

## Color in Dreams: A Scientist/Artist Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Jayne Gackenbach, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus in Psychology

MacEwan University

At the recent annual conference, I attended a paper session where color in dreams came up. It's a topic I'm often asked about when I teach courses on dreams. People ask do we dream in color? I typically answer well if I asked you what you had for breakfast today would color be part of your answer. Most often people say no. I point out that is the same process when we recall a dream. While color may be part of it, unless its a detailed recall and retelling, we typically don't mention it. Various scientists came up to the podium and pointed out how they don't often remember color in their dreams. Suddenly I realized that I very often have a key color in my dreams. I pointed this out and attributed it to my other major self hat, artist. When I mentioned color in my Jungian dream sessions my therapist always attended to it carefully. In this commentary, I'll briefly touch upon the science behind color in dreams, but my point here is to talk about my personal experience of color in dreams as it relates to the painting of the dream.

Hoss and <sup>i</sup> points out that laboratory dream studies have shown that while most dreams are in color (70% to 83%), only about 25% report colors in their dreams outside of the dream laboratory. This researcher makes a strong case that color has emotional association and that when something is colored in a dream it adds to the emotional impact of the item in the dream. This, of course, is well known in everything from dress to room decor while awake, so it's not very surprising that we see it in our mentation of the night. Hoss goes on to explain that observed colors condense with dream imagery in four ways: "amplify the emotional content of the dream image; compliments the associations within the image alone; color association sometimes revealed hidden meaning within the dream image; and sometimes colors appear outside of any object attachment seemingly to represent a general emotional environment associated with the dream story at that point." Finally, this dream researcher offers a dream color chart and a method of dream interpretation of colors in dreams in his website that may be useful to the reader.

### Current Study

I decided to examine the color in my own dreams from a one year period. My original inquiry was due to my thought that color in my dreams may be a related to my artistic endeavors. Thus, I picked a year where I did the most artwork based upon my dreams. In the year chosen, 2015, I compiled 210 dreams recorded over 154 days. The number of dreams recorded that

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<sup>1</sup> Gackenbach, J.I. (2018, September). *Color in Dreams: A Scientist/Artist Perspective*. Paper presented at psiberdream conference online for the International Association for the Study of Dreams.

year ranged from seven in April to 31 in October with a mean of about 17 dreams per month. Colors were mentioned 228 times in these 210 dreams. These colors are broken down in Table 1.

**Table 1: Colors mentioned in 2015 dreams**

Color	Number of Mentions of Each Color	Number & Percent in First Half of 2015 Dreams	Number & Percent in Second Half of 2015 Dreams
Black	43	13 – 30%	30 – 70%
Blond	5	0 – 0%	5 – 100%
Blue	15	6 – 40%	9 – 60%
Brown	13	5 – 38%	8 – 62%
Grey	19	11 – 58%	8 – 42%
Green	16	1 – 6%	15 – 94%
Mahogany*	1	0 – 0%	1 – 100%
Orange*	7	2 – 29%	5 – 71%
Pink	1	1 – 100%	0 – 0%
Purple	3	1 – 33%	2 – 67%
Red	31	11 – 35%	20 – 65%
Tan*	2	0 – 0%	2 – 100%
Turquoise	1	0 – 0%	1 – 100%
White	54	17 – 31%	37 – 69%
Yellow**	17	10 – 59%	7 – 41%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>78 – 34%</b>	<b>150 – 66%</b>

\*These words were used as a color description not as an object description.

\*\*Of the 10 yellow words identified in the first half seven were yellow ochre, while of the seven yellow words in the second half only one was yellow ochre. Yellow ochre is a muted, brownish yellow.

Most noteworthy of these color mentions was the high incidence of white and black relative to other colors, followed by red. As Hoss notes when I say black or white I mean that in the dream there was mention of the whiteness or blackness of an object or person or scene, rather than simply the oft observed “my dreams are in black and white”. Consistent with Hoss’s table of color meanings, there was a sense of endings and beginnings in the dreams of this year as well as a passion, i.e. red, for the experiences that year.

My purpose herein is to connect these colors to the waking art work that emerged from the dreams. While I only painted 26 of these 210 dreams they were chosen by me to illustrate due to their emotional impact and apparent relevance to my trying to understand this emotionally turbulent time. Thus, I will now turn my attention to these 26 paintings. As it turns out all but two of these occurred from June 26 to Dec 31. There was a four and half month gap between the first two dream paintings of the year and the remaining 24<sup>ii</sup>.

My purpose here is dream color, so I split the years dreams into these two sections and looked at color words in each half. This can be seen in Table 1. The dreams prior to June 26 had 11,987 words (37.5% of the years dreams) while those afterward had 19,922 (62.5%). While it appears

that here are more colored words in the second half of the 2015 dreams, when more painting dreams occurred, that difference simply echoes that there are more words in the second half. However, the time length of each half tells another story. The first half is 176 days (Jan. 1 to June 25, 2015) as is the second half (June 26 to Dec. 31, 2015) of the dream diary. In other words, in the same number of days there were more words and more colored words in the second half which was also associated with more painted dreams. Indeed, when I looked at the painted dreams alone, 81% had at least one color mentioned in the dream. I was not motivated to paint a dream due to a color in it, rather it was more about the emotion the dream was associated with or something about the images or my life circumstance that impelled me to paint it. Still it's interesting that painted choices were also associated with color mentions in the dream transcript.

