

Ralf Weber

Technische Universität Dresden, University Color Research and Teaching Collection, Department of Architecture
TU Dresden, Germany. farbe@mailbox.tu-dresden.de

The Influence of Colour Theory on 19th century Colour Composition in Garden and Landscape Design with a Cross-Disciplinary Exploration into Architecture and Painting.

This lecture explores the mutual relationship between colour theory, painting, and landscape design, with a brief excursion into architecture. I will argue that the compositional use of colour in landscape design was often not directly derived from contemporary colour theories, but rather from the compositional approaches of landscape painting—which, in turn, were shaped by the prevailing colour theories of their time. By contrast, architectural colour composition was more frequently dictated by the availability of regional pigments. Only in exceptional cases—such as certain religious or palatial structures—was colour theory explicitly applied, and even then, it was typically informed not by architectural theory, but by colour composition principles found in painting.

While treatises on painting and architecture were abundant from the Renaissance onward—and I will discuss a number of them in the introduction—writings specifically focused on garden design became more widespread only in the 19th century. Even then, these texts offered little in terms of colour theory or compositional guidance for park design and planting schemes. One of the earlier influential works was published by Count Hermann von Pückler, renowned for creating several landscape parks across Europe. In his seminal book *Andeutungen über Landschaftsgärtnerei* (1843), he outlines detailed principles for staging space in garden landscapes and includes numerous coloured illustrations and lithographs—yet he makes no mention of colour theory or the principles of colour composition.

Nevertheless, landscape architects have long drawn inspiration from contemporary colour theories. I will illustrate using Pückler as an example, as his garden designs were influenced by the painter Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich, in turn, was shaped by both German and British garden theorists, who themselves were deeply inspired by British landscape painters. In both Germany and Britain, colour theory played a significant role in artistic practice, as seen in the works of Goethe and Runge in Germany, and of artists like Turner and Hayter in England. I will trace this chain of mutual influence between painting and design through a number of examples and connect them to the dominant colour theories of their respective periods.

Particularly influential at the fin de siècle was the colour theory of Wilhelm Ostwald—a chemist, painter, and passionate gardener. His work contributed significantly to the development of a standardized system for colour measurement in garden design and plant breeding—tools that continue to be used by garden planners today.

At the end of the lecture, I will return to colour systems, summarising how they have been used in painting and shaped over time by the evolving needs of art. I will hypothesise about some of the reasons why the systematic application of color theory and compositional knowledge in architecture and landscape design has fallen out of favour and argue that colour theory can serve as a vital bridge connecting art, architecture, and landscape design.

At the end of the lecture, I will return to colour systems, summarising how they have been used in painting and shaped over time by the evolving needs of art. I will also offer some hypotheses as to why the systematic application of colour theory and compositional principles in architecture and landscape design has declined, and I will argue that colour theory holds the potential to serve as a vital bridge—reconnecting art, architecture, and landscape design.