

Colour as Mediator: Perception, Materiality, and Technology in Contemporary Visual Culture

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a theoretical-critical synthesis of contemporary colour research by framing colour as a multifaceted object that operates simultaneously as a perceptual variable, a cultural code, a chromo-material strategy, and a technological-epistemic construct. Rather than offering a venue-specific review, the paper proposes an integrative framework that bridges design, heritage, digital systems, and sustainability. Four thematic axes are discussed: (i) colour and perception; (ii) colour as code; (iii) colour, material, and sustainability; and (iv) colour as evidence and optimisation target in heritage and digital workflows. Across these axes, the paper identifies recurring tensions between standardisation and plurality, measurement and meaning, fidelity and interpretation, and efficiency and care. The argument advanced is that colour today should be understood not as a secondary attribute but as a critical mediator of perception, culture, ethics, and technology.

KEYWORDS (Color; Perception; Design; Heritage; CMF; Digital Methods; Visual Culture)

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1. Introduction

Colour research today traverses perceptual science, design and architecture, digital systems, cultural history, and heritage conservation. Across these domains, colour is increasingly treated not as a mere surface attribute but as an active mediator of experience, meaning, and material practice. Recent work ranges from low-arousal lighting strategies for neurodiversity (Bertoletti and Rossi, 2025), to immersive explorations of chromatic interaction in three-dimensional environments (Calisi and Botta, 2025), to psychological interpretations of colour as symbolic projection in modern art (Vilas Bôas and Barros de Held, 2025). At the same time, large-scale measurements of chromatic identities in public web interfaces point to colour's role in governance and institutional communication (Ahmedhodzic et al., 2025), while historical analyses of advertising posters and design movements foreground its long-standing function as a code of attention and identity (Scalzo, 2025; Spennato and Battisti, 2025).

On the material and sustainability side, systematic work on CMF design argues for the strategic role of chromo-material choices in shaping experience and durability (Sossini et al., 2025). Studies of polymeric polychromy and marbled textures reinterpret chromatic heterogeneity as a contemporary code of sustainability (Caruso et al., 2025), while research on chromatic imperfection in fashion reframes irregularity as an ethical and aesthetic resource (Calvo Ivanovic and D'Itria, 2025). Finally, heritage-oriented contributions show how colour becomes an object of evidence, optimisation, and reconstruction within restoration workflows, whether through unsupervised spatial colour algorithms (Vanoglio and Rizzi, 2025) or through documentary and scientific analyses of historical laboratory manuals (Rossetto, 2025).

Rather than surveying a single venue or issue, this article proposes a synthetic, theoretical-critical framework that connects these strands. The guiding hypothesis is that contemporary colour studies are structured by recurring tensions: standardisation versus perceptual plurality, measurement versus meaning, fidelity versus interpretation, and efficiency versus care. These tensions recur across design, heritage, digital systems, and sustainability, and they provide a productive lens for integrating otherwise distant practices.

2. An Integrative Framework

The synthesis developed here is organised around four complementary perspectives that recur across contemporary colour research.

1. Colour as perceptual variable concerns how chromatic and luminous conditions shape arousal,

comfort, attention, spatial experience, and symbolic response.

2. Colour as cultural code addresses how colour operates as a semiotic and institutional device that structures identity, authority, and visibility across media and historical contexts.
3. Colour as chromo-material strategy focuses on the entanglement of colour with materials, finishes, production processes, and sustainability narratives.
4. Colour as technological and epistemic object treats colour as something measured, simulated, reconstructed, or optimised within digital and heritage workflows.

These perspectives are not disciplinary silos but analytical lenses. Many contemporary practices sit at their intersections, which is precisely what makes colour a strategic site for theoretical integration.

3. Colour as Perceptual Variable: Inclusion, Space, and Symbol

Recent research increasingly treats colour not as a secondary aesthetic attribute but as a primary perceptual variable shaping arousal, attention, comfort, and meaning. In this perspective, chromatic and luminous conditions are understood as active mediators of experience rather than neutral background parameters. Bertoletti and Rossi (2025) explicitly position light and colour within debates on inclusion by drawing on neuroscience, environmental psychology, and neurodiversity studies. Building on evidence that visual variables such as illuminance, spectral composition, flicker, and surface reflectance modulate arousal and stress (Küller et al., 2006; Boyce, 2010), they argue that many contemporary environments remain calibrated on an implicit "neurotypical" user (Manning, Williams and MacLennan, 2023). Against this backdrop, their proposal of low-arousal strategies reframes lighting and chromatic design in terms of perceptual justice: a concept that shifts the focus from average comfort to the equitable distribution of sensory load, control, and agency among users with different sensory profiles (Bertoletti and Rossi, 2025; Mostafa, 2015).

