



AMERICAN TAPESTRY ALLIANCE

Choosing Colors

Linda Rees, Editor

The following commentaries were initially compiled as source material for an ATA Online Focus Forum that explored how tapestry artists approach color selection. I chose nine talented tapestry artists whose work on ATA's Artist Pages or in exhibition catalogs reveals a distinctive color sense. In addition to reading the artists' commentaries, Forum participants took part in weekly projects involving exercises using yarn and other media.

Those who participated in the forum were greatly rewarded by the variety of design approaches and all were informed by some detail or practice that had not occurred to them previously. Because the collective methods and observations seemed to stimulate new means of translating concepts into artwork, I felt the commentaries should be available for a larger audience.

Here are the questions I posed to the selected artists, Patricia Armour, Karen Benjamin, Patricia Dunn, Marcia Ellis, Anna Kocherovsky, Margo MacDonald, Lynn Mayne, Inge Nørgaard and Becky Stevens.

- At what time in the process do you start working out the specific yarns to use?
What helps you determine a palette, or what kinds of tools, do you use to make the decision? paints? chalk? commercial yarn samples? magazine clippings? photographs? scanning your supply? etc.
- Do you work with bundles of colors? And if so, do you have specific formulas you have worked out about the most effective rules for this, like analogous color or some other combination?
- At what point in the process might you consider the conventional tenets of color theory?
- Do you write your thoughts down or brainstorm on paper or is the choice a purely empirical placement of yarns together, or an intuitive process as you go.

Combining Yarns, Collage and Chalk

Patricia Armour

Color decisions happen at the same time as the design process. I generally create a collage using photographs, paintings, prints etc., so it is when putting the collage together that I make the color choices. They either have a strong contrast or, more often, they have a similar color used throughout. Once designs are resolved, the actual colors may be too bright, so I fade or darken them slightly to get the effect I wish to achieve, more often altering the intensity rather than the color choice. I tend to use muted shades in my work.



The Crossing: Windows of the Soul Series, 30" x 39"

Besides the photographs/paintings in the collage design, I use chalk pastels and the mixing of yarns to determine the color pallet. I find that chalk pastels give the grainy effect I wish to use in my work. Looking at the shades of pastels and colors layered on top of one another can determine how the combination of yarns will react together on the bobbin and when woven. Because I rarely use bold hues and my images usually represent an ethereal theme, the more smudged the colors appear the better effect I get. Quite often a dark color forms the base and I fleck the paler color through that dark one to convey mist or transparency.

When shading I use multiple strands of color on the bobbin, moving from dark to light; light to dark; shade to shade. I also use the hatching process to graduate the colors even further. They could be analogous or even complementary but frequently the change is gradual. A sharp division of color or intensity can give impact to the design when it is needed. When shading from one color to another, I use the black/white scale and run the yarn across it to get the

appropriate shade which will not “glare” at you through the transition. I usually follow the rules of nature – all colors can blend together.

I rely on my instincts and, yes, I do experiment with the combinations of yarns together – I like to make groups of different shades of yarns on the bobbin, then weave them as a strip or band warped separately at one side on the loom. It allows me to test various combinations as I weave. I would usually weave about an inch of each sample. The bands could be solid blocks of color to see how they work side by side, but mainly I use this method to experiment with color blending on the bobbin. They are generally about 2 inches wide or if wider, I can experiment with the selection in the hatching process to create a transition both vertically and horizontally.

Illumination

Karen Benjamin

I feel that color is the very heart of my weaving and the primary element in my designs. I hand dye all of my yarns and almost always work with three strands of yarn so I can transition from one color to another more evenly. I definitely enjoy getting a sense of illumination in my work with just the use of color.



Connecting Threads, 30" x 40"

For my more formal pieces, and usually for commissions, my designs begin with the color. I have always been fascinated by color gradations and have spent most of my weaving career exploring the possibilities of design limited by the use of color gradations. I choose three colors of dye and then use one color in its pure form and combine the other two in various ways. That is to say using blue and yellow I might mix a color that consists of 80% blue and 20%yellow. I would then mix that color with scarlet in varying amounts from 2% b/y to 80% b/y with the goal

of a smooth gradation from one color to the next. This is facilitated by using three strands of the yarn and thus dropping one strand of the previous color and picking up one of the next.

