

Chromatic Analysis of the Collective Unconscious: Analytical Psychology Applied to the Art of Antônio Bandeira

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ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of humanity, colors have exerted fascination and influence on the psyche, yet few studies explore their symbolism through the lens of analytical psychology. This research aimed to investigate the extent to which predominant colors in abstract artworks can be interpreted as projections of the collective unconscious. The study is grounded in the premise that artistic choices transcend conscious intent, carrying archetypal meanings. To test this hypothesis, the works of Brazilian painter Antônio Bandeira (1922–1967), a pioneer of lyrical abstractionism in Brazil, were analyzed. A qualitative interpretive methodology was adopted, structured in four stages: (1) artist and artwork selection; (2) extraction of the predominant color palette using specialized software; (3) historical contextualization of the *Zeitgeist*; and (4) symbolic interpretation of colors. The analysis revealed significant patterns: earthy tones associated with archetypes of connection to the land; deep blues evoking transcendence; and vibrant yellow accents, suggesting creative energy. These choices not only reflected avant-garde techniques but also engaged with the cultural climate of the 1950s—a period of reconstruction and the search for new artistic languages in Brazil. Furthermore, the predominance of organic colors over industrial hues reinforced a symbolic connection to nature, aligning with Brazil's broader cultural emphasis on territorial identity. The study concludes that chromatic analysis, when integrated with analytical psychology, offers a robust method for deciphering symbolic layers in abstract art. In Bandeira's case, colors transcend aesthetic function, becoming visual narratives of the collective psyche of his era. This interdisciplinary approach paves the way for future studies bridging art history, semiotics, and analytical psychology, enriching our understanding of creative processes.

KEYWORDS Collective unconscious, Analytical psychology, Chromatic analysis; psychodynamics of color

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1. Introduction

Since the dawn of civilization, colors have held a singular fascination for humanity, operating simultaneously as physical phenomena and psychic experiences. As noted by Pedrosa (2014, p. 20), what appears concrete is "merely a sensation produced by specific nervous organizations under the action of light", a paradox revealing color's dual nature: measurable in its objective aspect yet deeply symbolic in its subjective dimension.

Silva (2006) expands this reflection, emphasizing color's vital role as a "supplement of vital energy, an essential and marvelous part of life" (p. 136). His assertion that "color serves as a pretext for new forms of interaction among beings and between them and the world" (p. 144) anticipates, albeit intuitively, the Jungian conception of chromatic symbols as archetypal language. As demonstrated by Galipeau (1991) and Azevedo (2018), colors constitute a system of signification transcending cultures and historical periods, serving as privileged expressions of the collective unconscious.

Despite extensive literature on chromatic phenomena, studies often neglect their profound symbolic dimension, particularly from the perspective of analytical psychology. This gap is significant, as Jacobi (1959) observes, colors function as the "visual grammar of the unconscious," encoding in their hues the same archetypes manifest in myths and dreams. The Jungian approach interprets chromatic choices not as mere aesthetic preferences but as projections of collective psychic processes, especially in contexts of social transformation.

This study thus investigates the extent to which predominant colors in abstract artworks can be interpreted as projections of the collective unconscious. The analysis proceeds from the premise that Bandeira's palette constitutes a "pigmented collective dream" (Whitmont, 1969), revealing the tensions of a society transitioning between rural and urban paradigms. The methodology combines Jungian analysis of chromatic symbolism with historical inquiry, offering an innovative model for interpreting abstract art as a psychocultural document.

2. Theoretical framework

Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), psychiatrist and founder of Analytical Psychology, dedicated his work to the study of the psyche, distinguishing himself through his break with Freudian psychoanalysis in the early 20th century (Hall and Nordby, 2005). His approach sought to integrate theory and clinical practice by exploring the relationship between the conscious and unconscious (Pieri, 2002). Jung argued that his psychology was empirically grounded (Samuels, Shorter and Plaut, 1988), and his model has

been applied across diverse fields, aligning with contemporary scientific paradigms (Penna, 2014).

