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WHERE WERE
YOU WHEN
THEY WERE
GETTING HIGH?

THE NINETIES

THE ILLUMINATI

The Nineties, decade of designer beige and expensive ecru. Everything must go (especially if it's in plain old khaki). Right? Not quite. The colour industry has never been so powerful. There are people now deciding exactly what ecru you'll wear in 2012. Text **Jennifer Kabat** Illustration **MP**

I've seen the future and it's white and green with organic shapes. It's been shaped by natural food (all non-GM, of course), and it's going to be in with the look of the next *Star Wars* movie. And soon, if not already, you'll be gardening like a New Age Ground Force gremlin while wearing (depending on who you consult) either 'soft spa colours' – muted pink, aqua, and blue... or terracotta, brick and petrol. Everything you buy will be about 'personalisation' and 'the individual'. Yes, the individual. That means you – all of you.

That's what Ellen Haeser, Anne Lise Kjaer, Joanne Jenkins, Mimi Cooper and Indra Mistry say. Though you may not have heard of them, they've known for the last two years what colour jumper you'll buy this autumn. They can even tell you about what you'll want next year and in 2001. They're colour forecasters, the people who harness colour to objects and attach it to trends. They anticipated last autumn's grey and red, and the fad in merrowear a few years ago for French blue shirts in lieu of white ones. Forecasters often work anonymously in small firms, just one or two people, but they advise companies like Philips, Mercedes, Dupont's Lycra, The Gap, The North Face, Mac cosmetics, BMW, Benetton, Mercedes and M&S. Li Edelcorf, the industry's biggest, runs a veritable colour franchise with some 20 assistants scurrying around her two studios, compiling the ideas that culminate in her twice-yearly magazine *View On Colour*, a steal at a mere £40 an issue. But her hold over the industry is slowly loosening.

The forecasters work at least a year and a half into the future, assembling books devoted to their palettes, lovingly created scrapbooks filled with pictures and stray bits of yarn or plastic or copper wire, pasted down to illustrate a point. A bit like a well-made student art project, the books can cost £2,000 or more. They tell any company putting out consumer products – clothes, cars, couches, computers, hair dryers, shavers, coffee makers and kettles – which colour to make them. Forecasters will hawk their palettes on the first weekend in October at Premier Vision in Paris, the fabric tradeshow attended by every high street retailer and most of the big name designers. Some 600 predictors will

assemble in late October for the Color Marketing Group's annual meeting – this year in Palm Springs, California – where they'll argue over different colour schemes and shades as members present their plans for our future, or at least the hues they hope we'll buy in 2002.

In Carlstadt, New Jersey, just beyond signs announcing 'Welcome to Northern New Jersey, embroidery capital of the world' and next door to the Meadowlands Arena, Manhattan roads like Oz in the distance over the marsh flats, Carlstadt is the home of Pantone, literally the colour factory, who produce swatches and dye formulas used around the world to create standardised colours. While the company also works with forecasters to make sure the shades they predict can be reproduced, Pantone is also in the prediction business itself. 'People are starting to look backwards now; they want something simplistic,' says Tod Schuman, the company's textile marketing director. 'Transparent colours, just a bit!'

But who listens to the Schumans and Kjaers and Jenkinces? For a start, the high street stores: M&S, French Connection, the Arcadia group, Bloomingdale's. And so do high-end fashion designers, even if the Muccias and Helmut's won't admit it, as Anne-Marie Woodhead, Joanne Jenkins' creative director, explains. Despite Donna Karan's insistence that her inspiration for colour comes from everywhere – nature is very important, she says, 'rocks and beach and stones and sand and being in the Hamptons' – everyone from The Gap to Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein's diffusion lines buy Jenkins' reports. Even Disney wants to know.