In the design, the purest, warmest color represents the brightest or lightest part and the coolest mix represents the darkest tone in the design. Sometimes I may dye different saturations of the same combinations to get more variation and interest. That is usually determined by the complexity of the design. I seldom use black, but prefer a very saturated deep color in its place. When deciding which colors to mix, I use the color wheel and like to mix one or two steps from the complement of a given color. For example, if I were mixing green with a red, I wouldn't use a pure red, but use a magenta or red mixed with some yellow. To my eye this gives more beautiful mid tones than when one mixes complementary (i.e. opposites on the color wheel) colors.

Zacatecas 6. Cerro del Grillo. After the Fire.

Patricia Dunn

I was pretty dreamy one spring morning in 2008 as my dog and I walked beside the highway on our way to our usual jaunt on the mountain, Cerro del Grillo. An acrid smell woke me. Puzzled, I looked up across the highway, discovering that there had been a brush fire on a part of the mountain. My heart sank as I saw a swath of scorched nopal cacti, young eucalyptus trees and bushes. Needing our morning walk I sadly continued up the mountainside through the burned area, finally leaving it behind.



Zacatecas 6. Cerro del Grillo. After the Fire. 57" x 47"

The next morning having no other place to walk where I could release my dog to run, I returned with some reluctance to the mountain. When I looked around seeing the singed cactus paddles, coppery and bronze-green, thick cactus trunks sooty, silvery ash flowing across the ground, the grays of burned grass, it was a suck in your breath moment. I was surrounded with color. I knew there would be a tapestry, so on the third morning after the fire I was there with my camera. It was the colors on the mountain that were the foundation of the palette. (I didn't in this case, but in my Zacatecas series I have taken my yarn samples to compare them with the color of the object. Because of different light this can be tricky.)

First, I reviewed the photos and selected those I wanted to print. Using those, I checked my supply of dyed yarns. What was missing? How did the colors work together? Since silk reflects and wool absorbs light, I dyed some together thus creating a shift in the hue. These two will be side by side in opposite sheds in the same block of color. There are 45 hues in this tapestry. There is movement of color gradations within a "solid" shape.

I did not work from a cartoon, rather a drawing. On the drawing I noted within each shape the formulas for the colors I planned to use, e.g. 30 yellow 70 violet (50 magenta 50 turquoise), .05 value (a gray). I drew a grid over the drawing. During the design process, I referred to the photos and confirmed my conclusions on my walks. The sketches originally were curvilinear. The design finally came together when I made the "cactus paddles" angular, offering contrast. This process of selecting colors from nature was used in my series of sculptures: Silent Voices. On the Mountain that can be seen along with the Zacatecas series at www.patriciadunntapestries.com.

Sources

"Nature-color used at its best." (Michelle Whipplinger, 1988, Boulder Weavers' Guild sponsored color class.) Found reviewing my notes in 2011. Synchronicity.

Yarns: Henry's Attic Crown Colony 2-ply wool, Rapunzel 2-ply for weft, and Normandy Linen gray 16/6 for warp.

Ciba Gigy Lanaset Dyes. "Shades of Wool for Lanaset Dyes", Linda Knutson, with over 600 dye samples and their formulas.

Archives of yarn samples and formulas of my work since 1990.

Johannes Itten, [The Art of Color](#)

On Choosing Colors

Marcia Ellis

I've never met a color that I didn't like. Maybe I wouldn't want to wear them all or put them all in my house but they intrigue me as an expression of an emotion or mood or just for how they look. The challenge comes in putting them in context. How do several colors work together and influence each other? How much of each? Where do they belong in the image?