Building on Freudian foundations, Jung developed the concept of the collective unconscious, distinguishing it from the personal unconscious. While the latter is shaped by individual experiences, the collective unconscious consists of universal, inherited archetypes common to humanity, functioning as the matrix of psychic manifestations (Jung, 1960; Ramos, 2002). This concept relates to the *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the time), which reflects the collective motivations and ideas of an era. Goethe defined it as a set of opinions shaping social thought (apud Caldas, 2004), while Hegel (1986) viewed it as an emanation of the "absolute spirit" inscribed in history (Caldas, 2004). Jung linked the *Zeitgeist* to synchronicity, meaningful connections between internal and external events revealing underlying patterns in human experience (Pieri, 2002; Stein, 2000).

Projection, the mechanism by which psychic contents are transferred onto the external world, is central to this process. Jung (2016) asserted that all reality is psychically mediated, emphasizing that the world exists only through the images we construct. These projections, whether passive (automatic) or active (intentional), play a crucial role in individuation, wherein the subject differentiates from the collective (Jung, 1996).

The unconscious, in its totality, comprises phenomena such as the personal unconscious (repressed or forgotten memories) and the collective unconscious, formed by instincts and archetypes (Jung, 1991). Instincts are innate drives, while archetypes are intuitive perceptual molds shaping human existence. Among instinctual factors, Jung included creativity, which – though related to other instincts (e.g., hunger, sexuality) – can dominate or even suppress them (Jung, 1991). Archetypes, in turn, underpin humanity's "most powerful ideas" (Jung, 1991), adapting to reality through consciousness.

Main (2004) classified archetypes into archetypes-in-themselves (irrepresentable) and archetypal images (expressed in myths and symbols). Aufranc (2006) adds that archetypes manifest bipolarly: in the psychic plane (fantasies, dreams, arts) and the biological plane (bodily symptoms). Symbols, essential in arts and cultures, are "the surface element that substitutes a deeper meaning" (Pieri, 2002). They are not mere conventions but spontaneous expressions transcending rationality (Oliveira, 2017). Cassirer (2005) reinforces that humans inhabit a symbolic universe where language, myth, and art reveal archetypes, offering pathways to comprehend the collective unconscious.

In artistic creation, colors assume a pivotal role. Studied across disciplines – communication (Farina, Perez and

Bastos, 2013), sociology (Erner, 2015), and neuroscience (Barros, 2009) – they are understood as signs integrating cognitive systems (Brandão, 2003). In Analytical Psychology, colors symbolize psychic functions: blue (thinking), yellow (intuition), red (feeling), and green (sensation) (Pieri, 2002; Urrutigaray, 2008). Neuroscientific research corroborates their universality, demonstrating that distinct spectral bands activate specific brain regions, eliciting uniform responses across individuals (Barros, 2009). This finding reinforces the notion of colors as archetypes, culturally variable yet rooted in shared psychic structures (Samuels, Shorter and Plaut, 1988; Fordham, 2002).

Thus, for Jung, color choices in art are not arbitrary but reflect projections of the *Zeitgeist* (present) or anticipations of the future, configuring expressions of the collective unconscious (Guimarães, 2000). Whether in art, myths, or symbols, Jungian psychology provides a theoretical framework for understanding the profound connections between psyche, culture, and human creation.

3. Materials and methods

Building on Jung's (2012, §99) assertion that psychology can investigate the psychic process of artistic creation but not the intrinsic essence of art, this study aimed to analyze colors as projections of the collective unconscious, without engaging in artistic merit evaluations. Accordingly, this research adopted an interpretive qualitative methodology (Sousa and Baptista, 2016), characterized as basic research (Gil, 2008) with exploratory-descriptive objectives. The research design followed an ex-post-facto approach, as it investigates an already established artistic and psychological phenomenon without direct manipulation, instead employing an analysis rich in symbolic and contextual interpretation (Cervo and Bervian, 2002). To this end, the following procedures were implemented: bibliographic research and documental-iconographic analysis, organized into four successive stages.

The **first stage** focused on selecting and analyzing the artist and their works. Considering the Jungian premise that abstract works allow for greater projection of the collective unconscious due to their detachment from representational rules (Jung, 2012), the study examined the production of Antônio Bandeira (1922–1967), a pioneer of Brazilian abstractionism. Seven non-figurative works produced in 1953 were randomly selected: *Paisagem Atormentada*, *Pequena Cidade em Formação*, *A Grande Cidade Iluminada*, *Árvores*, *Favelas em Azul*, *Tela sem título e Abstrato*.

