The Beginnings of a Beginner's Guide to Color Theory

By Laura Bracken (email@BrackenDesigns.com)

We're only going to scratch the surface today. Color in design is an intimidating (for me) and possibly overwhelming subject. There's SOOO much ground to cover and so many ideas, all with tangents and paths and differing opinions.

So let's begin…

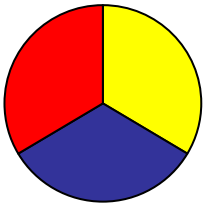
Remember in school, the "Primary Colors"? Red, Blue, and Yellow. The theory was, with these colors you can make ANY color. ☺ How exciting!

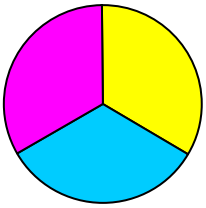
My first introduction to the "alternate" Primary Colors came about the first time I went to change the ink cartridge on my color printer. Egads! It's Magenta, Cyan, and Yellow!!! How can my printer make ALL the colors if it's not even using the primary colors as a base?!?!?

And so I learned about "four color ink printing" (black is the 4th). These *new* colors actually produce more variety and more intense colors. Go figure.

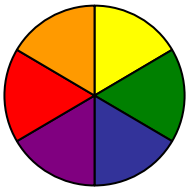
Now we'll discuss basic mixing. I'll use typical color theory terminology when applicable so you will know these words when you see them again, used in other things.

So a "Primary Color" is one either: red, blue, yellow or magenta, cyan, yellow.





A "Secondary Color" then, is when equal amounts of two primary colors are mixed together:



Sorry, some of my desired colors weren't available in the software in which I made these pie-charts, so I had to draw the colors in later. Hmph!

A "shade" is when you darken any given color, and a "tint" is when you lighten one.

"Tertiary Colors" are the colors between the Secondary Colors… the ones created by mixing a equal parts of a Primary Color and a Secondary Color.

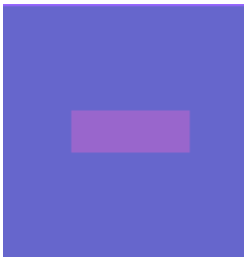
"Quarternary Colors" are created by mixing equal parts of a Primary Color and a Tertiary Color.

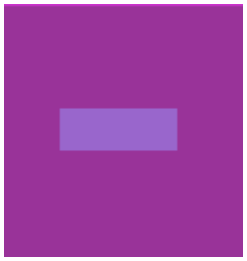
"Quinary Colors" are created by mixing equal parts of a Secondary Color and a Tertiary Color.

Next issue we'll continue with "Complementary Colors" and "Analogous Colors".

Here's a good example of how/why thinking about the color you're designing with really IS important.

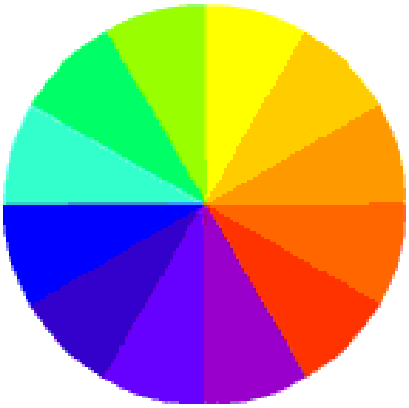
See these two blocks with shades of light purple in them. Those "shades of light purple" are the same shade. I almost didn't believe it until I cropped the blue square and laid it right up against the violet square. By golly, they ARE the same!





And what did that teach us? That choosing foreground color, background color, complementing colors, and all colors in between is a REALLY important job. That is, if you're trying to convey a feeling and/or say something with your art. Or if you want your work to be eye-catching and interesting.

