

A Color Theory for the Ages

King Louis XVIII, an *amateur* of fine fabric, was dissatisfied with the product of Gobelins, the royal tapestry works. Particularly, he felt that their black dye was defective—too light, and with a reddish cast. Looking for a solution, he turned to France's greatest scientist. The chemist M.E. Chevreul, after thorough examination, found nothing wrong with the dye. The real culprit, he said, was the dark, rich blues and greens surrounding it, creating the illusion that the black was weak. From this claim, he asserted a new law of optics. He expanded it into a unified theory about every design discipline and, in 1839, the finest and most influential book ever written about color usage.

Half a century later, *On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colors* had become "the scientific foundation of Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist painting," according to Johannes Itten. "It is my Bible," said Winslow Homer. Vincent van Gogh called it "a luminous theory of colors," allowing "effects so violent that the human eye can scarcely stand to look at them."

Although this book is most noted for its impact on painting (and by extension, photography) Chevreul makes clear from the outset that he means to cover *all forms of visual art*. He prescribes design principles for tapestries, carpets, furniture, mosaics, churches, museums, apartments, formal gardens, theaters, maps, typography, framing, stained glass, and even military uniforms.

The stripe graphic at left, which contains only four distinct colors, shows how right he was that colors appear to change depending on their neighbors. His basic ideas were clear but his explanations of how to implement them were convoluted even in the original French. The only English edition available until now has been condemned as plodding and misleading ever since it appeared in 1854. Today, Dan Margulis has channeled this classic into a lucidity that goes far beyond a "translation." He has rewritten obscure parts, corrected errors, updated references, commented separately as needed, and added six chapters of his own. Chevreul desperately wanted color graphics that he lacked the technology to produce. Margulis has added them and used his digital expertise to explain what few critics have understood about how painters chose their colors.

If you love color, this relentlessly practical book will leave an indelible mark on you. Look at a painting you've seen scores of times before, and you'll realize you never appreciated it properly. Your view of nature, the way you dress, and perhaps even the way you prepare food will change. Among the topics covered:

- When exaggerated coloring can enhance a painting or a photo.
- Compensating for the limitations of any process and for the destination of the product.
- How correction of photos is like—and unlike—fine art painting.
- Color considerations in corporate identity projects.
- Arrangements of food, flowers, and still life.
- The impact of lighting on color selection.
- Factors that deceive buyers of color.
- How the choice of background guides the viewer's eye.
- The most flattering clothing for various skin colors.
- Appropriate coloring in every type of architecture.
- The best choices for typography, maps, and charts.
- Effective uses of black, gray, and/or white.
- The alternate reality of the motion picture.

US \$69.95
LEVEL: All
CATEGORY: Design, Art History, Photography, Painting, Color Theory, Architecture, Interior Decoration, Fashion.

M.E. CHEVREUL (1786–1889) would have been a formidable scientific figure even if he had never done anything with color. His work in chemistry and in human health earned him a national celebration on his hundredth birthday.

DAN MARGULIS, today's leading expert on color correction of photography, quoted Chevreul fourteen times in his bestselling *Photoshop LAB Color*. He is also, according to digital artist Bert Monroy, "the best technical editor on the planet."



On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colors

CHEVREUL
MARGULIS

On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colors

and its timeless applications in all the visual arts

M.E. Chevreul • Dan Margulis