This move resonates with a broader body of work showing that poorly managed visual conditions can impair attention, increase stress, and limit participation in everyday activities (Küller et al., 2006; Westland, Pan and Lee, 2017; Rossi, 2021; Nair et al., 2022). From this standpoint, colour becomes a regulatory variable within the environment, one that structures not only visual appearance but also behavioural and affective responses. Importantly, Bertoletti and Rossi (2025) also stress the political and ethical implications of this shift: standards and

guidelines, often presented as neutral technical tools, embed normative assumptions about perception and thus risk reproducing exclusion unless they are critically re-examined and complemented by participatory and user-centred approaches.

A complementary but methodologically distinct route is taken by Calisi and Botta (2025), who revisit Josef Albers' theory of chromatic interaction through three-dimensional and virtual environments. Albers' central insight, that colour is not an intrinsic property of objects but a relational phenomenon shaped by context, is deeply rooted in Gestalt psychology, which emphasises the primacy of configuration over isolated elements (Koffka, 1935; Arnheim, 1974). By translating Albers' exercises into immersive simulations and real-time rendering, Calisi and Botta (2025) extend these classical perceptual experiments from the two-dimensional plane to spatial environments. This shift is not merely technical: it foregrounds how chromatic interactions participate in the construction of spatial experience, supporting the idea that colour can modulate perceived depth, volume, and atmosphere in architectural and virtual settings (Rossi, 2019).

Seen in this light, Calisi and Botta's contribution reinforces a relational and situational understanding of colour perception, one that aligns with contemporary views in environmental psychology and architectural theory, where space is conceived as a perceptual and affective field rather than a neutral container. Their work also highlights the role of digital tools not simply as representational media but as experimental devices for probing perceptual mechanisms, thereby bridging historical colour theory and contemporary computational design practices.

A third perspective is offered by Vilas Bôas and Barros de Held (2025), who approach colour through analytical psychology and interpret the palettes of Antônio Bandeira as projections of collective symbolic structures. Drawing on Jung's concept of the collective unconscious, they argue that chromatic choices in abstract art can be read as visual manifestations of archetypal and cultural dynamics, embedded in the *Zeitgeist* of a given historical moment. This interpretive framework resonates with earlier work on the symbolic and affective dimensions of colour (Pedrosa, 2014) and with studies that treat colour as a system of signification rather than a purely optical phenomenon (Azevedo, 2018).

Although methodologically distant from environmental design and virtual simulation, this contribution reinforces a shared premise: colour operates at the intersection of physiological response, perceptual organisation, and meaning. Where Bertolotti and Rossi (2025) focus on sensory regulation and inclusion, and Calisi and Botta

(2025) on relational perception in space, Vilas Bôas and Barros de Held (2025) foreground the symbolic and cultural layers through which colour participates in the construction of experience. Taken together, these approaches converge on a view of colour as an active, structuring variable, one that shapes how environments are felt, how spaces are perceived, and how images are interpreted.

A critical issue that emerges from this convergence concerns translation into practice. If colour is acknowledged as a powerful modulator of arousal, perception, and meaning, how can such insights inform guidelines, standards, or adaptive systems without reinstating a one-size-fits-all model of perception? The tension identified by Bertolotti and Rossi (2025) between standardisation and perceptual plurality is therefore not merely technical but epistemic and ethical: it calls for design frameworks capable of accommodating variability, context, and user agency while still operating within institutional and regulatory structures.

4. Colour as Cultural Code: Identity, Attention, and Governance

In contemporary visual culture, colour increasingly operates as an infrastructural element of communication systems, where identity, recognisability, and legitimacy are negotiated through chromatic choices. Large-scale analyses of public interfaces illustrate how colour functions not merely as an aesthetic layer but as a semiotic and organisational device embedded in institutional governance. Ahmedhodzic et al. (2025) conceptualise header colours in Italian municipal websites as a measurable proxy for identity and policy implementation, showing how chromatic selections are shaped by the tension between local distinctiveness, visual coherence, and technical standardisation. Their approach resonates with broader traditions in visual semiotics and information design, where colour is understood as a carrier of meaning, hierarchy, and authority within complex communication systems (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002). From this perspective, institutional colour systems can be read as instruments of governance that stabilise expectations, support navigability, and signal legitimacy, while simultaneously constraining expressive variation. The quantitative mapping proposed by Ahmedhodzic et al. (2025) thus extends earlier work on corporate and public visual identity, where colour palettes operate as tools for recognition, trust-building, and symbolic continuity across media (Heller and Vienne, 2012). At the same time, their findings expose the fragility of this balance: excessive standardisation risks erasing local specificity, whereas excessive variation undermines coherence and usability.