Article 2: Color Theory: Split Complements



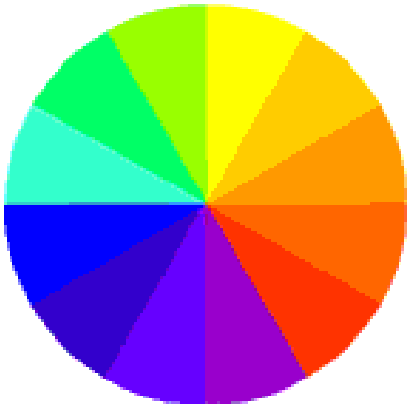
A complementary color is one directly opposite another on the color wheel. Although these colors are considered "opposites", they are also intended to complement one another. Using a color's complement as an accent color is one very useful technique of color theory (example: main design is purple… add tiny flecks of yellow or light green to accent the main color).

"Immortal"
© 2005 Laura J Bracken

"Immersion"
© 2005 Laura J Bracken

"Tranquility"
© 2004 Laura J Bracken

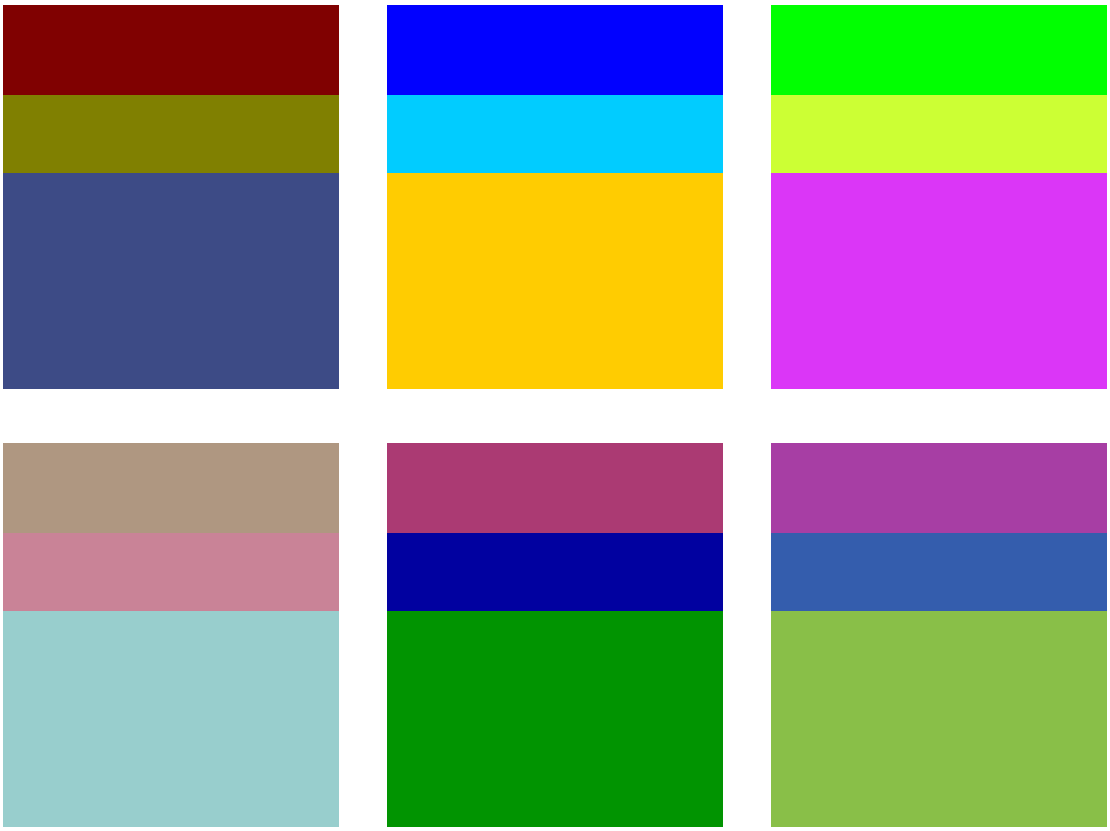
"Feral"
© 2005 Laura J Bracken



However, there is also the "split complementary". To find the split complementary, select your primary color, find its opposite, and slide one spot to the right or/and left to find the split complementary.

"Enticing Gypsy"
© 2005 Laura J Bracken

Below are some split complementary combinations to get you going. The colors do not (and maybe even SHOULD not) be used in equal proportions. Just have fun and relax… maybe your color design will become intuitive.



To be continued...

(Hit your BACK button to return to previous menu)