The **second stage** involved identifying the color palette. The digital images of the seven selected works were

grouped into a single image (respecting the screen size ratio), which was then processed using the Color Picker digital tool (<https://imagecolorpicker.com/>) to automatically extract the dominant colors. For methodological rigor, only objective hues were considered, disregarding variations in pigment color (present in the original works), light color (from digital images), and chromatic nuances. Once the palette was defined, a bibliographic review was conducted on the symbolism of the identified colors to correlate them with the *Zeitgeist*.

The **third stage** centered on analyzing the *Zeitgeist* by surveying key historical, cultural, and social aspects of the period (Brazil-1953), organized to facilitate correlation with the previously identified chromatic symbolism.

Finally, the **fourth stage** entailed a symbolic interpretation of the colors, juxtaposing the chromatic symbolism of the derived palette with the era's *Zeitgeist* to establish connections between Bandeira's color choices and the prevailing archetypes of the collective unconscious.

It is important to note that the adopted methodology has certain limitations. Digital color analysis may not perfectly replicate the original tonalities of the artworks, and the symbolic interpretation of colors is subject to cultural variations. However, efforts were made to mitigate these factors by standardizing the color extraction process and grounding the study in established theoretical frameworks, thereby ensuring methodological consistency.

4. Results and discussion

This section presents the findings according to the four methodological stages outlined earlier.

4.1. (Stage 1) Artist and Work Selection

Antônio Bandeira (Fortaleza, Brazil, 1922 – Paris, France, 1967) was an Afro-Brazilian painter, draftsman, and printmaker who became a leading figure in Brazilian Lyrical Abstraction, a movement that revitalized the country's art scene in the 1950s. A self-taught artist, he began painting in the 1930s but developed his distinctive style, characterized by free gestuality and chromatic experimentation, during his stay in Paris (1946–1951) and after his return to Brazil (1951–1954) (Itaú Cultural, 2020).

His work, situated in the postwar context, engages with both American Abstract Expressionism and the *École de Paris*, of which he was part. However, as Couto (2009, p. 87) notes, Bandeira resisted definitive labels, operating instead in the realm of the sensory and ambiguous: "His painting was not affiliated with schools but with a plastic intuition that favored controlled accidents, splatters, and stains as compositional elements" (Couto, 2009, p. 89).

From 1952 onward, he intensified his informal abstraction, producing canvases where dripping and layered textures created a diffuse depth, dissolving the boundaries between figure and ground. Though reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's dripping, Bandeira's technique acquired a tropical lyricism. As Amaral (2007, p. 156) observes: "His use of color – vibrant blues, earthy reds, solar yellows – reveals a luminous atmosphere evoking the Northeastern landscape, even when stripped of literal representation."

Despite his integration into the Parisian art circuit, Bandeira maintained an ambivalent relationship with the artistic nationalism prevalent in Brazil at the time. While artists like Di Cavalcanti championed figuration with local themes, Bandeira pursued a universalist abstraction infused with Brazilian sensibility. Leite (1988, p. 45) analyzes this stance: "His work was not 'national' in subject but in palette and rhythm – a synthesis between the freedom of European avant-garde and the vitality of tropical color."

Bandeira's reception in Brazil was initially polarized: celebrated by critics like Mário Pedrosa, who saw in his work an "organic abstraction" (MAM-RJ, 2017), he also faced resistance from sectors aligned with social realism. Today, his oeuvre is reassessed as a turning point in Brazilian art, anticipating trends later explored by movements such as Neo-Concretism and Informalism.

Thus, Antônio Bandeira occupies a unique place in Brazilian art history: his work bridges the local and the universal, accident and composition. More than an "importer" of abstraction, he was its reinterpreter, forging a language that, in Amaral's (2007, p. 160) words, "was neither French nor Brazilian, but simply necessary." His relevance to this study lies precisely in this synthesizing capacity, making him a key figure for understanding artistic modernity in Brazil.

