Primary Colors

*Audubon* once published a series of essays about color in nature that started with red because it is a favorite eye-catching color for editorial and advertising use. Thirty-six images were selected from several thousand submitted. The “red” essay proved so popular that it was followed by “blue,” and then “yellow.”

Some of the examples were the obvious—red maple trees in fall, a bluebird, a yellow daisy. But most were much less familiar—the red mouths of baby cuckoos, the yellow cere on the face of a Harris’s hawk, the turquoise eyes of a baby cougar. When you think about it, life without color would be dull indeed. So much of the pleasure we experience in our surroundings is tied to the variety and abundance of color.
Artists have long known to use colors based on their relationships to one another. On the color wheel of primary and secondary colors, those opposite each other are called complementary—red and green, orange and blue, yellow and purple—because they have an unusual optical effect on us. When used next to each other, each complement vibrates more intensely.

The nineteenth-century French impressionists were the first painters to exploit this phenomenon. It is no different for photographers: the bright red cock-of-the-rock, for example, will stand out much better against the backdrop of green foliage than that of a pale blue sky.

Editors take color into consideration when selecting their magazine covers. Audubon’s bestselling cover was a fairly somber fall foliage shot of a gray-phase screech owl; what made the picture were the tiny orange berries left on a vine. As images to frame and hang on the wall, harmonious color schemes are soothing, like the subtle earth colors in the aerial of the Ord River. They wear better over time when they have to be looked at and lived with every day.
PORTFOLIO OF PASTEL COLORS

Pastel colors can be thought of as simply muted versions of primary and secondary colors, with the same relationships still applying. They are often associated with spring, a season of pinks, lavenders, pale yellows, and greens—the colors of emergent vegetation. But they are also associated with winter, as in the image of the firs on Mount Rainier (below). The image of the Bolivian salt hills (following pages) with their soft pinks and blues also resembles a winter landscape.

The prismatic effect of abalone shell produces pastels in the whole color spectrum, satisfying and fascinating as they change according to the angle of the light. Like harmonious colors, pastels are emotionally pleasing and have a quieter impact, making them soothing, and therefore easy to live with.

ABALONE SHELL, CALIFORNIA
24-70mm lens, f/22 for .4 sec., ISO 100

Photos © Art Wolfe Inc.

FOREST, MOUNT RAINIER
NATIONAL PARK, WASHINGTON
80-200mm lens, 1/16 for 1/8 sec., Fujichrome Velvia 50

SALAR DE UYUNI, BOLIVIA
24-70mm lens, f/22 for 1.3 seconds, ISO 100

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Art Wolfe’s stunning images are recognized throughout the world for their mastery of color, composition, and perspective. Wolfe’s television series, Art Wolfe’s Travels to the Edge, airs on PBS stations throughout the country. He is also a popular speaker for such companies as Microsoft, IBM, and Sheraton Hotels. He can be found at artwolfe.com as well as on Facebook and Twitter.

Martha Hill is a freelance writer and the former photo editor of Audubon magazine.

Tim Grey is regarded as one of the top educators in digital imaging, having written more than a dozen books and hundreds of articles. He can be found at timgrey.com.