My Years With General Motors* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, inc., 1964).

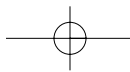
30 Sloan, 264.

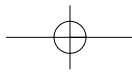
31 Frederick Allen, *Only Yesterday An Informal History of the Nineteen Twenties* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), 162.

32 Quoted in Allen Churchill, *The Year the World Went Mad* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960), 281. Churchill records that more than one million people came to see the Model A on the day of its debut in New York City alone. More than 2,000 newspapers had carried full-page advertisements in the days preceding the car’s introduction to the public on December 2, 1927.

33 For a discussion of the introduction of color into print ads, movies, and television, see Neil Harris, “Color and Media Some Comparisons and Speculations,” *Cultural Excursions Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 318–336.

34 Advertisements from *Home Building* in their respective order: June 1928: 49; June 1928: 3; June 1927: 65; November 1928: and back cover; August 1928: 64.





Fortune magazine, published by Time Incorporated, made its first appearance on newsstands in February 1930. Its advertisements sought to capitalize on the contemporary fascination with color—a fascination which, of course, those same advertisements were themselves producing. Early issues ran full-page advertisements for Hercules Powder Company, a maker of nitrocellulose lacquers (“It is no longer enough to produce merchandise that is well made, wears well, is useful”),³⁵ and General Electric’s National Lamp Works (“The University of Light”),³⁶ two important purveyors of color and light. As a complement to these advertisements, the very first issue featured a long article titled “Color in Industry,” which discussed the ubiquitous use of color in consumer goods.³⁷

“Color in Industry” detailed the fact that an overwhelming shift recently had occurred in Americans’ and American businesses’ attitudes towards color. “For during the past few years, a great pail has up-ended itself over the American scene, has splashed our household goods and gods with a rich, warm stream of flat, bright color.” The article at first focused on the use of color in domestic spaces, comparing the home of 1925 with the home of 1928. According to *Fortune*, the earlier home had been filled with natural wood stains, and black, “or some dull, dark color allied to blackness” pots and appliances. The home of 1928, however, was a veritable symphony of color. “Here so utilitarian an object as a sink was purchased from a color range of T’ang Red, Orchid of Vincennes, Royal Copenhagen Blue, Ivoire de Medici, St. Porchaire Brown, Rose du Barry, Ionian Black, Clair de Lune Blue, Ming Green, and Meissen White.”³⁸ While the ascription of unrelieved drabness to homes before 1925 is an obvious exaggeration (as color had clearly played a role in home decoration for centuries), it is true that the middle 1920s saw an explosion in the use of color for interior fixtures (especially in the bathroom), kitchen appliances, and floor coverings. In 1928, the Richardson & Boynton Company even declared that “Color Enters the Cellar” in the form of a bright blue boiler.³⁹

The body of the article in *Fortune* detailed many of the new introductions of color in products. The author listed several product packages which had been colorfully redesigned in the late 1920s, and had secured “gratifying sales increases.” Lifebuoy Soap, Bokar Coffee, Kotex, and Packer’s Shampoo all had begun to use colored packaging to secure larger shares of the consumer marketplace.⁴⁰ In 1928, Macy’s introduced the Red Star iron, which sold tremendously on the basis of its red molded plastic handle. The late 1920s also saw the introduction of dyed petroleum products (gasoline), such as red Socony Special and Pure Oil’s blue motor oil. Not only automobiles and their associated products, but trains (New York’s Blue Comet, Chicago’s Red Bird), Pullman cars, and planes were employing new color schemes. *Fortune* quoted Pullman executive James Keeley: “Color is becoming more and more of a selling urge.”⁴¹

35 *Fortune* (February 1930): 2.

36 *Fortune* (February 1930): 29.

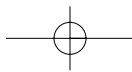
37 “Color in Industry,” *Fortune* (February 1930): 85–94.

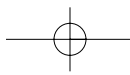
38 “Color in Industry,” 85. The kitchen came in for more than its share of colored products. “Take the same item, a gas range for instance, make one in the old style with black handles on the oven doors and gas cocks, with the stove proper in either black or white enamel. Take the same stove and have it enameled with one of the pastel shades, have the oven handles and gas cocks made of colored casein . . . and see the results on the sales of the two stoves.” From “Color in Electric Iron Handles,” *Plastics and Molded Products* 4:7 (July 1928): 398.