Most of these forecasters are so far into the future they can't clearly remember the past. Ask them about the decade we haven't even left yet, and you get vague answers: Ellen Haeser struggles to remember the Nineties and apologises. Anne Lise Kjaer, dressed in Evisu jeans nipped in around her waist with a Cartier belt, sits at a table filled with scraps that will go into her colour book for Summer 2001. She pauses and in her Scandinavian-inflected English admits it's hard to recall the early years, but pushes out a few words about 'ecru hell and misunderstood ecological' and goes straight into talking about what she's quite

comfortable with: her latest predictions. She's bullish on what she calls the 'i generation' and insists it's a little 'i' we're talking about here: 'i equals intelligence, integrity, identity, individual, information, even the iMac.'

Indra Mistry, Philips' colour guy, explains that colour in the Eighties and early Nineties was really rational; now it's emotional. This means that designers started off using expected and known ways of putting colours together, like black with red and white in the early part of the decade, whereas colour is now used to conjure up the past and memory. Other forecasters tell us the Nineties were 'colourful' (think of Gucci's recent collections, the iMac and Dyson's vacuum). The decade was also 'sophisticated', even 'yellow'.

Perhaps we're too close to it all to say for sure. Look back a few decades, think of the late Sixties – hot pink, bright turquoise and yellow were on everything from paisley ties and mini-skirts to the candy-coloured cars. And the Seventies? Harvest gold and avocado, while the Eighties ranged from Reagan red and black to Armani's steely hues. But the Nineties have been about any shade of beige – sand, pebble, toast, taupe, tan, cream, putty, camel and countless others. As much as the ideas of 'synergy', trip hop and the multipocketed trouser, the decade has been marked by Calvin's minimalist palette, Dockers, The Gap and Banana Republic's khakis. 'Our neutral statement is very different from Banana Republic's,' explains Walker McWilliams, Club Monaco's head of men's fashion. 'It's a lot more sophisticated. It's not just about the neutrals. It's about which neutrals you use.'

Finally, at the end point of the century, colour has grown into 'an accessory' where we prefer our brights in shoes or handbags or the simplest shirt so it doesn't become a 'design statement'. These shades were only really invented 100 years ago when the first chemical dyes were created in labs. This allowed vivid colours to be cheaply and easily reproduced and spread to the masses, so while you could call this the most colourful century, vibrant shades are now reduced to accents, hence the dash of red in last season's grey. Kjaer calls the red 'grounding, a chakra thing,' while, Haeser explains, the grey was predicted by Li Edelkoort some three years ago.

