



SEEING

No hue conjures more varied reactions than the color red. We take a look at the historical, psychological and emotional relationships we have with this versatile shade.

by Steven Heller

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HEN ANGER TURNS TO FURY, do you see red? Probably not. “Seeing red” is merely a metaphor. It vividly describes rage, but unless you’re predisposed to Rosacea, a skin condition that dilates blood vessels, ocular chromatic changes aren’t triggered even by as intense a human emotion as rage. “Seeing red” is just clever wordplay that colors the way we think of anger. Red is an intensely powerful modifier.

Is it possible to be caught literally red-handed? Maybe, if you were stealing from farmer McGregor’s strawberry patch, but otherwise, guilt doesn’t physically alter hand color. Nonetheless, this figure of speech refers back to a time when being discovered with blood on one’s hands after committing a violent criminal act was a sure sign of guilt. Few colors can be more vivid than blood red. Red has more literal references than any



other color, and greater symbolic power—good and bad—than any other hue, including black. Just consider some of the most common associations: blood, death, revolution, love, sex, envy, heat and fire. Red hot is the most intense of heats. Redneck is the lowest of social classes. A red flag is the anticipation of trouble. Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer is first among reindeers. Then there's the Red Light District, woman in red, Little Red Riding Hood, red devil and red state.

A red line suggests racial profiling and discrimination, while a red cross is symbolic of emergency medical service. The red shield of The Salvation Army represents “the blood which was shed by Jesus for our sins.” Red signs are the most visible and powerful on the road. Red pen means deletion, while a red letter day,

derived from Medieval times when church calendars announced holy days in red, marks a special occasion.

My son went to the Little Red Schoolhouse for lower and middle school. Red schools came into parlance after log buildings were phased out and sawed weatherboard siding was painted red for protection from the elements.

RED IS A VOLATILE COLOR

Giuseppe Garibaldi, who famously fought for Italian independence from Napoleonic rule in the nineteenth century, had all his fighters dress in the *camicia rossa*. They were called Redshirts—the living symbols of rebellion and unification.

On a more sinister note, Adolf Hitler wrote in his memoir “*Mein Kampf*,” “We chose red for our posters, since it is vivid and was the color that most aroused our opponents. It forced them to notice and remember us.” He borrowed the color from the Soviet flag or “red banner,” which paid homage to the red flag of the 1871 Paris Commune. The communist red flag represents the blood shed in the war for emancipation from the Russian czar. Red has long been a positive Russian color; the

Russian word for red, “*krasny*,” is related to the word for beautiful, “*krasivyy*.”

In China, red symbolizes good fortune and joy, and is found on banners and posters galore. George Washington is thought to have taken red for the American flag from the British colors (Red Coats), but the white stripes signified the secession from the home country.

RED IS A JOYFUL COLOR

“I love red so much that I almost want to paint everything red,” said Alexander Calder, an American sculptor and the originator of the mobile. Frank Lloyd Wright used red as the color of the square signature tile he placed on the houses he designed and built during the 1930s.

