

# The French period in the history of environmental colour design

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## ABSTRACT

Until now, there has been little research in the vast, diverse literature on environmental colour design that is devoted to the important French period as a comprehensive artistic phenomenon. Moreover, there has not been any study of the influence of the ideas of the French colour consultants and designer colourists on the tradition of environmental colour design. The present paper addresses this lack. A qualitative oral history approach was used to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with six French colour consultants: Bernard Lassus, Michel Albert-Vanel, André Lemonnier, Jean-Philippe Lenclos, Yves Charnay, and Victor Chérubin Grillo. Applying an inductive approach and implementing a 'thematic analysis' for the interpretation and representation of the interview data revealed key spiritual, intellectual, philosophical influences on these colour consultants as well as their sources of inspiration, teachers, and mentors, uncovering a heritage which has already left an indelible mark on the history of environmental colour design.

**Keywords:** *environmental colour design, colour consultant, designer colourist, colour methodology, French context*

## INTRODUCTION

The term 'environmental colour design' came into being relatively late in the 1940s. It was invented in response to a new reality in which increasing attention was being paid to how human activities interact with colour and associated natural factors, e.g., geographical, solar, climatic, etc. Two tendencies were crucial to the development of the term. On the one hand, through various trends, colour was considered to play a significant role in the architectural and urban environment. For example, the Art Deco movement at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century combined materials and colours to meet new technological and social demands; while through Expressionism, De Stijl, the Bauhaus, and Modernism, light, openness, and simplicity were introduced into architecture as fundamental qualities. On the other hand, starting in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, cognitive and experimental

psychology induced a wave of interest in the visual language and psychological meaning of colour and colour associations. Experimental psychology became a scientific field of research and colour was part of it. The arts contributed substantially to the search for the meaning of colour. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bruno Taut and Le Corbusier —two prominent architects, who also were dedicated to painting— developed a conscious and thorough application of colour in architecture and considered colour a powerful means to modify interior and exterior environments.

In the 1950s and 1960s, colour designers in France began to develop colour concepts not only for one single building or an interior space, but also for residential developments, new towns, city districts, and also for industrial buildings, public spaces, and infrastructure. Colour was applied at a monumental scale with supergraphics visually widening, distorting, or enhancing spaces and volumes. Colour provided a new dynamic and movement to environments. This understanding has shaped the Postmodernist city and has also had a significant impact on the development of environmental colour design in the sense that it sparked the birth of a new profession —the colour consultant. In collaboration with architects, engineers, town planners, industrialists, or commissioned for specific projects by public or private companies or governmental agencies, the colour consultant has become part of a multidisciplinary team (see, e.g., Prieto 1995, Caivano 2006, Schindler 2012, Jean-Philippe Lenclos 2017).

Various renowned colour consultants working in France have left an indelible mark on the history of environmental colour design: Jacques Fillacier, Georges Patrix, Fabio Rieti, Bernard Lassus, André Lemonnier, Jean-Philippe Lenclos, Michel Cler and France Cler, and Victor Grillo among others. Their influential colour projects and research have addressed colour for new buildings, historical city centres, and local or regional urban landscapes. Works of these colour experts are included in the Centre Pompidou's collection and have been exhibited in two group shows: *Environnements polychromes* in Paris (2011-2013) and *Éloge de la couleur* in Roubaix (2017). As well, their theoretical insights and practical approach to colour, often published in books, professional magazines, and newspapers, have been crucial to environmental colour design, colour research, and colour education in the arts and architecture. In the vast and diverse literature on environmental colour design, however, there hasn't been any research devoted to this important French period as a comprehensive artistic phenomenon. Moreover, there has been no study of the influence of the ideas of the French colour consultants and designer colourists on the tradition of environmental colour design. The present paper addresses this lack.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### 1) Data-gathering technique

Following a qualitative oral history approach, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with six French colour consultants. This data-gathering technique was especially valuable because it made it possible to explore subjective viewpoints (Flick 2009) and gather in-depth accounts of the experience of persons who have contributed to the history of environmental colour design. The semi-structured interviews focused on questions that facilitated conversation about the interviewee's life experiences relating to a particular historical event or period. These relatively unstructured interviews not only allowed the interviewees enough space to answer on their own terms, but also at the same time provided a framework for making cross comparisons (cf. Edwards and Holland 2013).

## 2) Topic guidelines

The topic guidelines for the interviews included five groups of exploratory, open-ended questions:

- 1) What has had a significant spiritual, philosophical, intellectual influence on you? What has been a source of inspiration?
- 2) Who taught you how to work with colour?
- 3) Who are your successors using your ideas? Do you have successors of whom you are proud? Do you have successors from abroad?
- 4) What does environmental colour design mean to you? How do you see the evolution of colour in the environment?
- 5) How do you prefer to practice colour?