'We found that grey was something in between,' says Haeser. 'It's not

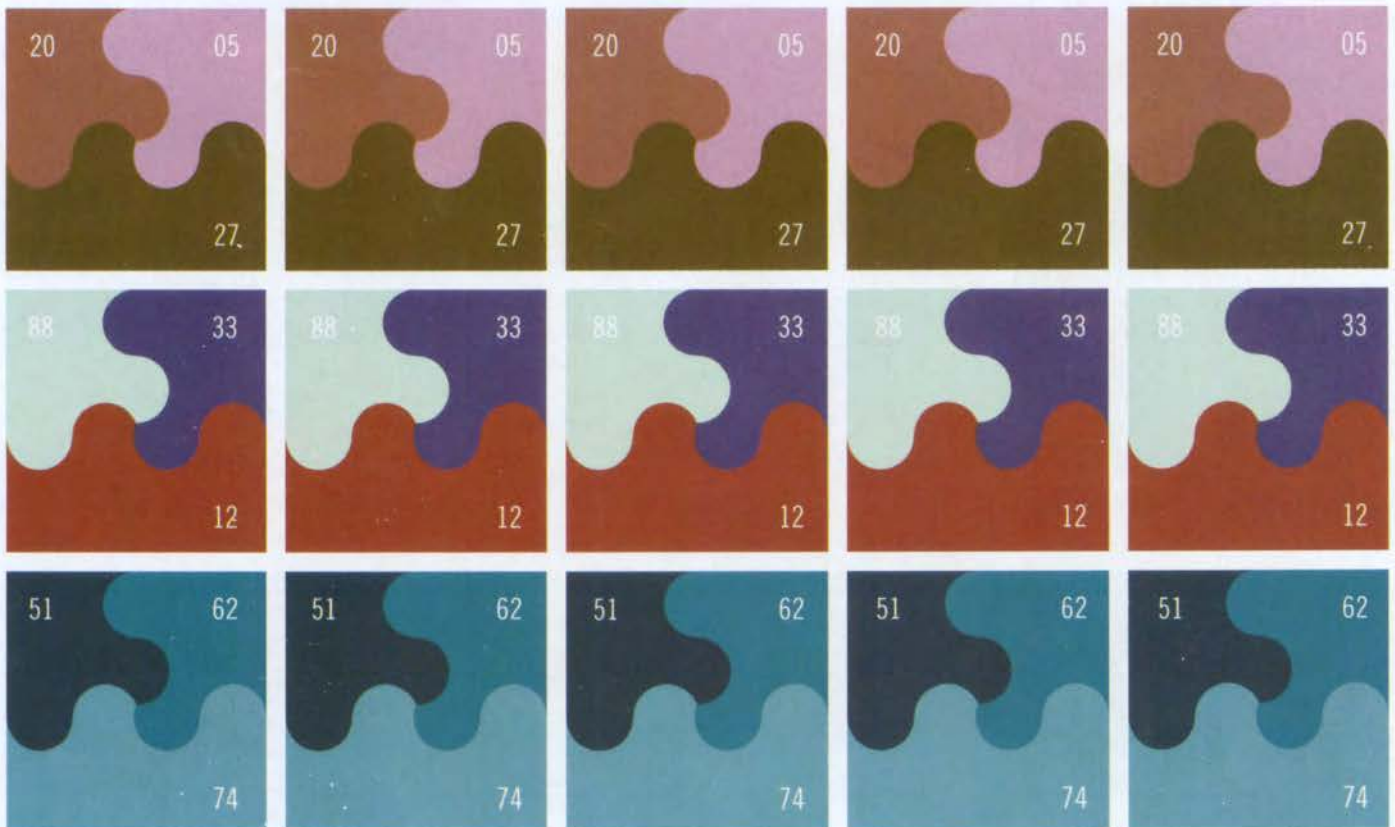
black, it's not white, it stands for peace and metal. It's soft, meditative. On the other hand, it can go into metal and the future; people don't have to choose with it. It's a very safe, quiet moment.' Indeed. Anne-Marie Woodhead's reasons for including grey are far more pragmatic. It's easy to match other colours with it – important now that people 'grow their wardrobe, unlike the Eighties when they'd throw out whole outfits.'

And last year's red accent? It's morphed into this season's bright pinks. Relax: if they're too loud, more muted shades are on their way. But red is also still in. As Manolo Blahnik pronounced in the August issue of *American Vogue*, 'Red's become a non-colour, the neutral of the new millennium! There's even an exhibit celebrating the shade that opens in Glasgow this October. Clearly, we need more grounding.'

So how do the likes of Manolo know? Ten years ago, says Woodhead, she could 'just stand up there and say something, and clients – retailers, designers – would just buy it. Now they're more aware, that information is more accessible.' And really the forecasters are working just a few minutes, five at most, into the future, using data we can all find quite easily. Ellen Haeser stands behind organic food and simplicity. She believes that people are fed up with too much choice. 'They don't want 25 types of jam,' she says. And her proof? 'I already realise this with myself. I like to spend money carefully and I know this will happen in three to five years.'

But looking at the paper and all the protests around genetically modified food, it's not a hard conclusion to reach. Indeed, every colour book refers to this. You can already see eco-friendly styles in *Star Wars* with those felt capes or in Birkenstocks, whose curving shapes Haeser promises will soon start influencing not just what we put on our feet but the rest of our bodies. The colour consultants pay close attention to newspapers and magazines. Yes, even these very words and images will come under the prognosticator's scrutiny, as will *Women's Own*, *Living Etc*, *wallpaper** and a slew of gay, teen, fan, style and lifestyle mags – all looking for what will crest into a trend.