Alternative Energy, 28" x 38"

I define my design with a black marker on white paper. Once it is completed, I start working on color. This is a challenge because my compositions have no reference points in the real world. Each shape can be any color. Finding the right ones is a real struggle for me and I never think that I am completely successful. Usually, I start with one yarn, selecting a color that attracts me. Then I try to find other options that will go well with the first yarn. I try to stick with three or four main hues other than black and white but additional hues often slip in.

I use commercially dyed yarns. With a large collection of both cotton and wool I have the opportunity to try close color cousins. I gather the choices together on my worktable to see if the overall visual impression is harmonious and pleasing. I don't think a lot about color theory at this point but I do try to find a variety of values. If all the yarns are too close in value, they will not sufficiently differentiate the shapes in my design.

Without considering proportion or placement, I put the skeins side-by-side to see if they look right together. This is an intense and time-consuming process. It involves looking at the yarns in different lights during the day and at night to make sure they all work together. If one is not right, I replace it with another until they combine successfully, or I get tired of the process.



Current Events, 18" x 12"

I think it is important to start with yarns rather than paint because, ultimately, the tapestry will be made of yarn. If I start with paint, I will never find the exact color of yarn to match it and the finished piece will not look like the painted design. However, after choosing the colors, I mix acrylic paint to simulate the yarn colors in order to experiment with the placement of the colors and usually make several copies of a small version of my design so that I can try variations. At this stage, I think about the amount of each color, contrast, and value. I try to achieve balance. One bright color may stand out so I would use less of it. However, if I use several equally bright colors, I can use a larger quantity of each because one doesn't overpower another. I try to have a full range of dark to light values. I particularly like black because it intensifies adjacent colors.

I strive to achieve the illusion of depth in the picture plane with color as well as design. I think about using darker or lighter versions of a color to depict shadows and light. Greyed colors may appear to be more distant. Often blue or grey or black will appear to recede because our eyes are used to the sky being in the background. Bright colors come forward. Yellow and white can look like light. I play with these properties. Most importantly, I try to have fun!

Active Colors

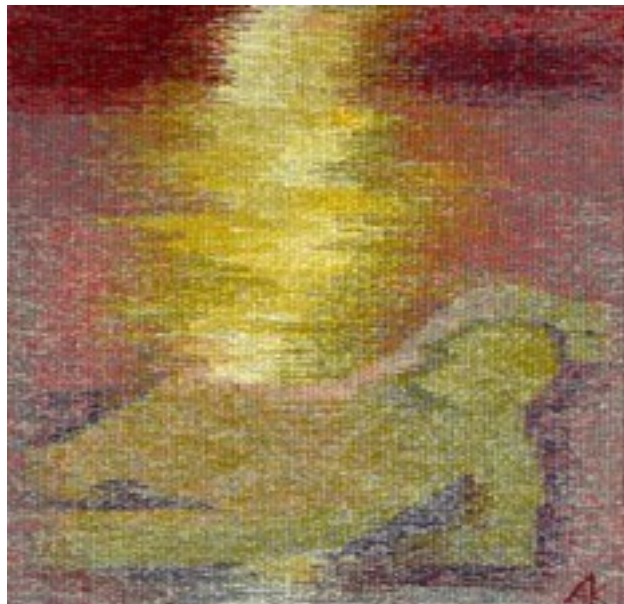
Anna Kocherovsky



Plea for Wisdom, 16" x 16"

I came to tapestry from studying to be a painter. I have that painter's habit of mixing colors on pallet or directly on a paper, adding layers, keeping them transparent or letting them tangle one over another. When I draw, I do not use outlines, preferring to place my shapes directly with different colors. I want my colors to vibrate, have depth — sparkle. For the tapestry I always combine several thin threads together to achieve this property. I keep my yarn in baskets next to the loom, organized like a box of pastels by the color. This makes all of them available so I can pull out any colors that please me.

My work has a lot to do with the process of making choices. I do not think about color when I start a new tapestry; first I decide what it will be about, the feel of the piece and the emotions. I make a lot of little drawings with crayons or acrylic paint, mostly focused on shapes and choosing colors that just please me. When I settle on the design's structure, I continue these small studies, keeping the shapes but playing out the color variations. The intention is simply to clarify the idea because I never try to match yarn to crayon or paint, or vice-versa, they have different properties. I only concentrate on the effect and not on the exact hue. When I am ready to weave, I will select the type of color I think the new piece will be about. Then I start making choices in relation to that color, going for emotion, and for the overall effect. It just happens. What is important is that shapes are fused softly, or they break apart; they are veiled or stand out clear.