In addition, the scheduled interview included an introduction that involved ensuring that the participants were aware of the purpose of the research; allowed the interviewees to give their informed consent; and, verified that they agreed with having the interview recorded. The interview guidelines that were employed enabled the researchers to address a defined topic while allowing the interviewees enough leeway to answer on their own terms and discuss issues pertinent to them (Choak 2012). Within the parameters of each of the pre-determined interview topics, any responses could be followed up if necessary with supplementary questions.

## 3) Participants: recruitment and sampling

As is often the case in qualitative research (see, e.g., Edwards and Holland 2013), the sample, i.e., properties and categories of the interview data, was constructed as the research progressed. Handling the interview data through 'sampling' relied on the grounded theory approach as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Selection of interviewees was based on the nature and design of the study, the aims and research questions, as well as on the relevance to the theory of environmental colour design.

Interviews were conducted with the following six French colour consultants:

- 1) Bernard Lassus (b. 1929), landscape architect and visual artist, with a major solo exhibition *Jardin monde* (2017) at the Centre Pompidou.
- 2) Michel Albert-Vanel (b. 1935), colour designer, inventor of the Planetary Colour System, Professor Emeritus EnsAD, and author of many books on colour.
- 3) André Lemonnier (b. 1937), painter, colour visual artist, colour researcher, inventor of patented colour tools and atlas, and colour designer for architecture and industry.
- 4) Jean-Philippe Lenclos (b. 1938), colour designer, painter, Professor Emeritus EnsAD, colour researcher, and creator of the concept 'The Geography of Colour'.
- 5) Yves Charnay (b. 1942), visual artist, painter, creator of a patented colour-light device, designer of light installations, author, and Professor Emeritus EnsAD.
- 6) Victor Chérubin Grillo (b. 1944), visual artist, colour designer for architecture and industry, Professor Emeritus École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts de Paris-Cergy.

All inherently interested in the research project, the interviewees live and work in France and have already made a substantial contribution to the history of environmental colour design.

## 4) Planning and conducting the study

The interviews were conducted and video-recorded in May 2019 at the homes or studios of the interviewees. Each individual interview lasted from forty to ninety minutes. Participants were offered breaks in between the interview questions to allow the interviewee time to collect his thoughts. One

sample, i.e., session, included several of the invited colour consultants and thereby entailed multiple interviews yielding considerably more data than a single, snapshot study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1) Data analysis

The first step of the data analysis was to transcribe the video recordings so that the material was easier to work with. As researchers, we transcribed all the data ourselves and took notes at the same time as a useful step in becoming familiar with and immersed in the data. All levels of detail were included, not only words, but also phatic utterances, pauses, and intonations.

Applying an inductive approach and implementing a ‘thematic analysis’ for the interpretation and representation of the interview data, patterns within the data were identified and studied from a constructivist methodological position to deduce the meaning that the interviewees attached to their experience, the significance this has had for their lives, and, more broadly, their own particular social construction of this influence (see, e.g., Evans 2017).

### 2) Impact of spiritual, philosophical, intellectual influences and sources of inspiration

As expected, each of the interviewees indicated unique spiritual, philosophical, intellectual influences and the sources of inspiration that have had an impact on their understanding of colour.

**Bernard Lassus** told us that he did not have any influential spiritual, philosophical, intellectual teachers and that his source of inspiration was his own work, or rather, the questions he raised and goals he set himself.

Responding to the question about spiritual, philosophical, intellectual influences, **Michel Albert-Vanel** mentioned Jean Bernard, a stonecutter and member of the *Compagnon* (French organization of craftsmen and artisans dating from the Middle Ages), who in 1941 in Lyon founded the journal *Compagnonnage*, reimagining the tradition of the worker association or ‘brotherhood’ of *Compagnonnage du Devoir et du Tour de France*, a fellowship which included taking a tour (*Tour de France*) as a journeyman to complete various apprenticeships with masters. In the context of the formation of the theory and practice of environmental colour design, Albert-Vanel’s reference to Bernard as an influence was completely unexpected. As researchers, we asked Albert-Vanel to explain exactly how Bernard might have influenced his ideas about colour. It turned out that Bernard was like a second father for Albert-Vanel, because Albert-Vanel’s mother and Bernard’s wife were very close friends. J. Bernard was son of painter Émile Bernard (1868-1941), who also did sculpture and woodcuts and whose work can be admired today at the Musée d’Orsay. Attributing great importance to colour, J. Bernard had a large studio in Neuilly where he painted. Taking Albert-Vanel under his wing, J. Bernard played an important role in developing Albert-Vanel’s taste for colour. Other influences impacting Albert-Vanel’s own development include Marcel Gromaire (1892-1971), André Pierre Léon Arbus (1903-1969), and even Mahatma Gandhi, as he describes, “...not directly, but somehow because he lived in the mental sphere.” As well, important sources of inspiration for Albert-Vanel are Buddha and Buddhism.

