

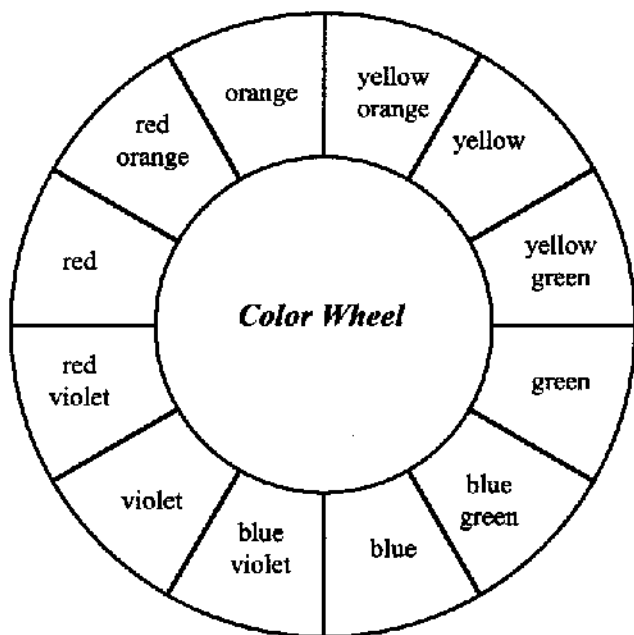
# Fabric Selection

How many times have you heard someone say, "I'm just not good with color!"? Maybe you've said this yourself. When I hear this my first thought is, I'll bet she can name the colors in the rainbow, and she would know how to mix paints in the primary colors to make orange, green, or purple. This is what color is. It's just that simple.

Now, I didn't say that fabric selection was that basic! Let me present a few concepts to consider.

## Color

You know the concept of a color wheel, primary colors, and the colors that are created when two primary colors are combined. All that's missing may be the confidence and skill to employ this knowledge.



Most anything goes with color combinations. Color schemes may be *monochrome*, *analogous*, *complimentary*, or a combination. It is not necessary that you concern yourself with the technical terms, just learn the basic ideas behind them.

## Monochrome

Monochrome simply means one color.

## Analogous

An analogous color scheme is one that uses colors that are next to each other on the color wheel, such as, blue, blue-violet, and violet. *Gemstones* is an example of an analogous color scheme that pushes the range to include additional colors on each end (green through red-violet). When using this color scheme, try not to have a big jump between two colors and very little between the next two, as you move around the color wheel. This is not an easy task when you are working with fabrics. That's where having a great fabric stash and access to a wonderful quilt shop come in handy.

## Complimentary

Colors that are across from each other on the color wheel develop a complimentary color scheme. Examples are: red and green; violet and yellow; and red-violet and yellow-green.

*Contrast* is an important term to know. Contrast between two colors can be described by how far apart they are on the color wheel. Complimentary colors, since they are across the wheel from each other, have the highest contrast between them. Colors next to each other are said to have low contrast. Fabrics can contrast in value, also. That is discussed later in the section on value.

## Triad

This is my term for three colors that are equidistant from each other on the color wheel. The most obvious example of what I mean is a primary color scheme; red, yellow, and blue. Look at *Snips and Snails* on page 24. The main color scheme for this quilt is a triad: yellow-green, blue-violet, and red-orange.

The color information presented above is just a starting place. Believe it or not, color is not very important to successful fabric selection. As I said earlier, anything you like is a good color combination. What makes fabric selection for a quilt successful is covered in the rest of this chapter.

## **Intensity**

Intensity refers to the pureness and clarity of the color. Intense colors are like those found in a box of eight crayons. A fabric that has less intensity is one that might be called “dusty”, such as, sage green, mauve, and colonial blue. Sometimes all that a fabric grouping needs is to replace a fabric with one that is not a different color, but more or less intense than the one currently being considered.

## **Value**

*The value of your fabrics is the most important single element in fabric selection!* Value is simply how light or dark the fabric is. It has nothing to do with color or intensity. **Contrast** in value means the difference between how light and how dark fabrics are *relative* to each other. Imagine a scale of zero to one hundred with white being at zero and black being at one hundred. All other values fall somewhere between them. Different values of color have interesting names. For instance, we don't often refer to colors as light or dark orange. Instead, they are peach or rust, respectively.

A high contrast collection of fabrics will include fabrics near both ends of the scale. A low contrast collection of fabrics will have a smaller range of values.

Since value is relative, the darkest fabric of a light quilt could be lighter than the lightest fabric in a dark quilt. Therefore, when a pattern asks you to select a light and a dark fabric, they do not have to be white and black. The yellows and periwinkles of *Step in Time* on page 23 are light to medium values, but the pattern calls them lights and darks just to remind you that there needs to be contrast. The amount of contrast is your decision.

