

Chapter Seventeen

Color and Seeing

I am fortunate to live in an area that experiences the drama of four distinct seasons. Occasionally I consider leaving the Midwest and moving to some place with little summer or little winter, but I know I would miss the allure of the color of the seasons. They each hold their own romance and majesty.

The world is filled with delicious colors that invigorate the soul. When it comes to color, nature has been my best teacher and mentor and most inspiring muse, and it is her audacity with color that I want dancing throughout my arrangements.

I was born in September. Perhaps that fact explains the great delight I take in the magnificent colors of nature's autumn tapestry. My spirits soar as I note even the slightest change in the leaves as they begin their transformation from forest green. I love the burgundy of oak leaves, and the maple's vibrant red, or the orange of bittersweet, the tan of cornstalks, and the deep brown of acorns. I want to wrap myself in the warmth of these colors as I prepare to settle in for winter.

But then I also revel in the colors Mother Nature dresses herself in as she bursts into spring. My heart dances with her as I see again the dainty purple crocus or the sun drop yellow daffodils. As spring is birthed and the earth is robed again in the rainbow, lilacs, roses, forsythia, red bud, iris, and dandelions gush forth with their color. Each color enters and takes its bow as it awakens from winter's sleep, and I also am reawakened.

Winter, too, holds my attention because during this season when there is less flamboyant color, I see the exquisite subtleties of nature's bones in the richness of the barren tree branches. I see the dusty brown of the sleeping grass and the dark, nearly black, green of the frozen ivy. When she chooses a mantle of snow, I love the combination of the white snow and vivid blue sky, as they fashion a fairy tale atmosphere against the muted and sleepy colors of Mother Nature's nightgown as she takes her winter's rest.

I love no less the intensity of summer's masquerade when the earth becomes a mirror reflecting back to the sun his intense radiance. As I look at the sunflower's gold, or the coneflowers deep purple, the sage's dusty blue, or the celosia's magenta, I nearly feel a slight burn as though the sun himself has touched my skin.

Like many flower arrangers, I learned about color combinations from the use of the color wheel. I was first introduced to this instrument in a high school art fundamentals class where we took the primary colors, red, blue, and yellow, plus white, and made charts with seventy-two colors. I was enthralled as the colors blended before my eyes. Then in flower school we worked with the color wheel as an aid in flower arranging. While the charts are helpful at times, such a cerebral approach to color is difficult for me to grasp. Oh, but in nature!!!

In nature each season has its distinct palette. I imagine Mother Nature standing before the mirror in her dressing room as she works with her frocks and changes from season to season. Those are the colors that communicate with my soul. And what I see is that the same colors flow from season to season, but their placement and intensity change. The colors that dressed the flowers in summer are now vividly present in the leaves of autumn. The colors of spring that were so light and airy become intense in the summer.

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The yellow that paraded through the jonquils in the spring becomes the gold in summer's sunflowers, and the amber in autumn's leaves and the umber in the winter remains of a harvested field.

When I go to nature for inspiration, the mundane becomes magical and the ordinary pulses with vitality. Often I have kicked a rock thinking it was nothing, but on closer examination it is a marvelous free form sculpture, with its shape and texture chiseled by millennia of existence.

As I follow nature's lead, fallen leaves in late autumn inspire an arrangement that captures the rich golden hues blended with a certain bleak emptiness. Those leaves that were high on the branches now rest on the ground, the lush green canopy now lies there, an amber blanket. However, beneath the leaves the green grass still peaks out and the many plants still maintain their leaves until winter's freeze.

I will begin my autumn arrangement with a dense layer of leather leaf, which reminds me of the rich forest ferns. Then, like the ground, I will cover that with a layer of autumn leaves. To echo the now-barren branches of the trees, I will place leafless branches radiating from the center. Bittersweet vining throughout the branches will complete the arrangement, which now speaks eloquently of the transitional nature of autumn as the earth moves from lush summer to sleepy winter.

Nature overflows with instruction. Her lessons come as we sit with her beauty and become the proverbial sponge soaking up her instruction and her inspiration. As we sit absorbing her lessons, we learn best if we look with soft eyes. Whether in a park, a garden, a field, a forest, by a river, in the mountains or on the plains, lessons occur anywhere we become reflective and receptive. Often as we hurry about our days we look without seeing, but when we sit with Mother Nature and view her with soft eyes, we begin to see differently, more fully.

Looking with soft eyes is nearly like squinting, but not at all tense; it is sleepy eyed yet totally aware. At this point our critical eye will go for a well-deserved rest. The critical eye is important because it deconstructs and allows us to see details. Effectively used it delineates those details and points out strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of improvement. But the critical eye can become a petty tyrant if allowed too much importance. With it in command nothing is ever good enough and everything is a stretch to unattainable perfection.

Soft eyes perceive the nuances of beauty and see with the tenderness of the heart like a lover gazing at his beloved. We live in a delicious world composed of sensuous, fluid layers, which, like waves, flow one into the other. When looking with soft eyes we see the layers and sense their flow, we see the whole rather than fragments, the composition rather than just the individual stems. Soft-eye viewing allows us to see the marriage between solids and space and to explore dimension.

Soft eyes guide our journey inward where we behold beauty and experience the pleasure of nature's seasonal palettes. These palettes are the celebration of moods through the many shades and tones of the rainbow. By looking at nature through soft eyes, we bathe our souls in her colors and dress our hearts in her frock and as floral artists we weave her tapestry through our arrangements.

The experience of creating art deliteralizes life. The meteorologist knows the speed of the wind but artists hear its melody; the technician depends on a color wheel, but an artist draws on the inspiration of nature's tapestry. As artists, we know dimensions not seen

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and give birth to expressions before unspoken. This is our foray into the mystical where we touch the sacred.