Angels in the Dream (Jacob), 16" x 16"

Next, I will put all the little drawings aside and paint in shapes at full scale with black ink on what will be a cartoon and just have an idea of the main color in mind. It will be about that – often I try to use a limited pallet, very limited in fact, but the plan is actually never sustained, I will add more and more. It is like music – keeping the main theme and having fun by adding variations on it.

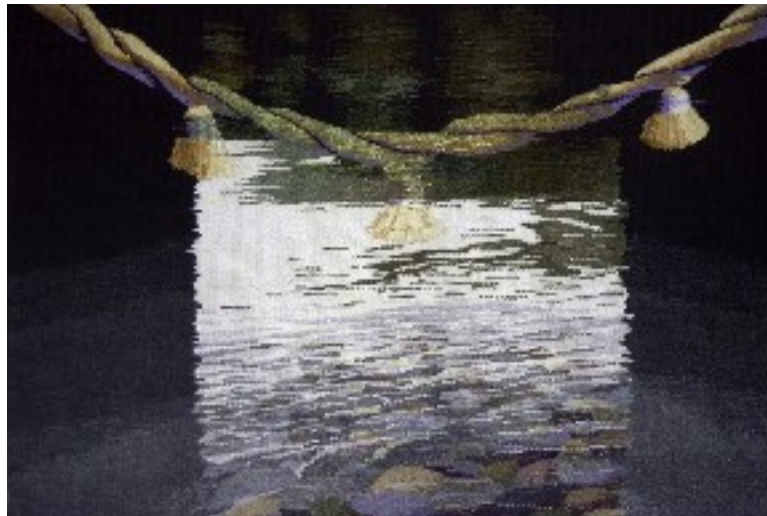
Shapes and colors will be fused with one another, then as I chose the next one, maybe it should mix ever so softly or perhaps I need to have the transition ragged and broken or make it

shimmer. I search for answers in painting and sculpture. I like Abstract Expressionism — it looks alive and full of energy pouring from it, especially strokes that create vibration of colors and depth. I learn about colors from George Seurat and Josef Albers. I like Marc Chagall, Henry Moore, Jim Dine and Nicolas de Stael. And the list is long from Rembrandt to David Smith. I like to explore and experiment, that is why I do not like to be tied up to formulas — I always tweak and try something new. Other ways make no sense, but I think it has to do a lot with emotion, what all work is about.

Limited Palette

Margo MacDonald

I am a painter and tapestry artist so I have developed my palette as somewhat of a marriage of the two. Early on, I decided to work in both mediums with a restricted palette and to blend colors from those. This gives me a related family of colors in a wide range. Most of the yarns I use come in a limited palette anyway so it's a natural way for me to work. I use basically the same colors whether it's paint or tapestry. Practice and experience are my guides. Knowing that my yarn palette is somewhat limited, I make my decisions after the image is ready.



Shimenawa for Puget Sound, 27" x 38"

I weave tapestry using two strands of Hifa Vevgarn (50% Spelsau, 50% wool) in my weft butterfly over an 8 epi cotton warp. This allows me to pick and choose whatever colors I need to make a blend. Sometimes it's two strands of the same color, sometimes not. I will also overlap

alternate rows of color (hatching) if I need a more gradual color change. Usually, the transition between colors is subtle enough that the eye doesn't get hung up on the change. I work both from photographs and images from other sources: drawings, collage, paintings. If I'm starting with one of the latter sources, I often use color theory to clarify my choices. Depending on what effect I want to have on the viewer, I might choose complementary colors to elicit intensity or analogous options to soothe. With the photographs, I rely on memory and the visual evidence in choosing color. I am aware in this case, however, of the impacts of the colors I select.