When determining the value of a print fabric, don't just look at the background. The fact that a print is on a black background does not automatically make it the darkest fabric in your grouping.

### *Some suggestions for determining value:*

View your fabrics from a distance. Put them on a design wall and stand back, or place them at the bottom of a staircase, and view them from the top.

Make a Xerox copy of the actual fabrics. The black and white image removes the confusion of color and lets you focus on only the value.

Squint or remove your glasses. This may blur the pattern enough to read a fabric's value. Another thing you might try is looking through a camera lens, a peep hole for doors (These can be found at hardware stores, and they are easy to carry to class.), a reducing glass, or backwards through a pair of binoculars.

## **Visual Texture**

Have you seen a fabric that looks like it should feel fuzzy or bumpy? Consider the following things when selecting fabrics for visual texture: **Scale** (size of the printed figure); **spacing** (distance between the figures); and **style** (floral, geometric, novelty print, tone on tone, etc.). Using fabrics of the same scale or spacing may cause visual confusion. Choose a variety. Consider how you will treat directional fabrics. Ignore their prints or fuss with them. Be careful with your use of **solids**. The use of only one or two solid fabrics may draw too much attention to those pieces and lessen the impact of the overall design.

## **Proportion**

The proportions of colors is important. In general, a quilt will be more interesting if the colors are not used in equal amounts. Instead, let one color be more dominant, and use the others in smaller, not necessarily equal, proportions.

## **Lighting**

Consider the lighting when making your fabric choices, especially if you have a definite use in mind for the quilt. Will the quilt be used in an office where there is fluorescent lighting?; in a bedroom with soft lighting?; in a family room with southern exposure?; etc. Make your fabric selection in that lighting. Fabrics look much warmer in natural light. Value contrasts may need to be stronger if the lighting is lower.

## **Application of the Concepts**

So far I have told you about what to consider when selecting fabrics. Now, I'd like to give you some “hands on” ways for using this information. Try some of the following suggestions as you pull your fabric palette together for your next quilt.

## **Safe Fabric Palettes**

One almost “no fail” method of fabric selection is what I employ when designing my mystery quilt patterns. That is the idea of safe fabric palettes. Don't forget to use your basic tools - *intensity, value, visual texture, and proportion*. Once you have mastered these, push yourself to expand.

### **Traditional**

These are tried and true combinations that are always successful: indigo and white; red and green; red, white and blue; etc.

### **Theme**

Choose a theme for your fabrics. Examples of what I mean are: primary colors, jewel tones, seasonal (Halloween, Christmas, fall...), Victorian, tropical, plaid, etc. This list could go on forever.

### **Interior decorating**

Decorators often use the “rule of three.” They choose one floral, one geometric, and a solid or tone on tone. It is almost like “dressing your quilt.” In other words, choose your fabrics like you would select clothes to wear.

### **Control background**

I have often told quilters, “Practically any fabrics can be used together as long as you don't put them together.” Part of what I mean is that if the fabrics all float on a control background fabric, it will be hard to find fabrics that you just cannot use. Old scrap quilts are great examples of this.

## **At the Quilt Shop**

It's time to get serious and pull the fabrics for a quilt. I'll walk you through the steps like I do when helping a student select fabrics for class projects.

Probably the easiest way to approach fabric selection is with a *focus fabric*. Choose a fabric you like. This is not the time to worry about if it will work for the quilt, what other fabrics you will put with it, or anything else. Just find something that you like. Imagine that you found it, and it is a cream background with lots of green leaves and bits of lavender, gold, and pink in the flowers.

Now, analyze the fabric. Why are you attracted to it? What colors do you like in this fabric? Note the proportions, intensity, and values of the colors.

Begin *brainstorming*. Pull out fabrics that have even a remote chance of going into the quilt. *Stretch* the color, value, and intensity ranges as you gather fabrics. Ignore those cheater dots that are printed along the selvages of some fabrics. *Avoid the tendency to overmatch the colors!* Perhaps you like that print fabric we started with, but you really wish that it had peach flowers instead of pink ones. Pull peach fabrics. Set the peach fabrics next to the focus fabrics. Step back and take a look. Do the flowers now look peachy? On the other hand, if you liked the pink, but it seemed too washed out, what about using fuschia or burgundy?

