



# COLOUR UNCODED

Is it blue and black or white and gold? *Lauren Romano* discovers why the optical illusion that divided the internet has thrust the science of colour into the limelight

As Kim and Kanye disagreed over the colour of *that* dress – a debate that involved millions of internet users the world over and helped coin the hash tag #TheDress on countless copycat posts – the chromatic confusion saw everyone pitching their own theories. Even style bible *Vogue* threw in its two cents. While Dressgate dies down and we digest the science behind it – something about wavelengths, visual cortex and other words that evoke vague memories of physics classrooms and dusty GCSE revision books – the idea that colour can alter our vision and ultimately how we perceive the world around us is stirring curiosity.

Scientific research into colour certainly isn't something new, but once a dinner party topic to be discussed solely within white lab-coat wearing circles, it is now making ripples in the publishing world too.

Last month saw the release of a new colouring book for adults. The eagerly anticipated *Colour Therapy: An Anti-Stress Colouring Book* by Cindy Wilde, Laura-Kate Chapman and Richard Merritt is not the first foray into this most unlikely sounding of genres for Michael O'Mara Books. The independent publisher has been releasing adult jotters since 2012, and this latest title is the follow up to the *The Art Therapy Book*, which has been reprinted five times since its original publication in June 2014.

Doodling is evidently having a moment. "Colouring has therapeutic benefits – it helps you switch off from the daily grind," *Colour Therapy's* co-illustrator Richard Merritt tells me. Arranged into seven sections, each double page concentrates on a different palette so readers can colour to soothe and suit their mood. "Colouring allows us to go back to a

● slower pace,” he adds. “If you put a piece of paper and a crayon in front of a child, they’ll start drawing, but I think as an adult you lose that spontaneity.”

The book jacket lauds further plaudits on the merits of a colouring-in session, claiming that it can lower anxiety, help you sleep better and increase your attention span. And while this might sound like a tall order, the evidence supporting colour therapy is stacking up. Scientists argue that the right hue can have a profound impact on our mood and overall health.

It was the ancient Egyptians who first used colour to heal. Papyrus scrolls from 1550 BC suggest that they built temples dedicated to the purpose, where the sick could be revitalised. They believed that the seven colours of the rainbow relate to the seven chakras, or energy centres, of the body. Today 21st century treatments range from coloured silks draped around a patient to high-tech beams aimed at key ‘colour-puncture points’. Lilian Verner-Bonds, president of the International Association of Colour, tells me that the pigments a client is drawn to will provide an insight into their health. “Every colour oscillates at a different rate and each part of the body responds to a particular colour,” she says. “When we feel stressed or ill we can use the appropriate shade to restore balance.”

Beau Lotto, a neuroscientist at University College London explains in a recent article in *The Telegraph* that colour is a result of how the receptors in our eyes interpret wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation. He states that optical illusions, such as the aforementioned shade-shifting dress, can occur depending on what surrounds the object. Look at something under shadow and it’ll appear lighter than when it’s on a darker background, he says – in other words it’s a simple trick of perspective.

Certain hues are more black and white. Ask people what the colour red represents and they’ll say it denotes anger, perhaps even desire, while blue is calming and clarifying. These culturally approved assumptions are true to a certain extent. Documented evidence confirms that red *is* rousing: red pills are more effective at perking you up than blue ones and paintings with burgundy brushstrokes are known to fetch higher prices at auction. Meanwhile sports teams that wear red have a better chance of winning than competitors dressed in other colours – ten per cent more according to a study conducted by the University of Münster.

As for blue, however, it might be the colour of choice for sleeping tablets, but recent research has shown that supposedly serene blue light (emitted from tablets, laptops and smartphones) actually affects our sleeping patterns by supressing the sleep-inducing



hormone melatonin. In fact, because of the alertness it induces, certain bandwidths of blue light are increasingly harnessed in the treatment of Seasonal Affective Disorder.

Pink, meanwhile, possesses more powerful characteristics than its associations with femininity suggest. Researcher Alexander Schauss documented the effects of exposure to the shade on inmates at a naval prison in Seattle in the seventies, coining his own specific bubblegum-esque ‘Baker-Miller’ pink in the process. He noted that 15 minutes in a cell painted this colour was sufficient to significantly reduce violent and aggressive behaviour, lower heart rate and even muscular strength.

But aside from banishing phones from the bedroom so we can get 40 winks – and supporting football teams on the basis of their kit – how can we harness the power of colour day to day? In her book *How Not to Wear Black* Jules Standish champions injecting specific colours into our wardrobes to help improve our mood.

“The media, fashion stores and designers everywhere would have us believe that black is the colour to be seen in if you want to look slimmer, chic and stylish. However,



I saw so many people, particularly women, who had no idea just how ageing it was. Who wants to look a size slimmer but ten years older?” she says.

As a personal style and colour consultant Jules matches clients with their perfect shades to help them look and feel their best. If you suffer from stress, for example, cool blues can stimulate the release of the calming hormone oxytocin; warm, bright colours can improve your mood; and red is a good bet for dieters as the shade is said to trigger the pituitary and adrenal glands, which can lead to increased metabolism. “We have all experienced days when people comment on how well we look in a specific colour, and yet other days we can feel completely invisible,” she tells me. To remedy this, Jules offers a range of colour analysis services that pay close attention to an individual’s skin tone. “Pigments that harmonise with the skin are the ones that make the complexion look even and minimise lines, giving it a youthful appearance, sometimes as transformational as a face lift,” she smiles.

She encourages her clients to fill out personality questionnaires to determine “what colour season each

individual’s temperament aligns with”. It might sound a bit hippy-dippy, but Jules’ innate style and shade nous has been sought by everyone from celebs to female executives. Her message is clear; the power of colour shouldn’t be underestimated.

Figuring out what your true colours are doesn’t necessarily mean an overnight transformation, but if you’re looking for an instant pick-me-up, a copy of *Colour Therapy* might help. “It provides escapism,” illustrator Richard Merritt muses. “In that moment when you’re sitting down with a piece of paper and some pens you almost go back to being a kid again.” And in an adult world where it is increasingly difficult to switch off, the opportunity to step back and appreciate the eye-opening possibilities of colour is surely a worthwhile way to spend an afternoon. Pass the crayons. ■

**Colour Therapy: An Anti-Stress Colouring Book by Cindy Wilde, Laura-Kate Chapman and Richard Merritt published by Michael O’Mara Books, £12.99**  
[colourconsultancy.co.uk](http://colourconsultancy.co.uk); [hownottowearblack.co.uk](http://hownottowearblack.co.uk)