I ask myself as I write this, why did I begin such feverish painting of dreams? There were a few earlier in the year and certainly ones after the end of 2015, but this seemed a focal point in my dream art. I should mention that creating artwork has been a passion of mine since childhood. I wanted to attend art school after high school but was discouraged by my father who felt that it would be harder to get a job. But my visually creative urge continued over all those years since this key employment decision was made. It ranged from making things for my children to gifts for friends to items to sell at craft shows. In retirement my creative urge has increased. While I always made time to paint, I now actually have more time and I am painting more. Despite this prodigious output of creative work, the focus on dreams in painting was/is rare and mostly contained in these few months.

Let me end this essay with a couple of color in dreams/painting examples from 2015. These dreams occurred within a few days of each other and seem to touch upon similar themes.

July 7 – 4:07 am

Dreamt I was in a big very fancy hotel and I was leaving, it was fancy in the old sense – I asked the clerk for the key to my suitcase and he gave it to me, I was a bit surprised that he did – I went outside down a fairly large and wide staircase, it was nighttime – then I got the bag, it was like the old fashioned suit bags – big and flat but with a zipper all around the sides – I took my cat and put him in the bag and started to zip it up on one side but the cat kept trying to get out, I pushed her back in and successfully zipped it around and once I had that done I saw my old cat Secret and was pleased and called to her either Calley (cat I had with tom when we separated) or Crackle (my real cat now) – in any case it was Secret visually – she was bigger than I recall and all stripes as I recall – she was a long haired cat – I went to scoop her up thinking to also put her in the bag, she was curled up among the plants at the end of the yard next to the driveway where I was working on the zipper bag which was a rich **tan** color.



July 13 - 10:23 am

Dreamt early morning about a one story house that was redone and all deep **brown** and clean edges- not sure why I'm picking that phrase but it seems to capture it – in any case the house was to my left and down a hillside in the dream and I was thinking about how will we get it to higher ground – I think there was a threat of a flood – I began walking along the hill top which was plowed field with the rows all very obvious, but also old dried up previous crop in **greyish** tone was underfoot as I walked- the rows were going across my path so I was walking from row to row and it was kinda wet and my feet kinda sucked into the ground but not very deep – I looked up to see where this was going thinking of a place for the redone house and it was hill after hill and I was partially blinded by the sun but saw slightly to my right a silhouette of a man sitting in a chair like he was waiting a few hills ahead – but I could only see him in my right visual field peripheral vision as center was blinded by strong sunlight





Following these two dreams and paintings I had a great session with my Jungian therapist. Here are some observations from my notes from that session. I worked the “blinded by the sun” dream and the “don’t let the cat out of the bag” dreams and paintings. I’m exhausted as I cried quite a lot at the one about my cat Secret. I remembered that Secret could always be held and just fell into the arms of the holder with no body tension. When I had her put down, she looked at me with lost, round, and pleading eyes. To this day it breaks my heart to think of that look from my cat, pleading with me to not have her killed. After dealing with my grief at possibly having Secret put down a bit too early, my therapist talked about cats being the feminine and how I may be trying to keep the secret of my feminine hidden. I need to let that cat out of the bag.

We then turned to the “blinded by the sun” dream/painting. I wondered does it represent “blinded by the SON”. Both my student, with whom I was emotionally close and was a son figure, and my actual son, came to mind. I had just seen my actual son’s film on euthanasia called “Hold Me” (<http://holdmethemovie.com/>). I talked about the strong transcendent experiences I had with each ‘son’. We further speculated that I wanted my dark brown, earthen, house to be raised up from the flood. I was often flooded by my unconscious during this period of my life. I had recently applied for phases retirement as I faced my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and was coming to understand that perhaps death is the next big ‘event’ in my life. In the dream, I am walking across the rows of the tiled field with both old dried up plants from last season, but it was also wet with promise for a new planting. What was ahead of me in my retirement years. While in the dream I’m moving towards the light, the obvious and cultural metaphor for death, but also blinded by it, i.e., sun or son. The son is now seated ahead and to the right in my peripheral vision. We thought that perhaps this was my creative and emotional side while I’m also seeing something transcendent ahead as I walk into the bright white light.

So now three years later I'm certainly much more seated in my creative side in these my early retirement years. The color in these dreams brought attention to key features, tan bag from which I was not to let the cat out of, and brown and grey's of the land and house I was trying to raise up out of the flood. These are earthen colors which seem to point to a groundedness to which I aspire as I enter this last section of life.

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<sup>i</sup> I want to acknowledge a great resource about dreaming in color which was created by IASD'er Bob Hoss at <http://dreamgate.com/dream/hoss/index.htm>. While I will briefly summarize some of what he has researched and summarized on his website, I recommend that the reader go to his website for more details.

<sup>ii</sup> Just prior to this painting of dreams binge, I did a series of dream quotes as images to understand the dreams from the first half of the year. In this series I noticed that there were a lot of animal dreams which were either wild or domesticated. Among the wild animals some were tamed and some were dangerous. Another theme was family and various negative emotions. These all of course point to an emotionally charged year and that was just the first half.