4.2. (Stage 2) Color Palette Extraction

The colors and their identified nuances that were predominant in the collection of works by artist Antônio Bandeira consisted of four main hues, as specified by their HEX codes: Black (#1D1D18), Blue (#5A6A6E and #7E9092), Green (#A4B480; #85866B; and #6D6449), and Brown (#624B3C; #CEB892; #4D342B; #925638; and #7A412F).

Figure 1 illustrates the grouping of selected works for analysis and the resulting output from the Color Picker palette generation software. The four principal colors and their respective nuanced variations identified as dominant in the collection were determined through HEX code identification and subsequently categorized by hue.



Fig. 1. Works by Antônio Bandeira selected and grouped to extract the color palette using an automated resource.

Jungian analysis attributes profound meanings to colors, interpreting them as archetypal expressions of the collective unconscious. According to specialized literature, the symbolic weight of the four colors can be understood as follows:

Black: Associated with the absence of light and primordial darkness, black symbolizes absolute passivity, primal chaos, and universal substance (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 2017). In Lüscher's (1969) color test, it represents negation and extinction, projecting shadow contents in psychological assessments. In the alchemical tradition studied by Jung, black (nigredo) corresponds to the initial stage of individuation, marked by confrontation with the shadow and the abyssal unconscious (Ellenberger, 1970). Its symbolism encompasses both negative aspects, such as death, destruction, and melancholy (Farina, Perez and Bastos, 2013), and positive traits, like prudence and wisdom in adversity.

Blue: Considered the coldest and purest of colors, blue evokes depth and transcendence (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 2017). Edinger (1985) links it to the transcendent function, the psychic process that mediates opposites and fosters wholeness. Hillman (1983) emphasizes its connection to active imagination, representing creative depth and inner reflection. It also symbolizes the divine and the infinite (Farina, Perez and Bastos, 2013), embodying, for Jung (2013), the spiritual process of connecting with the Self. However, it can also express depressive escapism, revealing its paradoxical nature.

Green: The quintessential mediating color, green balances warmth and cold, associating with nature and renewal (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 2017). Neumann (1954) connects it to the Great Mother archetype, symbolizing fertility and cyclical transformation. Von Franz (1995) highlights its ambivalence: while lighter shades suggest healing, darker tones may indicate toxicity or psychic immaturity. In clinical practice, it is often linked to

hope and emotional rebalancing (Farina, Perez and Bastos, 2013).

Brown: Derived from earthy tones, brown represents materiality and fecundity (Farina, Perez and Bastos, 2013). Jacobi (1959) associates it with the chthonic archetype, tied to telluric forces and corporeality. Whitmont (1969) explores its role in individuation as a symbol of grounding, necessary for integrating unconscious contents. Jung (2013) relates it to the sensation function, emphasizing its role in concrete reality perception.

These interpretations, expanded by analytical psychology scholars, reinforce that colors function as an archetypal language. Galipeau (1991) suggests that their analysis in clinical contexts reveals stages of the individuation process, while Azevedo (2018) demonstrates their application in dream image interpretation. Thus, beyond aesthetic elements, colors constitute complex symbolic systems capable of expressing both individual and collective psychic dynamics.

4.3. (Step 3) Zeitgeist Analysis: Historical-Cultural Context

1953 marked a pivotal moment in Antônio Bandeira's oeuvre, situated within a transformative period best analyzed through Nystrom's (1928) quadripartite framework – events, ideas, attitudes, and technologies as constitutive axes of the Zeitgeist. His chromatic and formal choices during Brazil's "Golden Years" engage with collective archetypes of the era.

The global political economy embodied postwar contradictions: U.S. prosperity (Galbraith, 1958) contrasted with Cold War tensions, while Brazil's developmentalist policies (e.g., Petrobras, BNDE) under Vargas coexisted with dependent industrialization (Furtado, 1961). Rapid modernization, epitomized by Volkswagen's arrival, created stark paradoxes between progress and inequality (Schwarcz and Starling, 2015).