I list all the yarns that I plan to use, then scout through my shelves for close neighbors. I make the rest of the decisions at the loom as the piece progresses using the choices now on my table. I rarely go back to the shelf at this point. Blends happen while I'm weaving. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. If that happens, I will unweave and try again.

Color for Tapestry

Lynn Mayne

Color can be the most exciting feature of a tapestry. It can be what draws a viewer's attention and what either attracts or revolts someone. The depth of color that can be achieved in densely packed layers of yarn in a tapestry is dramatic.

My thoughts about color are usually in my mind right at the beginning of a new piece. I like to pull out yarns and pile them together to see what works. Often, further along in the design process, I will wrap yarns around a yardstick or strip of foam core to see how a number of colors appear in rows or, perhaps, in inch widths. This is early on. A successful tapestry probably won't have equal amounts of the colors. Some should be dominant with others playing subordinate roles.



Sneezing Lady III, 22" x 16"

In reviewing my notes and records about tapestry, I think I can trace many of my color choices and use of borders to my discovery of Turkish kilims in the early 90's. I liked the colors and simple geometric designs woven in the covered warp tapestry technique. I discovered a book, The Tribal Eye by Peter Davies, in a bookstore and brought it home. From that I learned about the 1989 publication of The Goddess of Anatolia which blew me away with its theory that the kilim designs from Anatolia, or Turkey, go back to early Neolithic times when god was a woman! I procured the book from the U of MI through inter library loan. It gave me access to designs obtained from anthropological digs uncovered from ancient walls.

The old kilims pictured in books often have rows of crenellated designs, chevrons, stylized flowers and even birds. I wove them in conjunction with the El Belinda or goddess figures against modern appliances and with cartoon figures. I played with the borders on graph paper and still use graph paper to plan out my borders especially if an image is repeat. I have kept notes on the planning and weaving processes from my earliest pieces, recording the sett and yarns and ideas. I have a small, loose-leaf notebook that I have used since 1997. Bear with me as I look through for writings that deal with color choices.

1/23/04 "Want to use lots of yellow and yellow-green. Can make stem of curving grass if use white background down below leaves. Will use paler colors at top in back and dark green in front. Not much depth here." Notes for *Hooray!*, a grass allergy tapestry.

4/19/04 "Black and White is successful. Geometrics make this more contemporary." Notes for *Woman Sneezing III*.

9/29/07 "Design very successful. I like the creepiness of exoskeleton images in bottom border. Transparency works. Dark gray water good against black in borders." Notes for first dragonfly tapestry, *Metamorphosis*.



Hooray, 23" x 20"

5/29/08 "Two weeks designing 4 Dragonfly designs. Emerald Spreadwing, Water border @bottom -black/blue, red leaves add punch. Clouds or stylized flowers at top? or both?"

7/12/08 "close blends seem best. Too much contrast (color mix on the bobbin) makes a spotty surface. Use the light bright greens at the front of piece but dull them going back. Mix the bright green with other greens or with grays." Notes for *Pondwater Puzzle*

9/17/08 “ Pitcher Plants in Wilderness Park on Lake MI – Comparison of Dragonfly & Pitcher Plant. Killers Fierce, Carnivores – The Predators – pale yellow or black background, Very delicate – Lethal – White border looks like a photo. Thinking of negative space around pitcher plants.”

11/29/08 “Curving lines of darker gray on lite gray are subtle & nice, (single strand outlining)”

1/30/09 “Colors are good after many false starts. 3” bug border, lt. gray 203, white bugs. gray 203, 202, 200, paternayan. Detail lines on bugs mostly 200 and 202 mix. 2” wing design border – lines with single strand black cotton 5/2.”

12/16/09 “10” woven- Dark greens to portray night & moth is light green. Using mix of 4 greens for dark. Listening to PBS radio show about “Dark Green Religion – Nature based spirituality. All life related – DNA.”

6/10/11 “Interesting how something can look good in outline form – delicate lines on white paper. When colored in, shapes and form take over. But then color can change it all again. Luna moth on acanthus leaves doesn’t say much. Luna & caterpillars can be about the circle of life – beginning – ending.”