**Jean-Philippe Lenclos** stated that his understanding of colour was mostly influenced by artists: Claude Monet (1840-1926), Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947), Henri Émile Benoît Matisse (1869-1954), Paul Klee (1879-1940), and Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979). Each of these painters affected his theory and work in their own way. From Monet he learned about an emotional, intuitive use of colour; Bonnard’s freedom, creativity, and special ability to apply colour in combination with light impressed

him; Matisse's art of combining colours and using colour contrasts served as a powerful example; Klee's development of reflecting theoretically in an encompassing way strongly influenced him as well as the artist's creative use of colour and skilful manner of expressing feelings through colour; and, finally, Delaunay played a special role in shaping his attitude to colour: she was an artist who not only had amazing talent and intuition concerning colour, but also achieved impressive results in various practical applications, e.g., in painting and also in the design of artefacts for everyday life such as in fashion and interior decoration. Furthermore, the way she did it —perceiving colour as a part of the human environment— is of great importance to Lenclos.

The most important philosophical, intellectual influence for **André Lemonnier** is Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786–1889), a great scholar and organic chemist who developed his own colour system that significantly shaped certain movements in painting including Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Cubism. The most substantial source of inspiration for Lemonnier is the cosmos.

Reflecting on his foremost influences and sources of inspiration, **Yves Charnay** said that he cannot single out any specific person: "There is not one person, but there was a set of people, there was also a system of references from reading, from experiments, and also from encounters and conferences." Colour came to his life more through coloured light than through painting, and also when he discovered the world of colours in the reproduction processes used in printing factories.

**Victor Chérubin Grillo** clearly identifies two major influences on his understanding of colour. First of all, there is the work of philosophers: Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903-1985), Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), Michel Serres (1930-2019), and Michel Onfray (b. 1959). Secondly, he mentioned artists who have influenced his understanding of colour: Mark Rothko (1903-1970), a prominent representative of Abstract Expressionism and one of the creators of the Colour Field Painting movement; Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), a German Romantic landscape painter; and, Piero della Francesca (c. 1415-1492), an Italian painter and theorist of the Early Renaissance.

### 3) Teachers and mentors

When asked about teachers, almost all the interviewees noted that in the art schools where they studied (e.g., at the School of Decorative Arts, EnsAD, in Paris), although colour was discussed, there wasn't any specialized teaching or courses as such, as described by Jean-Philippe Lenclos, "We touched a little the subject of colour by realizing a chromatic circle that was the basis of our reflection and the learning of colour."

Interviewee	Teachers and mentors
Bernard Lassus	Fernand Léger (1881-1955), François Desnoyer (1894-1972), Pierre Francastel (1900-1970), Léon Gischia (1903-1991)
Michel Albert-Vanel	Marcel Gromaire (1892-1971)
André Lemonnier	Jacques Fillacier (1913-1986)
Jean-Philippe Lenclos	Johannes Itten (1888-1967)
Victor Chérubin Grillo	Jean Prouvé (1901-1984), Jacques Bertin (1918-2010), Alain Wisner (1923-2004), Roger Tallon (1929-2011)
Yves Charnay	Jacques Fillacier (1913-1986), Claude Weisbuch (1927-2014)

Table 1: Teachers and mentors of the interviewees.

The list of teachers and mentors mentioned by the interviewees includes representatives of different epochs and fields (Table 1). These are not only artists and designers, but also include philosophers, writers, architects, urban planners, ergonomists, psychiatrists, and sociologists. Interestingly only one name in this list of teachers occurs twice: both Lemonnier and Charnay mention Jacques Fillacier, with Lemonnier referring to him as a 'great pedagogue'.

## CONCLUSION

In general, this study provides depth and detail to a broad schema or general picture of the history of environmental colour design, a sketch which has great potential for further development. The present research contributes to our understanding of theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approaches to the study of colour in urban space as well as to our understanding of key aspects of the evolution of environmental colour design. Representatives of the first generations of French colour design embody unique experience and knowledge, whose value will increase over time: If this heritage had not been collected and analyzed now, much would have been lost forever. A paper on some aspects of the present research has also been presented at the First Russian Congress on Colour, which took place on 18-20 September 2018 at Smolensk State University.

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