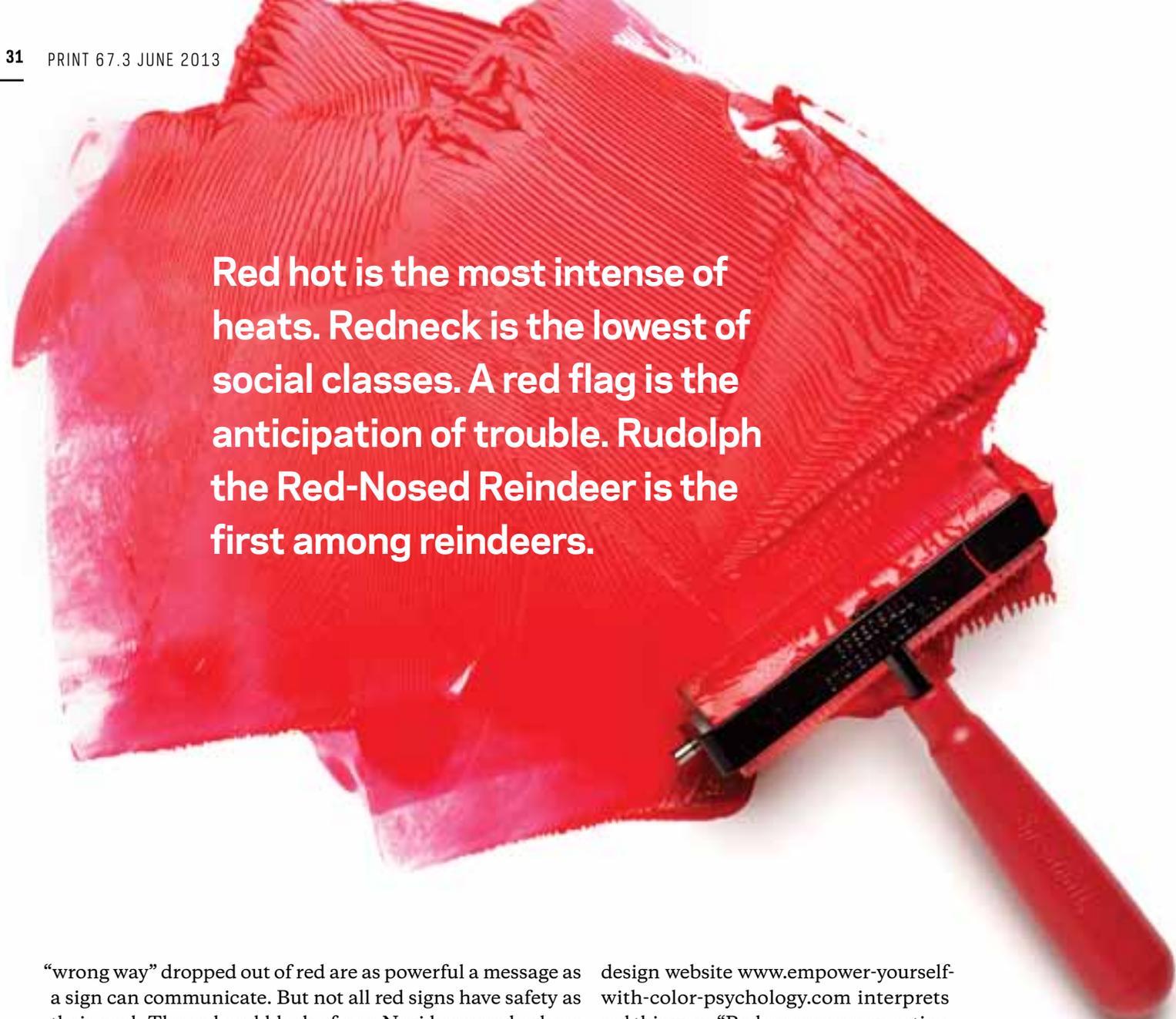
“Where I got the color red—to be sure, I just don’t know,” Henri Matisse once remarked about his beautiful painting “*The Red Studio*.” “I find that all these things ... only become what they are to me when I see them together with the color red.” Pablo Picasso, however, famously said, “If I don’t have red, I use blue.”

RED IS A DOMINANT COLOR

Most artists and designers aren’t as cavalier about red as Picasso was. The primary Bauhaus colors were red, yellow and blue, but red was the most iconic, along with black. “*ReD*” (*Revue Devětsilu* 1927 to 1931) was the title of the Czech avant garde magazine edited by Karel Teige, which often used red ink for its mnemonics and visibility. And El Lissitzky famously “Beat the Whites With the Red Wedge” in his 1919 lithographic Soviet propaganda poster.

RED IS A DANGEROUS COLOR

Think “red alert” or “code red.” It’s a cautionary color warning against threatened danger. The universal stop sign need not have any type on it as long as red fills its octagonal shape. The bold letters of a



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“wrong way” dropped out of red are as powerful a message as a sign can communicate. But not all red signs have safety as their goal. The red and black of neo-Nazi banners harkens back to the Fascist era when red and evil were synonymous.

But red is not owned by one group alone. Thailand’s 2010 anti-military junta protesters belonging to The National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship were issued red shirts (and called Red Shirts, too) as a sign of solidarity.

NOT ALL RED IS CREATED EQUAL

Art educator Josef Albers noted, “If one says ‘red’ and there are 50 people listening, it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different.” There are many different kinds: Imperial Red, Ruby Red, Rusty Red, Fire Engine Red, Barn Red or Crimson. Lipstick red comes in even more alluring shades. Was *The Scarlet Letter* any of these or its own shade of persecution? Incidentally, red hair is really orange. Red wine is made from dark-colored grapes.

Every color has applied significance invented by man but given mystical and psychological significance. The package

design website www.empower-yourself-with-color-psychology.com interprets red this way: “Red means energy, action, passion, excitement and strength. ... Dark reds are perceived as professional and luxurious, while bright reds are more exciting and energetic and generally of lower perceived value than dark reds. ... Blue-reds are more attractive to the upperclass market, while orange reds are attractive to the working class—orange reds have a lower perceived price and value. But adding black decoration to your red packaging can add sexual or adult connotations.”

If everyone sees red differently, then what is the real red? Red is good. Red is bad. Red is power. Red is love. Red is warmth. Red is evil. Red is Santa. Red is the Devil. Red is a color about which everyone has an opinion. ■