8/11 “Good idea. Make a swatch card: punch holes on index card. Combine yarns to match color pencil squares.”

Light and Variation

Inge Norgaard

Not long ago, I was looking for new glasses. Trying on frames while not being able to see is a challenge in itself, let alone finding a frame that fit my face and then staying objective, while trying to see what I look like.

My sister, who was with me, had chosen a darker green frame with an almost bright lime green color on the inside. They looked great on her. I tried them on, and they made me look quite sickly. Then why was that? It was not the shape of the frame, but the color. On my sister’s darker skin, they looked a bit exotic. On my pale skin, however, they gave a green shine to my face that did not compliment me.



Nesting #2, 43" x 45"

Understand that there is no bad color. All colors are beautiful. But it is how we use them and what colors we pair together that dictates their aesthetic success.

In 1666 Sir Isaac Newton developed the first valuable theory on color. He admitted sunlight through a prism and found seven basic colors in the spectrum, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. So there we have the rainbow. Leonardo Da Vinci suggested four primary colors; red, blue, green and yellow. As late as 1914, William Ostwald eliminated the green as being a product of blue and yellow. (Linda Clark. *The Ancient Art of Color Therapy*.)

That is actually the true way of seeing it, I think. All colors can be made from those three colors plus black and white. In the color wheel, each color has an opposite. So red and green are across from each other. That means that if we mix them we will end up with a grayish color. In fact, they will negate each other if they are of the same light value. Up against each other, they appear as a seemingly gray blurry line, they fight. We could use that if we want to create tension. If we choose to change the value and pair a light green with a dark red, it will be calmer.

Many years ago, I spent a month sketching and weaving on the Faro Islands with a friend. For part of that time we ended up with a roommate, a painter from the Orkney Islands. He was out sketching and painting all the time, and came back with the most wonderful oil pastels every evening. Strong colors and lots of energy. He used the colors more as energy, taking the starting point from the actual color and then going with it. His belief was, do not try to copy nature, but capture it.

What I took from these early trips was that it takes a lot of time actually seeing and knowing the colors. When drawing and painting, I was taught that you are supposed to look 9 seconds at what you want to draw and one second at the paper drawing it. We tend to do the opposite. Looking at the paper most of the time and putting down, what we think we see. I can sit for hours, just looking. Often not even drawing, just letting the image imprint itself in my brain. If you look at a waterfall, you can see how a clear substance like water can have colors. The force and energy when tumbling down make it look white. Then when the sun hits it just right, there can appear blue, violets and yellow colors in it as well. The colors of the ocean change to a brilliant white, just by the way the sunlight reflects on its surface. It is always restless and changing, from shimmering white to the very dark. If we reach the shores of the tropics, this same clear body of water will be yellow, merging into green, and turquoise before turning into various blues. The tropical light is bright and strong and we end up with a very different color spectrum. So, color is a lot of things. It is surface and light, and how it plays. It gets created through a prism effect. Don't underestimate light. It affects everything.

In my nesting tapestries I was sketching the actual nests. I found that the brown twigs and branches were mostly various colors of brown. At a closer look, some browns were more yellow, others golden or dark red. So taking most of the brown out of the equation, and playing with the secondary tones freed me to be more playful. Then I could prioritize with the colors of the outer twigs compared with the ones further away. That gave me a lot of freedom, while still capturing the nests. This was on a blue sky with lots of clarity.



Nesting #3, 43" x 45"

Then what would happen if I wanted to do a nest in the evening, while the sun was setting? A different thing was happening. Look as I might, the sky's color was peach, but the nest was, and continued to be brown. No tonalities to play with. The light came low and from behind, casting my twigs and branches in shadows. A peach sky, with my nest in silhouette. That moved me in a different direction. I had to think in more graphic terms and I chose to use very few colors.

