# Bringing Color Home

By John Russel Jones

**D**uring the Covid-19 pandemic, its subsequent lockdowns, quarantines, and the advent of the working-from-home phenomenon, we all learned lessons about the promises and perils of remote work. We're not necessarily free of Covid just yet, but as things begin to return to something like normal, we have all gained a newfound appreciation for a collaborative workplace. Impromptu meetings, desk-side chats, and water cooler gossip may now be appreciated as welcome reprieves, rather than annoying distractions. While nobody may have felt the impact of working in isolation more keenly than the creative community—particularly designers who rely so much on human interaction, on touching and feeling materials, and on truly experiencing color—the simple fact remains that hybrid office arrangements offer employees more control over child care, the ability to avoid the stress of commuting, and otherwise contribute to overall productivity and job satisfaction. Even before the pandemic, many creatives were hired as contractors or freelancers and worked from home offices or personal studios, and the realities of the modern supply chain mean that a designer may be working remotely from the color team, or even on the other side of the globe from manufacturing facilities where crucial decisions regarding materials, finishes, and color are made.

## Communicating Color

Like so much of the design process, the true challenge of color communication didn't really change all that much during the pandemic. The trick has always been to make sure that the particular hue that is inspiring a designer in one location—whether that's on vacation in some exotic locale, taken from a haute couture garment straight off the runways, or discovered in a scrapbook while on lockdown in a home office—is properly executed from design and throughout the supply chain to the final garment. Even subtle deviations in the representation of color in that process can make or break a collection, resulting in expensive corrections, or worse, massive markdowns.

As Tim Williams, of Color Solutions International (CSI), puts it, "You're not necessarily talking about just the design function. Other people in the brand communicate color. Particularly with a large retailer, it's very rare that a designer is communicating directly with a mill, or others in the supply chain. In the product development process, there's a color manager between the design and sourcing teams. When we talk about color communication, it may start with color selection in the design process, but that triggers a whole lot of other color communication all the way through to the person trying to actually formulate that color in the mill."

Fred Gliddon, sales and operations manager at Archroma Color Management, shared some of the challenges that are part of the design and production process. (Full disclosure: I worked on the Archroma Color Atlas public relations campaign from January through May of 2017, but have been a freelance writer, not associated with the brand, since then.) They include:

- Providing a wide selection of color choices to the designer.
- Making it easy for designers to find achievable colors.
- Creating an easy method to execute color vision, from inspiration to selection, then communicating selection properly, while ensuring that the color target is readily available and accessible throughout the supply chain.
- Incorporating a digital workflow into a physical workflow (particularly important to remote collaboration).
- Having access to information that helps the designer understand the achievability of color on multiple fabrics.

Of course, there are other issues, such as data organization and sharing. A brand's stance on sustainability can also be an issue: What might the impact be on the consumer, or the environment, based on the designer's color choice?

Williams points out that, particularly at the outset of Covid-19 in the United States, communicating color became a real issue, "Before the pandemic, even if designers didn't work in an office full-time, they would at least be able to have meetings where people could get together and look at physical color: Swatches, CADs,...everybody's process is different. Unless it's a small brand, color selection is usually a collaborative effort. Larger retailers will have a design space with color libraries, fabric swatches, and proper projection to look at things digitally. Suddenly a lot of the tools that teams relied on to come to an agreement on a

# "Tools are available for streamlining the whole process of color communication between the brand and its supply chain."

— **Fred Gliddon**,
Archroma Color Management

color palette were gone. All they had was a laptop, a monitor, and a Zoom call."

Sandy Johnson, also of CSI, adds, "Some of the big companies would also need feasibility information: would they even be able to execute those colors? Design and color teams working from home may not have had access to that information."

Many companies decided to move forward with colors from current or previous seasons, rather than risk making changes. "They literally carried over palettes, not making decisions, and not trying anything new because they weren't sure that it would be communicated properly," says Williams. "Particularly at the start of the pandemic, if they were at the point of making decisions, all of the information they needed was locked up in an office in midtown Manhattan."

## A Failure to Communicate

The initial chaos resulted in teams trying to figure out how to survive using video conference calls while sharing documents and images online, basically breaking all the rules of modern color communication. Critical buying and color decisions were being

made using substandard displays, using everything from a phone, to a laptop, to a tablet—PC or Mac—with many variations, and very little calibration.

As the pandemic continued, companies began to realize that they needed better ways to communicate. Those that were already using digital color throughout the supply chain fared better: They were able to collaborate on palettes because they already had digital color tools in place.

## Creating the Digital Tool Belt

Archroma began helping its clients standardize their color reference libraries nearly 20 years ago by creating customized, custom-engineered color standards. "While we do use Archroma-produced, globally available dyes on Engineered Color Standards, our colors are formulated in a manner that provides flexibility to the brand and its supply chain in that our colors can match with other dyes common to the industry. The 'Engineered Color Standard' (ECS) we developed consists of a physical swatch that can be seen, felt, and touched, and includes digital reflectance data, marrying the physical and visual representation of the color with the digital," says Gliddon."