39 *House Beautiful* (January 1928), cited in Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 126. Marchand includes a discussion of the color explosion on pages 120–27.

40 “Color in Industry,” 93.

41 “Color in Industry,” 87.





“Why all the color? What is the limit, if any?” These questions led off a 1930 article in *Advertising Age*. The article reported, predictably, that advertising art directors used color for its emotional appeal. “It can be used like music to achieve a particular reaction.” The consensus was that colorful print ads were particularly effective in advertising when they were used to depict colored products to the consumer.⁴² This was the case for Sherwin-Williams, a paint company which, via colored ads, exhorted consumers to repaint their homes according to the seasons—warm colors for the winter and cool ones for the summer months.⁴³

“Today, color is the modern note everywhere. We have special color effects in bathrooms, kitchens, cooking utensils, house furnishings, and even at night some of us climb into bed between colored sheets.”⁴⁴ Interior decorators often expounded on the emotional effects of colored rooms during this period. Florence Cockerham suggested that a housewife could “radiate her own personality in her kitchen” through appropriate color selection. Similar claims were made by bathroom-design companies, which attempted to promote color as a hallmark of individuality. Mosaic Tiles crowed, “First of all, *color and individuality*.”⁴⁵ The kitchen and bathroom were the focus of manufacturers’ attention because the introduction of color could be promoted in connection with the purchase of new appliances and fixtures. Consequently, these rooms were the most frequently redesigned part of the average middle-class home.

During the 1920s, women’s make-up, which previously had been promoted as discreet and imperceptible, blossomed with bright swaths of color. Martin Battersby has noted that, as late as 1919, colored beauty products were still not widely advertised, a situation which was soon to change.⁴⁶ Around 1920, colorful rouge and lipstick came into vogue. Soon, *Ladies Home Journal* began to include advertising for lipsticks that reassured the consumer: “It’s comforting to know that the alluring note of scarlet will stay with you for hours.”⁴⁷ A new emphasis on the cosmetic adornment of women’s faces gave rise to a rainbow arsenal of products that complemented the brilliant hues of jewelry and clothes.

The investment of mass-produced goods with social and artistic status was the job of the professional designer. In the United States, many top designers were culled from the ranks of prominent theater artists, and the profession soon included Norman Bel Geddes, Robert Edmond Jones, Lee Simonson, Josef Urban and Henry Dreyfuss. The most famous designers were given total control over the design of products, and amassed large individual fortunes. As early as 1931, for example, Bel Geddes was able to command fifty-thousand-dollar advances on royalties. Considering that some products saw sales gains of more than seven-hundred percent after being visually recreated, the potential profit was enormous.

42 “Color Strikes Deep in People’s Minds,” *Advertising Age* 1: 23 (June 1930): 3.

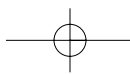
43 This advertisement anticipated Josef Urban’s “color geography” at the Chicago’s Century of Progress exposition, where he planned for warm colors on the south sides of structures, and cool colors on the north sides.

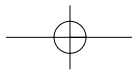
44 F.J. Cadenas, “Colorama Lighting in the Ballroom of the St. George Hotel, Brooklyn, NY,” *Transactions of the Illuminating Engineering Society* 25:3 (March 1930): 282–91.

45 Florence Cockerham, “Color Refreshes the Kitchen,” *Home Building* (August 1928): 26–27. The Mosaic Tile advertisement can be found in *The Architectural Record* 64:4 (October 1928): 36.

46 Martin Battersby, *The Decorative Twenties* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1988 [1969]), 137.

47 *Ladies Home Journal* (June 1922): 133.