Historical analyses provide a longer genealogy of colour as a technology of attention. Scalzo (2025) traces the introduction of black backgrounds in early twentieth-century advertising posters, particularly in the work of Leonetto Cappiello, as a decisive shift toward a visual grammar based on contrast, immediacy, and perceptual impact. This strategy, grounded in the need for rapid legibility in urban visual environments, aligns with earlier theories of poster design and advertising that emphasised shock, memorability, and visual salience as key drivers of attention (Wlassikoff, 2008). The black background, by maximising chromatic contrast, transformed colour into an active agent of visual capture, anticipating many of the high-impact strategies still operative in contemporary visual communication and interface design.

Spennato and Battisti (2025) situate these developments within the broader history of design movements, showing how colour has oscillated between a subordinate, rationalised role, typical of functionalist and modernist paradigms, and an expressive marker of identity, emotion, and cultural values in more eclectic and postmodern phases. Their analysis echoes classic accounts of modern design culture, where the regulation of colour was often tied to ideals of objectivity, efficiency, and universality, while later reactions reasserted colour as a vehicle of plurality, symbolism, and differentiation (Meggs and Purvis, 2016).

Taken together, these contributions suggest that colour as cultural code operates across multiple temporal and institutional scales: from the historical technologies of attention developed in mass advertising (Scalzo, 2025), to the ideological frameworks of design movements (Spennato and Battisti, 2025), to the contemporary governance of digital public interfaces (Ahmedhodzic et al., 2025). Across these contexts, a persistent tension emerges between standardisation and expressivity, between colour as a tool of control and colour as a marker of identity, a tension that remains central to understanding visual culture in both historical and digital environments.

5. Colour as Chromo-Material Strategy: CMF, Polychromy, Imperfection

In contemporary design discourse, colour is increasingly understood as inseparable from material and surface, giving rise to the notion of CMF as a strategic design domain rather than a purely aesthetic layer. Sossini et al. (2025) provide a systematic mapping of CMF design research and argue that chromo-material decisions play a central role in shaping product identity, user experience, and long-term engagement. By framing CMF as an integrated design strategy, their review aligns with a broader shift in design research that treats materials not as passive substrates but as active carriers of meaning,

performance, and value (Ashby and Johnson, 2014; Karana et al., 2015; Manzini, 2015). In this perspective, colour is not added to form and material at the end of the process, but participates from the outset in constructing how products are perceived, used, and evaluated over time. This strategic understanding of CMF also intersects with sustainability debates. Sossini et al. (2025) highlight how chromo-material choices influence perceived quality, attachment, and durability, factors that are increasingly recognised as crucial for extending product lifecycles and reducing premature disposal (Mugge, Schoormans and Schifferstein, 2005). Here, colour and finish are not merely expressive tools but levers for shaping user-object relationships and, indirectly, consumption patterns.

Caruso et al. (2025) push this argument further by analysing polymeric polychromy and marbled textures as a contemporary code of sustainability. Their work situates chromatic heterogeneity within the context of open recycling and decentralised production, where material mixtures and colour variability are no longer treated as defects to be eliminated but as visible traces of circular processes. This position resonates with emerging theories of circular design and material aesthetics, which argue for making material histories legible rather than hiding them behind uniform surfaces (Bocken et al., 2016; Karana et al., 2018). In this sense, marbled and heterogeneous surfaces operate as semiotic devices: they signal recycled content, process openness, and a departure from the industrial ideal of perfect repeatability.

A similar revaluation of non-uniformity underpins Calvo Ivanovic and D'Itria's (2025) discussion of chromatic imperfection in fashion. Drawing on both design theory and sustainability studies, they argue that irregularities, variations, and chromatic "defects" can function as ethical and aesthetic resources rather than as quality failures. By making imperfection visible, such strategies can communicate material provenance, craft processes, and extended lifecycles, fostering forms of attachment that counteract disposability (Fletcher, 2014; Niinimäki, 2015). This approach also echoes broader cultural shifts in which patina, wear, and variation are increasingly valued as signs of authenticity and time, rather than as problems to be erased (Ingold, 2011).