Creating standardized references becomes the *lingua franca* of color communication, and each of the major players offers their version of a dictionary of color that standardizes the language companies use to transmit information throughout the supply chain. By choosing from the vast selections of color standards that any of these companies supply, a designer should be able to quickly and easily identify the specific hue they have in mind. Color, like beauty, however, is quite literally in the eye of the beholder, and truth is subjective. This is where science steps in.

Those ECSs became the building blocks of Archroma's Color Atlas, a series of books incorporating more than 5,760 in-stock standard colors that Archoma can provide to a brand's supply chain in any region of the world due to its global reach. To further aid their clients' design teams with remote working, Archroma has developed compact versions of both Color Atlas in both cotton and brand-specific custom color libraries in a convenient, economical format.

Similarly, Pantone's Matching System has been around since 1963, and, with over 10,000 color standards available across multiple materials, it's become a customary tool in the textile and apparel industry. The subsidiary of color measurement and management company X-Rite Inc., Pantone regularly introduces new colors to its collections to keep pace with color trends.

CSI's ColorWall Vue system contains 3,709 colors in four loose-leaf binders. CSI also offers personalized collections containing brand-specific Custom, ColorWall, and Color Library colors.

## Moving to the Digital World

The next move is, of course, moving from that physical world to the digital, and ensuring that everyone is referencing the same quality-controlled color samples.

In response to remote working and the combination of digital and physical workflows, Archroma launched its Archroma Color Ecosystem, a series of software solutions that have been developed to provide end-to-end solutions for color development. An open-access web-based platform offers digital access to all the colors in the Atlas, allowing designers to build and communicate palettes, which can then be shared with team members, suppliers, etc. A related app permits designers to upload images from a phone or tablet to the system, which will identify matching colors in the library. The system also offers a color development evaluation program, so a mill can evaluate lab dips to be sure that the color is matched before production begins, streamlining the entire process.

"Mills usually match on a small scale, having a brand approve color on a piecemeal basis," says Gliddon. "With this tool, we have a system that can streamline
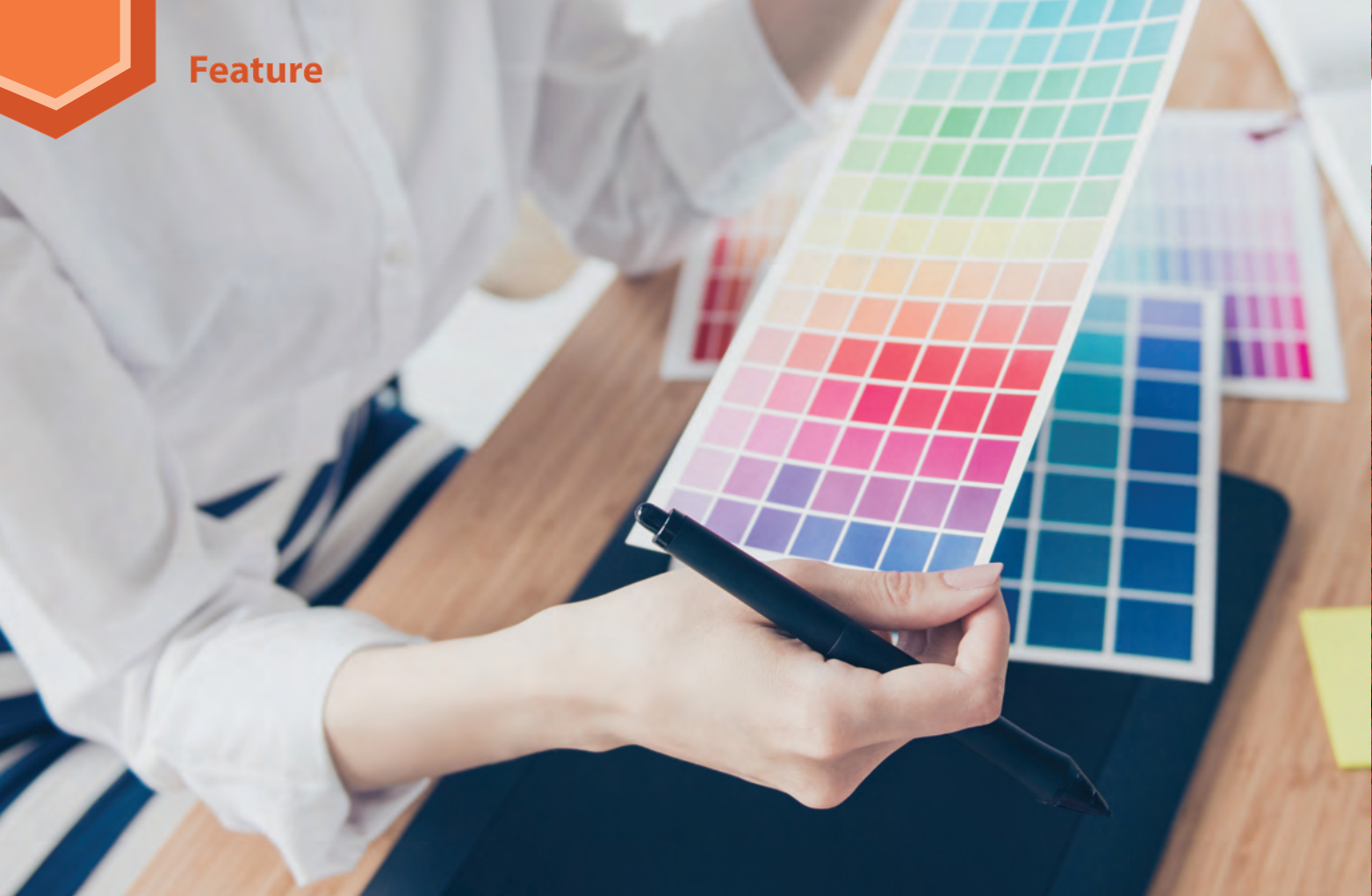
that whole process of communication between the brand and its supply chain. It eliminates a world of spreadsheets, emails, manual forms, digital attachments, and Post-it notes and brings that chaotic world of communicating color into one source of the truth, from color selection and palette setting through lab dip and what's going on in the mill."