Some of the industrial designers' most important work was the redesign of the packaging of retail goods. Reflecting a measure of artistic elitism, this function was, in fact, called "packaging," not "industrial design," but was still avoided if possible by the top designers. During the 1920s, many brands reconfigured their product packaging in an effort to increase consumption. "Slowly, quietly, unobtrusively, the package has revolutionized modern merchandising. It has changed the buying habits of a nation."⁴⁸ One of the most important elements of a new package was color. Wheatsworth Biscuits Company, Comet Rice, Liggett's Candy, and Adjust-Lite Lamps were just a few of the many companies which repackaged their products in the 1920s using new and brighter colors. Business consultants advocated the purchase of color wheels so that advertisers and marketers would be able to choose the best tones for each product. The deployment of color in packaging was further supported by academic psychologists, several of whom developed a large literature devoted to the psychological effects, including attention values and emotional responses, of certain colors and color combinations for business use.⁴⁹

One final area of design was the construction of shop window displays. This "new art of commercial display" was deployed to create appropriately dramatic settings for merchandise. "Beautiful exhibits of merchandise are on view...having usually a conventional setting formed by an architectural background or simply a painted screen, against which the rich colors and textures of the goods blend in a glowing pattern of artificial light. They are like scenes from a theater."⁵⁰ Thus, theater designers employed their talents to create controlled environments of colored light to develop exciting scenes-starring products.⁵¹ These "scenes from a theater" utilized colored light combined with colorful costumes (packaging) to present a seemingly attainable world of unlimited pleasure.

The new employment of color coincided with an increasing focus on consumption among retailers. An article in the advertising journal *Printer's Ink* termed this trend the "Dawn of the Distribution Age 1922-29."⁵² In the aftermath of World War I, thousands of back orders for construction machinery, railroad equipment, and a variety of retail goods including automobiles had been quickly filled by an industrial establishment still geared for war. Productive capacity, spurred by new machine tools and the rationalization of labor promoted by Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford, had expanded tremendously over the preceding few decades. The fundamental demands of American society for useful goods could be easily met, and industry turned its attention to increasing the consumption of goods.

Color played a key role in this shift in the United States' economy toward the dominance of consumption. Henceforth, products would be marketed more and more on the basis of their supposed intangibles, the aura which an effective marketing

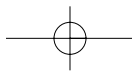
48 Richard Franken and Carroll Larrabee, *Packages That Sell* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1928), 1.

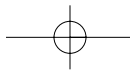
49 Franken and Larrabee, 58-73. Franken himself was a "Lecturer on the Psychology of Advertising" at New York University.

50 John Taylor Boyd, Jr., "The Art of Commercial Display," *The Architectural Record* (January 1928): 59-66.

51 William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

52 "Dawn of the Distribution Age 1922-29," *Printer's Ink* 184: 4 (July 1938): 320-26.





campaign lent to a given object. A 1928 article in the trade magazine *Plastics and Molded Products* pointed out that “[t]oday the public demands color in the articles it purchases. This applies not only to objects in which one would ordinarily expect color, but also to articles that would appear to have only a utilitarian purpose.”⁵³ The onset of the color age represented a new and more effective cathecting of desire on to commodities. Jean Baudrillard theorized the situation this way: “‘Free to be oneself’ in fact means: free to project one’s desires onto produced goods.... The goal is to allow the drives that were previously blocked by mental determinants (taboo, super-ego, and guilt) to crystallize on objects, concrete determinants where the explosive force of desire is annulled and the ritual repressive function of social organization is materialized.”⁵⁴

Deeming it important to an understanding of the relationship between objects and the utilization of color, Baudrillard attempted to define consumption apart from the material act of purchase.

*In order to become an object of consumption, the object must become sign; that is, in some way it must become external to a relation that it now only signifies, a-signed arbitrarily and non-coherently to this concrete relation, yet obtaining its coherence, and consequently its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relation to all other object-signs. It is in this way that it becomes “personalized,” and enters in the series, etc.: it is never consumed in its materiality, but in its difference.*⁵⁵

This aspect of the system of “sign value” was especially operative in the use of color—a single object achieved its status in part from its association with colorful artistic spectacles. This juxtaposition was a supremely effective marketing tool because it invoked neutral discourses, outside the space of the commodity, via color.

53 “Color in Electric Iron Handles,” *Plastics and Molded Products* 4:7 (July 1928): 398. This issue of *Plastics and Molded Products* also contains advertisements for manufacturers of colored plastics.

“Color” screamed the red full-page ad for Karolith Corporation (362). A few pages away, an article trumpeted the benefits (“From the standpoint of color, it is a revelation.”) of molded plastics (397).

54 Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* [1968], Mark Poster, ed. and trans. *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 13. Baudrillard is quoting from an American book, *The Strategy of Desire*, by Ernest Dichter (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960).

55 Baudrillard in Poster, 22.