Taken together, these contributions suggest a paradigmatic shift away from the industrial ideal of uniformity toward a chromo-material culture in which variation, texture, and imperfection acquire positive value (Sossini et al., 2025; Caruso et al., 2025; Calvo Ivanovic and D'Itria, 2025). However, this shift raises a critical question: how can such aesthetics be scaled and institutionalised without losing their ecological and ethical significance? If heterogeneity becomes merely a new

stylistic norm, detached from material processes and circular logics, its critical potential risks being neutralised. The challenge, therefore, is not only formal but systemic: to align chromo-material strategies with production models, supply chains, and user practices that genuinely support sustainability rather than simply rebranding it.

6. Colour as Technological and Epistemic Object: Restoration, Manuals, Algorithms

In heritage and digital workflows, colour increasingly emerges not only as a visual attribute to be preserved or displayed, but as a technological and epistemic object, something to be measured, reconstructed, optimised, and validated. Within this framework, Vanoglio and Rizzi (2025) conceptualise colour restoration as a problem of constrained optimisation. By comparing supervised workflows with unsupervised spatial colour algorithms, they argue that automated approaches can improve sustainability and accessibility for small cinematheques, albeit at the cost of a controlled reduction in quality. Colour is thus explicitly framed as an optimisation target within a technical, economic, and institutional system characterised by limited resources and competing priorities. This position aligns with a long tradition in digital image processing and colour science, where restoration is understood as a trade-off between fidelity, computational cost, and robustness (Rizzi, Gatta and Marini, 2009). In the context of cultural heritage, such trade-offs acquire a normative dimension: decisions about colour correction, enhancement, or reconstruction are never purely technical, but embed assumptions about acceptable loss, intended use, and audience expectations (Fossati, 2009). Vanoglio and Rizzi's (2025) proposal to favour scalable, unsupervised methods for small archives, therefore situates algorithmic choices within a broader ethics of access and sustainability, rather than within a narrow paradigm of maximal visual accuracy.

Rossetto (2025) approaches colour from a different but complementary epistemic angle: as material evidence to be reconstructed through documentary sources and scientific analysis. Focusing on silent film, Rossetto shows how historical laboratory manuals, chemical formulas, and spectroscopic data can be mobilised to characterise and validate historical colour processes. This approach resonates with established practices in conservation science and film archiving, where the reconstruction of historical appearance relies on the triangulation of textual sources, material analysis, and comparative study of surviving artefacts (Read and Meyer, 2000; Fossati, 2009). Here, colour is not primarily an optimisation variable, but an object of historical inquiry whose legitimacy depends on evidential chains and methodological transparency.

The contrast between these two approaches brings into focus a fundamental tension in contemporary heritage practice: optimisation versus reconstruction, efficiency versus evidential care (Vanoglio and Rizzi, 2025; Rossetto, 2025). On the one hand, algorithmic methods promise scalability, repeatability, and resource efficiency, values that are increasingly central in a context of growing digitisation and limited funding. On the other hand, evidence-based reconstruction insists on the irreducibility of historical specificity and on the need for slow, interpretative, and materially grounded work. This tension is not merely operational but epistemological: it concerns what counts as "the" colour of a historical object, who is entitled to decide, and for which purposes.

Read together, these contributions show that colour in heritage contexts is inseparable from broader questions of authenticity, access, and use. Whether treated as an optimisation target within algorithmic pipelines or as material evidence reconstructed from archival sources, colour becomes a site where technical constraints, historical knowledge, and institutional missions intersect. The challenge for future research is therefore not to choose between automation and reconstruction, but to articulate hybrid frameworks in which computational tools and evidential practices can inform and critically constrain one another.

7. Conclusions

This article has argued for a theoretical-critical understanding of colour as a mediator across design, heritage, digital systems, and sustainability. Read through the four lenses proposed here, contemporary work shows how chromatic decisions distribute sensory load and agency (Bertoletti and Rossi, 2025), organise institutional and cultural identities (Ahmedhodzic et al., 2025; Spennato and Battisti, 2025), encode material-ethical values (Sossini et al., 2025; Caruso et al., 2025; Calvo Ivanovic and D'Itria, 2025), and are increasingly shaped by algorithmic and evidence-based workflows (Vanoglio and Rizzi, 2025; Rossetto, 2025). Future research would benefit from strengthening links between perceptual justice, design governance, sustainable material practices, and heritage evidence, while also developing hybrid methods that can negotiate quantitative measurement and qualitative interpretation.

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The author declare no conflict of interest.

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10. Short biography of the author

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