

The Munsell Color System

A Vibrant History and a Lasting Legacy



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Every time an archaeologist discovers even the smallest of artifacts, like a piece of pottery, a few beads, or some bone fragments, they’re able to weave together a story about how people lived in the centuries before us. Most of these incredible stories were unearthed by color — specifically, by a color standard devised by a man named Albert H. Munsell.

What is the Munsell Color System?

Driven by a passion to communicate color in an objective, non-emotional way, much like how musical notes communicate a specific melody, Munsell began working on color theory in the late 1800s. It was a science that was virtually untapped, and in 1905, Munsell released a color system based on three dimensions: hue (the color itself), value (the lightness or darkness of the color), and chroma (the saturation or brilliance of the color). By assigning a numerical scale to each of these dimensions, Munsell’s system



created a standard for accurately identifying colors and defining how different colors relate to each other.



A World Forever Changed

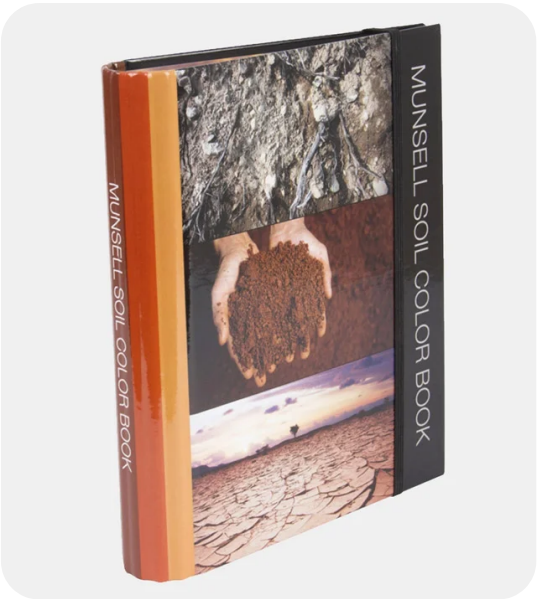
Munsell’s System in Action

Munsell’s groundbreaking work quickly gained international acceptance and is still the standard today for regulatory bodies around the world. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) uses Munsell’s system to accurately grade and measure food so that only the safest, ripest crops make it onto store shelves. It’s also the National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA) color standard for electrical wires, cables, and components. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) uses it to define skin and hair color in forensic pathology. Dentists use Munsell’s system to select the right color for tooth restorations, and brewers use it to match beer color. Munsell even has an impact every time you get in your car because his system determines the “right” red for stop signs and the “correct” green for highway direction signs.

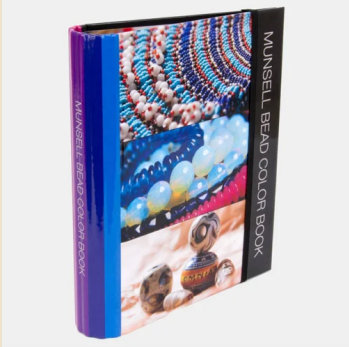
Digging Up the Stories of the Past

In addition to food safety, the USDA has another giant use for Munsell’s system: soil color standardization. Contrary to popular belief, it’s not the pottery or bones themselves that tell a story hundreds or thousands of years later — it’s actually the soil that surrounds them. Brown isn’t just brown. The lightness, darkness, and gray or black infiltration give archaeologists critical information about different time periods, human activities, and natural events. That’s why the Munsell Soil Color Book has been an archaeological staple for over 60 years.

But don’t stop there. Dig even deeper into nature’s untold stories with the Munsell Plant Tissue Color Book and the Munsell Rock Color Book, which tell you even more about the past and present of our ecosystem.



Other Invigorating Ways to Communicate Through Munsell’s Color Standard



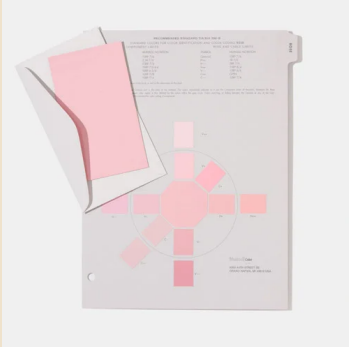
Take a fresh spin on bead-inspired designs with the Munsell Bead Color Book, which has 176 color charts to compare beads in the field.

SHOP NOW



Want to tell a story in 37 shades of gray? Grab the Munsell Neutral Color Scale in Glossy and Matte.

SHOP NOW



Or, head to the other end of the spectrum with Munsell Coding Charts in Rose and Aqua.

SHOP NOW



Make color come alive in exciting new ways by harnessing the complexities of color physics explained in the Munsell Interactive Learning Kit.

SHOP NOW

Munsell’s Lasting Legacy on Us All

There are few tools that can shape the work of the most scientific minds and the most creative visionaries, but Munsell’s color system is one of them. It has enough structure and precision for scientists yet it is simple enough for artists with no scientific background to match and compare colors.

While others have tried to out-color Munsell, no one has built a more precise — or more accepted — standard. Since 1917, the Munsell Color Company has carried on his mission of improving color communication, education, and service. Today, the Munsell Color Company is owned by X Rite, the same company that owns Pantone. We’re grateful for his work because it set the stage for the color calibration and matching techniques we use today across fashion, interiors, graphic design, and more.

In other words, we live in a much more vibrant world because of Albert H. Munsell.

Best Sellers