Culturally, the rise of television and radio (Ortiz, 1988) paralleled Niemeyer's modernist architecture. In visual arts, the abstraction/figuration debate (Linhares and Silva, 2016) reflected tensions between universalism and local identity. Bandeira's work, as Amaral (2007) notes, synthesizes "Parisian cosmopolitanism with a chromatic sensibility rooted in Brazilian soil" (p. 134).

Three theoretical lenses illuminate his practice:

Affect Theory (Massumi, 2002): Industrial blues and metallic grays encode nuclear anxiety, while earthy reds map Brazil's transforming landscape (Andrade, 2021). His drips materialize "pre-personal affective intensities."

Cultural Semiotics (Lotman, 1990): His palette functions as a code mediating international abstraction and Northeastern chromaticity.

Archetypal Psychology (Hillman, 1983): Vibrant yellows manifest developmentalism's solar archetype; ochres invoke the telluric.

This tripartite analysis reveals Bandeira's colors as Panofskian "symbolic forms" (1955), condensing midcentury hopes and anxieties. The dialectic between earthy tones and industrial blues visually articulates Brazil's tradition/modernity conflict. Ultimately, Bandeira's work constitutes a chromatic cartography of Brazil's collective unconscious during developmentalism. Through cultural history, affect theory, and semiotics, we decode how his formal decisions materialize the archetypes of an era in flux.

4.4. (Step 4) Symbolic Interpretation of Colors

Antônio Bandeira's 1953 works employ a deliberate palette of cold, opaque tones (brown, green, blue, black), reflecting Brazil's historical transition between rural and industrial identities. This aligns with Singer's (1970) "cultural image," where art embodies collective historical conflicts.

Earthy browns and greens evoke rural roots (chthonic archetype - Jacobi, 1959), while blue suggests transformation (Edinger's 1985 "chromatic transcendent function"). Green acts as a bridge (alchemical *coniunctio*), balancing humanity and nature, a relationship disrupted by urbanization. Black and deep browns reflect social traumas (rural exodus), functioning as "initiator colors" (Neumann, 1954) between archaic and modern structures. They symbolize cultural uprooting and melancholy, echoing Hillman's (1983) "cultural mourning."

The palette's quaternary structure (Jung, 2013) signifies wholeness, with chromatic quartets often representing psychic synthesis in crises (Galipeau, 1991). Bandeira thus captures the Zeitgeist rather than a futurist vision (linked to the number three). As Azevedo (2018) notes, this aligns with 20th-century industrializing societies.

Bandeira's work transcends individual expression, becoming a historical document. As Whitmont (1969) suggests, the palette functions as a "pigmented collective dream," mirroring 1950s Brazil's tensions and paradoxes.

5. Final considerations

This research aimed to investigate the extent to which predominant colors in abstract artworks can be interpreted as projections of the collective unconscious. The results demonstrate that the colors in Antônio Bandeira's abstract works function as archetypes that project the collective

unconscious, revealing the Brazilian Zeitgeist of the 1950s. The analyzed palette - brown, green, blue, and black - constitutes a symbolic system that reflects the tensions of a society transitioning between rural and urban realities, confirming art's psychological function as a social mirror.

The findings provide significant contributions to both the creative process and art therapy. Regarding creative practice, they suggest that chromatic selection transcends individual preferences by connecting with archetypal patterns. For art therapy, they expand the interpretation of colors beyond expressions of personal emotional states to include collective psychological processes.

While the focus on abstract works has privileged the analysis of archetypal content, future research could expand the investigation in two key directions: First, by examining figurative works from the same period to test the hypothesis that abstraction facilitates the emergence of the collective unconscious. Second, through comparative studies with artists from other industrializing nations, which might reveal universal patterns in chromatic choices during periods of social transformation.

The Jungian approach developed here proves particularly potent for deciphering chromatic codes that, while apparently subjective, engage in dialogue with universal psychic structures. This confirms that Bandeira's art operates simultaneously as historical record and timeless expression of the collective unconscious. Consequently, this analysis provides a replicable model for interdisciplinary studies bridging psychology, art, and social sciences, highlighting color's.

9. Conflict of interest declaration

There is no financial or personal conflict of interest that could have affected the authors' objectivities.

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11. Short biography of the author(s)

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