And all the forecasters over predict, Cooper insists. They need to get it right. Thus an 80 per cent success rate is good, and Indra can pride himself that in the last seven years he only got it wrong once, calling for orange vacuums a year too early in 1994. In the UK, he explains, it looked



old-fashioned rather than retro. People still had too much orange stuff hanging around from the first time it was popular. Colour is an imprecise science. Members of the Color Marketing Group tack 'CMG' after their names, as if the initials give them more credibility. They all insist 'colour evolves', that its course can be plotted by looking at the present. 'Nothing comes from out of the blue,' Pantone's Tod Schulman says, unaware of the pun. Follow the path of pink, for example. Yes, in part it's red's advancement, but he links it with travel to India. Perhaps you could blame it all on Madonna and people going there with some new-found late-Nineties spiritualism and bringing pink fabric back. Soon, though, it starts to slip into the popular consciousness and take on a life of its own.

Indeed, forecasters are paying attention to travel and restaurants, careers, movies, even wars. After the Gulf War, Schulman recalls that everyone suddenly wanted khaki. Cooper contends you can find these changes by polling consumers, that they will tell you what they want and what they'll buy. It's a pragmatic approach, which makes sense if you think about the real reason to change colours on clothes is to sell more products. Who really needs another shirt or pair of trousers, or even a kettle? But if it's in that great new shade of apple green, wouldn't you possibly reconsider? As the Color Marketing Group's motto states, 'Color sells. . . and the *right* color sells better.' 'How many black or white shirts will the typical consumer at Macy's or Blooming's need?' says Schulman. 'They look at colour to augment their wardrobe.'

Others track these trends from the street, overturning the old logic that colour trickles down from couture. Now that youth culture is big, it goes up, too. Just remember combat trousers were big before Helmut and Miuccia went mad for strap-on pockets this past spring. Thus Jenkins publishes 'street books' of trends, popular with those diffusion-line designers, so they can know what the kids are up to. It's clear now that the power is with the people – only the people need guidance. Haeser promises a day in the not-so-distant future when people will hire colour consultants like they do interior designers and, in fact, in 2000 and 2001 Pantone is going to publish a consumer colour guide. It will give punters direction on how to pick and match different hues.

'People are overwhelmed by the choice, and right now is the window of

opportunity to show them how to start managing their lives in colour,' says Lisa Herbert, vice president of Pantone's textile division. 'They want colour,' she insists, 'they just don't know how to use it yet.' Everyone wants to know they're doing the right thing, making the correct choices, and that's why companies go to predictors. Mistry looks for confirmation of what he sees himself, so he knows he's on the right track. And when Woodhead gives seminars, she always couches her pronouncements by saying, 'I'm sure you know this already. But I'm here to reassure you,' in order to massage the egos of managing directors and marketing men.

Certainly, that need to know you're making the right decision can explain the long queue in a Paris suburb waiting for Li Edelkoort's colour seminar. This is Premier Vision and representatives from the fabric, auto, fashion and cosmetics industries all file into an auditorium to hear her pronouncements repeated every 45 minutes continuously for two to three days. They wait outside, looking each other up and down. No one will go on the record criticising Edelkoort, but one recent participant recalled her declaring, 'In the near future, I see Coca Cola taking over Pepsi Cola.' He could barely contain his laughter. Another mentioned her declaration this spring that 'it's all about green.' Edelkoort and her assistants were all dressed in matching headscarves and pinafores. She talked about apples, country and nature. Everyone in the audience scribbled and nodded. Then a series of slides were projected, interspersed with images of words lifted from her lecture and, when it was all over 15 minutes later, you were invited to eat apples. Others call her 'precious' and 'conceptual' and accuse her of being a 'diva', but she's had an iron hold on the industry.

However, instead of waiting in line, perhaps they should just look around them. That's what one forecaster says, pointing out of the window. It's always going to be about neutrals, he says. That's what sells. And stores like French Connection and Jigsaw just have 'fashion colours' because they have to seem cutting-edge. Indeed, instead of Paris, one should turn to northern New Jersey. There, Pantone annually compiles the list of the bestselling colours worldwide, breaking them down by region. For the past ten years, navy blue has been the most popular colour in Europe, the Americas and Asia. And, if indeed the consumer is king now, there will be blue in your future •