Pantone offers Color Connect, bridging the Adobe Creative Cloud of design software products with Pantone's Color Match Card and Pantone Connect Mobile App for use on mobile phones to marry the digital and real worlds. All of Archroma's Atlas colors are also available to designers using Adobe .ase files for use in most 2D and 3D design software at no extra charge.

Palette Builder is CSI's digital palette management system, designed to accelerate the decision-making and communication process, incorporating search and palette creation functions. ColorFlow is its web-based color management system that is designed to manage lab dip color approvals and monitor color consistency throughout the supply chain, ensuring color accuracy, while offering analytics and reporting functions that monitor KPI's for approval and rejection rates by vendor, color, and/or fabrication, and monitoring consistency.

## An Eye for the Colorist's Eye

Rather than relying solely on one color professional's eyes to match the color from source material to a swatch in a book, there are also solutions where technology removes the chance for human error from the equation. Additionally, QR codes, data shortcuts, and state-of-the-art monitors help to make sure colors ring true.

Pantone's Capsure device is a portable handheld scanner that can be used to scan color from existing objects and then translate that color to the Pantone library. Similarly, CSI's ColorReaderPro is a portable search tool that can be used to match materials with the existing colors in your library. During the pandemic, CSI found that the device was much in demand for colorists working at home, as was its portable lightbox, which allows viewers to check samples under multiple light sources. Perhaps best of all, the lightbox can easily be folded and stored, so if the home office doubles as the dining room table, it's easy to get it out of the way when lunchtime rolls around.

Archroma has also updated its ECSs with an easily accessible QR code. A user can scan the code with a phone and be connected to all the information on achievability for that color. That data includes

whether the selection can be realized using sustainably responsible dyes and chemicals to ensure that a brand's sustainability goals can be reached.

The Pantone Validated (and PantoneSkinTone Validated) programs offer assurance that certain displays or printers are approved for accurate color representation based on, among other things, the proper temperature of white displayed on the screen. The company partnered with electronics corporation Samsung earlier this year making it the first HDR display manufacturer to participate in a program that allows display, TV, mobile device, and printer manufacturers to have devices tested and validated for authentically reproducing Pantone colors. Samsung's 2022 QLED models are the first HDR Displays to carry Pantone's seal of approval.

## The Home Office

Even with the right set of matching tools and a calibrated monitor, a designer will also have to be careful that the working environment is as neutral as possible. A video about the Pantone Validated system on its website points out that bright colors on walls or even on clothes can reflect in the monitor and throw off color rendition to the human eye, so keeping a neutral palette in the home workspace is critical. Of course, providing ideal lighting conditions is also key: colors

are best viewed under a 6500 degrees Kelvin light, the equivalent of daylight.

Designers have always been free thinkers, often hired as freelance talent, moving from project to project, and brand to brand. The challenges of the remote office existed before the pandemic and will continue to exist, especially now that many businesses have discovered that working-from-home or a hybrid model can offer their employees a better work-life balance.

A truly international—and increasingly digital—supply chain further clinches the idea that a standardized system of color communication that spans both the digital and physical worlds is a necessary requirement for the job. And the tools are now available to start the color communication conversation from home.

John Jones is a Jersey City, NJ, USA-based writer who enjoys covering design in all its forms, from fashion to architecture, interiors, and textiles; as well as men's style and grooming. When he's not herding cats with his husband, he can be found at the gym or hanging out in St. Augustine, FL, USA, the nation's oldest city. He's on all the socials: **@JohnRusselJones**