



Fascination

Color Reflects Life

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On this page, you can see the colors of 60 years of Porsche. For a sports car, the paint isn't just make-up—the colors also reflect social moods and trends. Color research is one of the most complex and exciting areas of automobile design. Here, Porsche experts show their colors for *Christophorus*.

Way back when, the Germans must have made a pretty pale impression. In the infant days of motorsports, the racing colors were assigned to the nations: Italy got the red of the heart's blood, France got an impressive blue, and the Brits their noble racing green. All that was left for Teutonic tastes was white. Today, however, the clarity and speed that white conveys is back in style. And Porsche design boss Michael Mauer drives a white 911, even after hours. "It's completely unambiguous and therefore coherent," he declares in praise of the coat of paint on his Turbo.

Nothing about a car is as subject to change as its color. In the studio in Weissach, little curved pieces of metal on the wall tell the six-decade Porsche color story. What an array of colors! And even without looking at the years, you can easily discern the timeline. That's one of the phenomena of color design: in retrospect, a lot of it is self-explanatory. You can see the still-shy colors of the fifties, the ever-cheerier sixties, the flashy seventies, the reserved eighties, and the cool nineties—and finally the gentle new millennium.

Long gone are the days of Henry Ford, who'd sell you a Model T in any color—as long as it was black. There was theoretical business sense behind that corny joke: black was the cheapest and most durable color back in the twenties. Today the hue itself is not the only consideration; equally important is the impression it makes. The right color for a car is not simply a matter of personal taste; some colors work best with certain types of cars. "Colors underscore the character of a sports car," says Joachim Paetzel, responsible for the development of colors and materials at Porsche. The rule of thumb: Highlight, but don't distract. That sounds very fashion-conscious, but fashion is only one inspiration for the designers. All the creative disciplines—architecture, furniture design, art—also contribute. And yet by tomorrow, what you see today will already be yesterday's news. The color specialists in the auto industry think in completely different time frames than fashion designers, who operate in six-month cycles. Auto interior designer Franz-Josef Siegert, on the other hand, explains that he and his colleagues "have to think three to five years in advance—and that's how long our choices have to stay modern." The challenge, as Paetzel knows, is to make cars appear new without making them appear contrived. Color reflects life.

It's a process that has less to do with feelings than with experience and thoughtful analysis. But analysis can come in plenty of colors—seventeen, on the current Porsche palette. Each of them, in order to please the eye, must be able to stand alone convincingly. And yet, each must also fit the brand and the palette as a whole, for they are part of the Porsche identity. The shade-of-difference business is tough. "It helps to stay alert, and aware of how the world is turning," Siegert says. It's truly a job for the senses. In the studio, answers must be found to questions, including: What happens in your head? How do you translate what you see into colors? What does the future hold—bronze, blue-metallic, or even pink? It's future trend research.

No outside without an inside: A car's exterior and its interior require color coordination—there's no painting over that



Sixty Colorful Years 1948–1979

The fifties: Auratium Green



356 A Cabrio, 1957

The sixties: Light Ivory



911 2.0, 1963

The seventies: Signal Orange



914, 1970



Mixed feelings: Sometimes, stronger is better

The color rush always leads back to seriousness. Siegert notes, "What we do is more rational than you'd think. Wild artistic experimentation alone won't cut it here. We also need cool calculation and strategy." His favorite question for finding the right shade: What is enduring? Individual enthusiasm must be toned down, and the Color Commission must remain neutral. Once the color researchers have agreed on a certain hue, it has to be projected onto all the models. Some colors make cars look slimmer; others make them appear more massive. One tone may seem unobtrusive; another too aggressive. And that depends not only on the tint itself. The course of the lines, the play with shadows, and the accents of painting technique are substantial design and decision-making factors. It's an activity with plenty of contrasts. Multiplied by the combinations of interior colors, it yields an almost infinite array of variations. Yet the color intensity always has to be right. Paetzel explains, "The great difference is in the nuance."

Beauty, the creators freely admit, means something to them, too. That already identifies an important virtue that the coloration ▶

Sixty Colorful Years

1980–2008

The eighties: Casablanca Beige Metallic



928, 1980

The nineties: Ocean Jade Metallic



Boxster, 1996

The new millennium: GTS Red



Cayenne GTS, 2008

of a sports car has to fulfill: colors have a stimulating nature. And like everything else, they only get one chance to make a good, decisive first impression. But Porsche colors are not after quick contact; their effect is designed to be more profound.

The color designers have to serve many masters, including the social climate on the one hand and the need for “practical” colors on the other. Beyond that, there is the desire for striking hues and, finally, the climatic conditions of various global markets. In addition to these sometimes contradictory demands, there’s the most important one, self-imposed: “We have to meet the expectations of the customer and yet still stand out from the crowd.” Compulsion and impulsion interact to come up with the right solution in the process of elimination. Sooner or later, the kaleidoscope for the model year is ready—for a decision by the Board of Management.

Once the palette is available for viewing, the designers’ visions are no longer as abstract as they sound in words: future desires, such as time, space, and tranquility, are now manifested in real colors. Colors always signal a lifestyle. Why, for instance, has a color called “Macadamia Metallic” joined the dance? To say that it “fits the trend” is to provide a justification, but not a satisfactory explanation. The designers are pleased by its acceptance by customers, whose interest confirms what they had long anticipated: a discreet brown signifies pleasure, as derived from the resurgent coffeehouse culture. Your car is one of the centers of your life; you can’t separate (color) design from your attitude to life or from your social surroundings.

A true designer will never abandon his courage for good taste to the dictates of statistics. The paint manufacturers DuPont and BASF prepare annual top-ten lists—stock-market indexes of color. Black and silver are not an issue, at least in Germany—they’re always fine. Three-quarters of all vehicles on the road in Germany are in dark tones, whereas in the United States, silver yielded its top position to white for the first time last year. These are important facts for the color selectors, but ones that already belong to the past. What’s important for the colorists now is to draw the right conclusions from them.

Colors bear witness to their era—as the experts at Porsche’s “Colour & Trim” division know full well. That a far-cooler Arctic Silver Metallic can thrive alongside subdued colors results from the different worlds that people either inhabit or hope to enter. Moreover, who can live completely purely, true to a certain type? Siebert says, “Colors just happen to have something very enticing”—a compliment to his own work. Car colors are taste amplifiers for the soul. The designers have to fulfill a very sensitive interpretive role: they must address feelings and arouse desires and then fulfill them. Hence: Lead me into temptation—but not too far. Showing off is strictly frowned upon. Paetzel majored in communications and industrial design, with a concentration in color and surface design. For him, color design is so thrilling “because it combines within itself all disciplines.”

At the end of our interview in the Weissach security area, the designers also show their personal colors: one drives a blue sports car, the other a black one. After all, they are surrounded by colors all day long. ◀