Keep brainstorming! Don't make any final decisions until you've pulled dozens of fabrics. When looking at fabrics on the bolts, their proportions are almost equal. To help you imagine them in different proportions, stand them on end against a wall, layering them with the most important one, perhaps the focal print, in front. Arrange them so the fabrics that will be next to each other in the quilt are next to each other now. Expose larger amounts of fabrics that will be used often or in larger pieces and smaller amounts of those that will be used sparingly. If there are fat quarters available, use them for the small pieces in this “fabric audition”. Rearrange the bolts, studying how the fabrics look when placed next to a different fabric. Look at our imaginary focus fabric. Do you think that a little gold goes a long way? If so, there is no reason to add more by using a gold fabric. Concentrate more on the green, lavender, and pink.

It's time to begin *fine tuning* your selections. It is much easier to work from many fabrics, back toward the necessary number of fabrics, than it is to work from a few and reject each new one. During the first pass, get rid of any fabric that you just don't like. Do not force it into the quilt. Are you having trouble making a decision about two or more fabrics of the same color? Why use one when many will do the job? Using several will probably add more visual texture and interest.

Select neutrals or background fabric as needed for the quilt. Audition replacement or additional fabrics. Try stretching the color range a little more or replace one or two fabrics with ones with more intensity. Remember to consider value, visual texture, proportion, etc.

As you pare down the collection of fabrics, don't be surprised if one of the fabrics that gets dismissed happens to be the original focus fabric! It has done its job by creating a wonderful fabric palette, but somehow, it no longer has a role to play in the quilt.

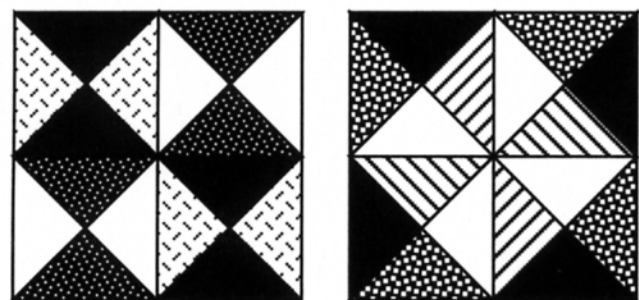
One of my best pieces of advice for fabric selection comes from an eighth grade English teacher. She was asked why she spent more than ten weeks teaching students to diagram sentences. After all, literary and grammatical rules are broken all the time for impact. Mrs. Finley promptly replied, "You have to know the rules in order to break them!" I have found the same in fabric selection for quilts. Knowing how and why fabrics behave as they do allows you to break the rules and design a more exciting quilt in the end.

If you have chosen a "safe" color scheme, and have gathered all of the perfect fabrics to accomplish that, you're now ready to do what Roberta Horton suggests. "Go in and mess it up a bit!" *Have some fun and add your personality to the quilt.*

## Placement of Fabrics

Look at the quilt on the back cover. It is a puzzle quilt. A puzzle quilt is a sampler which has two of each block. *Who Has the Old Maid?* happens to have an odd one, too, just like the card game.

When making a puzzle quilt, the idea is to use color and value to create two blocks of the same pattern that look completely different from each other.



Two versions of a Big Dipper block

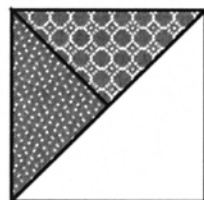
Using different colors for each block would make them look even less like the same block.

On page 16 there is an exercise for you to try your hand at this concept. Copy it for your personal use. Color the line drawings and try to create a block that looks different than those shown.

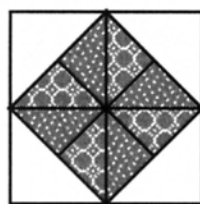
There are line drawings for all eighty blocks on pages 83 through 86. To see a traditional placement of values refer to the page where cutting and piecing instructions are given for that specific block (Chapter 4). You may copy pages 83 through 86 to use as coloring pages for designing your quilt.

If you choose to make a puzzle quilt, your fabric palette will need some fabrics that are close in color and value. Placing two similar fabrics next to each other in a block will suggest a different shape. I think it is cheating to sew two pieces of the same fabric together when one larger piece could have done the job.

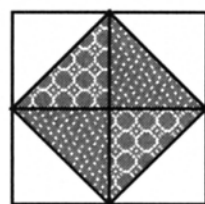
Consider the unit below. Two quarter-square triangles of similar values have been used to create an illusion of a half-square triangle.



The blocks below are two different patterns, but made with the same fabrics, and, at a glance, give the illusion of being the same block.

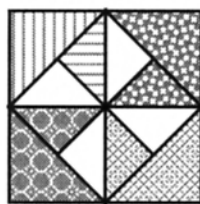


Pinwheel on Point



Broken Dishes

Now, look at the same two blocks with another fabric placement option for each.



Pinwheel on Point



Broken Dishes

This information is a chapter from the book, *Blocks and Quilts Everywhere!*, by Debbie Caffrey.

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