

The Power of Color

by Sandy Dumont

For 23 years I lived in Belgium. It was the best and worst thing that ever happened to my business. It was the worst thing because it is very sad to hear a client say, "I would rather look ugly than wear the colors you are suggesting." It was the best thing that ever happened to me because I learned how to remedy this ever-recurring situation.

The woman who said that to me was very serious. You see, she had discovered that the "grunge" colors that are so popular in Belgium did not make her look better. In fact, they made her look sad, tired and older. And by the end of the workshop, she was able to see it in the mirror and acknowledge that she didn't look good in grunge colors like Loden (olive) green, brown, mustard and beige. She also saw that fuchsia and cherry red were her most flattering colors, but she could not think of ever wearing them because they would make her stand out too much.

You see, Belgium has been invaded since the days of Julius Caesar. One by one, most of Europe has invaded this tiny country. Belgians quickly discovered that it is wise to blend into the background and not be noticed. Standing out, they observed, could cause you to be hanged, shot, or be dragged off by your ponytail to the new conqueror's cave.

Belgium's climate is similar to Seat-



tle's. It rains and is overcast most of the time, so the colors that allow you to blend into this country of immense forests and woods are the colors of autumn. It is no coincidence that grunge colors were popularized in Seattle because, throughout the world, people have a tendency to dress to "match" their surroundings. It is one of the most profound survival instincts going all the way back to the days of cavemen.

Color is my passion, so it broke my heart to see my Belgian friends looking so drab. I resolved to find a way to get them to look in the mirror and truly see the results. Surely they could see that some colors make you look happy and other colors make you look drab, dreary, and sad. It took me a few years and many trials and errors with various methods, but eventually I learned to teach others to "look and see." That is, to make a distinction between the colors that make you feel good—or safe—and the colors that make you look good in the mirror.

Eventually, a number of journalists came around to interview me because they had heard of some crazy stories about looking good in loud colors. I ended up doing several TV shows and being selected by the Belgian state television to be their image consultant. It was a long and tedious journey to success, but it was worth it!

While in Belgium, I served as president of the 900-member Women's International Club, so I was able to observe the distinct differences among more than 53 different nationalities and cultures, and I discovered something about the Belgian members.

Most of the members were very international in attitude and dress. Occasionally, however, we were entertained with fashion shows of garments or costumes from all the different nations of the club. For our yearly "costume" fashion show, American women had no other "national costume" besides cowgirl outfits, while women from African nations wore brightly-colored floral prints and exquisite jungle prints. Belgian women wore "farm" costumes like those in a Bruegel painting. It was interesting to see how often ancient costumes find their way into "modern" dress. We Americans still love our jeans and cowboy boots, and lavish floral and jungle prints still permeate the scene in modern-day Africa. Belgians today wear high-fashion clothing, but always in the muted drab colors of Bruegel.

Throughout the many years I lived in Belgium, I noticed that most people around the world dress to match the season of the year. For example, they wear dark colors in the winter, and as soon as the first few springs of grass and spring flowers emerge, they wear colors to match.

There were two notable exceptions to changing colors as the seasons change—the Belgians and the British. Most Belgians clung to autumn colors throughout the year, except when they



were on vacation. Then they felt safe, I assume, and wore vivid colors and bright floral prints with abandon. As for the British, they donned the muted cool colors of English gardens and Laura Ashley prints throughout the seasons.

In the States, some regions are influenced by British leanings when it comes to colors. In Florida and much of the South, for example, they prefer pastel garments—and houses; while in the nearby Caribbean, they paint their houses hibiscus red, canary yellow and bright Caribbean blue. Color is a powerful thing! ■

Sandy Dumont is an image consultant who has been changing people's lives for more than 30 years. Contact her at www.theimagearchitect.com.

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