POSTERS AT A DISTANCE
EFFECT OF VARIOUS COLOR COMBINATIONS

BY PROF. DR. ALBRECHT

If an outdoor poster is to attract attention, its coloring must make it conspicuous at a distance. It was therefore a natural consequence that sometime or other someone should make experiments to determine the relative effectiveness of various color combinations at a certain distance. According to the "Courier du Livre", as reported in "Dekorativen Vorbildern", Munich, 1913, an English poster printing firm undertook the following experiment to test the long-distance effect of various color combinations.

A large wooden board, well in the sunlight, was set up at one end of a large field. On this board were fastened a succession of posters in various colors with varieties of text in varying colors. The texts used were partly extremely legible and partly difficult to read at a distance. Several persons tested the distance effects and the following scale was the result:

Furthest visible of all: black text on yellow paper. Next in order:

green	text on	white	paper
red	" "	"	"
blue	" "	"	"
white	" "	blue	"
black	" "	white	"
yellow	" "	black	"
white	" "	red	"
white	" "	green	"
red	" "	yellow	"
green	" "	red	"
red	" "	green	"

König in his "Reklame Psychologie", Vol II, p. 44, draws the following conclusions from this experiment: "The order of colors shows us that, generally speaking, dark print on light or white ground remains more legible at a distance than light-colored lettering on a dark background of any color. Contrary to everyday practice, we find that the black and white combination is considerably less legible than a number of other color combinations and that black text on a white ground is more discernible at a distance than white lettering on a black ground—a result which is also confirmed by Professor Harlow's experiments."

My students and I have submitted these results to the test, but under somewhat different preliminary conditions. It did not seem to me desirable to use lettering as a test of the long-distance effect of color combinations, since the influence of memory must detract from the objectivity of the judgments passed. The long distance effect of color combinations can be tested, in my opinion, only by splashes of color in combination with a geometrical form—the circle. I set up a wooden board on which a succession of round circles seven-eights of an inch in diameter were mounted on a paper background of various colors and six persons then determined the color of the circle on its colored background, the colors and distance from the eye being constantly varied. This seemed to me to guarantee a perfectly objective test.

We came to a surprising result, very different from anything as yet known to the literature of advertising. The best long-distance effect was not achieved by black on yellow, but by white on black: this nullifies the conclusions arrived at by König, based upon the English experiment. According to our results, the use of light colors on a dark background is more effective at a distance than the contrary combination.

What is true of text applies still more forcibly to pictorial effects. It is particularly important for posters in which photography or composite photographic effects are employed. Everyone can make the experiment for himself and convince himself that the superimposition of light upon dark is more effective than the contrary at a long distance.

Whether statistics prove that the practical artist is apt to choose other color combinations or not, is of no importance for our investigations. He is not considering the long-distance effect in the first place, rather the color harmony itself. One more point must be particularly stressed from the standpoint of practical propaganda in its technical aspect. A poster is never seen alone on a wall or advertising pillar, but in company with several others. However striking its individual effect may be at a distance, if the others are equally effective it simply vanishes in the mass. In advertising, the one fundamental law must be observed; be different from the others. This fundamental law can never be upset by the most elaborate experiment. Trans. by E. T. S.