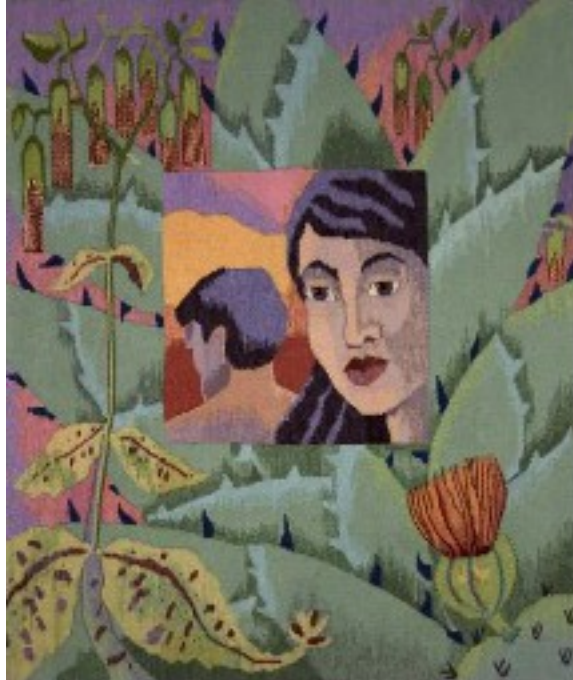
Still life is different. It is not so affected by the changes of light and movement. I am sure you have seen different variations of still life with bottles, vases or bowls in the colors of blues and grays and various shades in between. If you try to recall some of those images, you probably also have seen some with a bright yellow lemon added. Lemon is a pop of energy, contained in a nice roundish form, which counterweights the vertical lines and cool colors. A different color, however small it might be, can change the balance in the picture. That is a great thing to use. And what color glasses did you choose, you might ask. Tortoiseshell my friend, the color of the nest in sunset!

Value and Color Temperature

Becky Stevens

Color is what entices many of us to buy yarn and weave.

How do you select colors? Many times, I have selected yarn colors the same way I shop for fruit and vegetables—on impulse. Ah, a fresh box of strawberries, a pound of bright red cherries, and of course I have to have those lush red raspberries! While the fruit and the colors are enticing, weaving those colors may create a tapestry in which one color merges with the others. The reds are close in value, and they visually blend together like a fruit smoothie. Lately I am trying to give more attention to the lightness or darkness of a color. Color values create contrast. Contrast makes it easier to read shapes.



Can We Talk About It?, 28" x 24"

Determining the value of a color can be tricky. It involves squinting until you don't see the color, only the lightness or darkness of the color. Art supply stores sell a small cardboard value chart (less than two dollars cost) that allows you to place it on your yarn and see where it falls on the chart of ten values from black to white. If your colors are too closely related, say all falling in the range of 7 and 8 or in the 3, 4, 5 range, they will blend visually and will not create distinct shapes. If you look at a collection of tapestries often the ones that catch your eye have some areas of strong value contrast, containing values of 1 & 2 and some of 7 & 8. Placing a light color next to a dark color creates contrast and draws the eye to that space. The award-winning watercolorist John Salminen has been quoted as saying "Value does all the work but color gets all the credit."

Another consideration is color temperature. Warm colors come forward; cool colors recede. Colors also set the mood or feeling of the subject matter. In my tapestry *Can we talk about it?* I have used color to reflect the mood of a relationship between two people. The colors around the people are warm (yellow and orange), perhaps suggesting some tension between them. This is also the area with the lightest lights and darkest darks, which focuses your attention on

the people. The border of prickly plants around them is in the middle value range and is a cooler blueish green indicating a cooling of the relationship.

My final selection of colors is made after the composition is determined and I have made several small copies of the cartoon. I try different color combinations in watercolor because it is easy to adjust the value and temperature of the color in that medium. A problem occurs when all the variations I paint are not available in commercial yarns.

Joan Baxter gave a very good tip in a workshop at Convergence 2008. She suggested that you "paint your yarns". Work from yarns you have on hand or from a yarn color chart, mixing your paint as close to the sample as possible. This gives you a true sense of the value and temperature of the color your yarns will produce. If it looks good in your painted sketch, then you will not be disappointed when you weave. Good advice!