

Colours of Our Time – Identity and Difference in Design



reddot design museum

The Value of Colour in Design

Colours can characterise brands, symbolise their values and convey the quality of products. They play a decisive role in distinguishing a company's products from those of its competitors. Since 1995, the Trademark Reform Act allows colours to be protected as trademarks.

In industrial and product design, colour design plays a significant role in brand perception and product use. Colour is a design factor that lends products an aesthetic quality beyond their form and function and gives brands an unmistakable identity.



The iconic NIVEA tin has borne the brand's characteristic blue colour since 1925. The name NIVEA means „the snow-white“. *Photo: ©Beiersdorf AG*



In 2024, Beiersdorf introduced a new tin made from 88 % recycled aluminium. *Photo: ©Beiersdorf AG*

Aesthetic Continuity of Colour

From the blue of the sky to the blue of the sea, our perception of the world is coloured blue. There is no other colour that we intuitively trust more. Wherever companies and brands tout for trust, blue is the colour we confide in. One of the best-known colours is the blue of the NIVEA brand. Since 1925, the iconic NIVEA tin has borne the brand-defining colour and stands for trust, closeness and reliable skincare. Since then, the blue NIVEA tin with the white lettering has become synonymous with the brand. The skincare cream got its name from its white appearance. Derived from the Latin word "nix, nivis" for snow, NIVEA means "the snow-white".

Symbolic Colours of the Consumer Culture

What the colour red is for Coca-Cola, the colour blue is for Pepsi. As brand and primary colours, they are in direct competition with each other. While the colour red is quickly recognised, attractive and entertaining, the colour blue is cool and refreshing, creative and liberating.

PepsiCo's roots go back to 1898, when pharmacist Caleb Bradham founded Pepsi-Cola. To mark its 125th anniversary, Pepsi has redesigned the company's logo and changed its typography and colours.



After 14 years Pepsi gets a new typographic and chromatic logo with the new colour "Electric Blue" in 2023. Photos: © PepsiCo Inc.

The history of Coca-Cola began in 1886, when pharmacist John Pemberton developed a recipe for a syrup to treat headaches and fatigue. His accountant, Frank Robinson, then christened the syrup "Coca-Cola" and developed the unmistakable red and white lettering.

Precisely because the histories of the two companies and the soft drinks are very similar, their products must be differentiated for consumers by their brand-typical colours and design.

The classic Coke cans are one of the most important points of contact consumers have with the respective brand.



In 2021, Coca-Cola developed a new brand identity together with the design agency Kenyon Weston. The classic can is one of the most important touchpoints with the brand. Photos: ©The Coca-Cola Company



Fiskars PowerGear™ X, Red Dot Winner 2017

In 1967, industrial designer Olof Bäckström, who worked for the Finnish company Fiskars, created a lightweight, precision-cutting pair of scissors that combined plastic and metal for the first time. However, the choice of colour for the ergonomically shaped, orange handles was rather random. A factory employee decided to use orange-coloured plastic left over from the production of cups and juicers for the first batch of scissors.

When the scissors came onto the market, they very quickly became a symbol of the brand. To date, the orange-coloured scissors have been sold more than a billion times worldwide. In Finland, they are considered a cultural asset of national importance.



The orange-coloured scissors from Fiskars hit the zeitgeist of pop culture in 1967. Today, they are considered a cultural asset of national importance in Finland. In more than 50 years, the scissors have undergone small but subtle changes in design, while the colour has remained the same. *Photos: ©Fiskars Group*



GARDENA RollUp, Red Dot Winner 2021

Accent Colours in Design

Turquoise plays an important role as an accent colour for the Gardena brand and company, which was founded in Ulm in 1966. In contrast to the colour grey, the colour turquoise gives the garden tools a natural freshness and has a strong signalling effect. While the tools were initially painted in turquoise rather by chance, the triad of turquoise, grey and orange is now a defining feature of the brand.

Key operating elements are orange in colour. Turquoise serves as an accent colour. The slightly warm grey provides the background. In this way, the three colours link the different Gardena products, whose shape is based on a geometric grid, to create a coherent brand identity with a high recognition value.



The colour turquoise is perceived as a fresh, invigorating shade that lies between the two colours green and blue. In design, technology and art, the colour cyan is used synonymously with the colour turquoise. GARDENA AquaBloom, Red Dot Winner 2020. *Photos: ©Gardena GmbH*

Designing Colour Trends

Shaping and Colour Aesthetics Through the Ages

Every generation has its language, every generation has its music and every generation has its colour. Everyone naturally grows up in a world of colour that they share with those who grew up at the same time under comparable social and cultural conditions.

Beyond fashion trends, we can observe in design which colours have shaped our culture and our society for a certain period of time. We live in a colourful world whose meaning is linked to experiences we had in our youth, and which still influence our colour preferences today.



Back in 1946, the American inventor Earl Silas Tupper launched an icon of design onto the market with the Wonder Bowl. *Photo: ©TupperwareBrands*



Tea set from the 1950s of the manufacturer Gräflich Ortenburgsche Steingutmanufaktur
Photo: ©Raumwunder – Vintage Wohnen

New Colours for a New Era

The colours of the 1950s shaped a new aesthetic. Advances in colour film technology brought unprecedented pastel and pearlescent tones to the cinema screen and gave film stars such as Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn a cool elegance in delicate lavender tones and light aquamarine blue.

The cars of this period were also offered in colours that radiated a new confidence. Under the term "mid-century modern", designers such as Charles and Ray Eames or George Nelson gave numerous everyday objects rounded and flowing shapes. Pastel shades of yellow and blue or a light pink also found their way into households and revitalised kitchens and interiors at this time.

Colour as an Expression of Identity

The world is constantly changing. Issues of diversity and identity are more topical than ever. The colour aesthetic of the 2020s, which at first glance is reminiscent of the pastel colours of "mid-century modern", is an expression of the search for orientation and identity.

In terms of design, this development is reflected in the colour trends of a wide range of products. The subtle colours of loudspeakers and headphones can also be found in the design of cameras and office chairs. Pastel-coloured objects characterise the home and bathroom, and are an expression of our time, our perception and our identity.



Apple AirPods Max wireless headphones, Red Dot: Best of the Best 2021
Photos: ©Apple Inc.



Google Nest Audio smart speaker, Red Dot Winner 2021
Photos: ©Google Inc.



In 2021, KALDEWEI presented a new colour collection for the MIENA washbasin bowls and brought the new trend colours into the bathroom. Red Dot Winner 2018.
Photo: © Franz Kaldewei GmbH & Co. KG

Exhibition

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Opening hours:

Tue–Sun: 11 a.m. – 6 p.m.

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Fridays: Pay what you want

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