
Colour me clueless

By Cindy Wolff

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As my husband and I recently drove back from a North Carolina doughnut shop with treats and coffee for the family we were vacationing with, he asked, "What's this?" as he slid his hand into my shirt pocket.

It might have seemed like a dumb question if the pocket wasn't on my back on my right shoulder. Once again, I'd put something on backwards.

Another coffee stain on my fashion prowess.

For most of my life, I've been a mess. My criteria for new clothes: on sale and in my size. Forget color, hemlines, necklines. I can't tell you a scoop neck from a boat neck. I am often found with shirts on wrong-side out, colors mismatched or fabrics worn in the wrong season.

Nuance in color is lost on me. People will say a pink has too much yellow in it, and I squint at the fabric like I'm looking at one of those pictures hidden in a mosaic.

I wore shirts with big feathery sleeves and a little ruffle until my husband called me Prince. When ponchos came back in style, I wore a few until someone reminded me that unless you are thin, most people look like Mama Cass in one.

I drew the line at sweaters embroidered with jack-o'-lanterns or candy canes and pants with prints or stripes, but beyond that, my wardrobe was just a hodgepodge of clearance items hung on wire hangers.

But that changed recently after I lost a lot of weight and began showing the definite sign of a waistline. I bought a few pieces with the help of image consultant Jane Curtis at Stein Mart, who taught me about trumpet skirts and hemlines. But fashion editor Barbara Bradley said I needed more. Along with pap smears, mammograms and color woven in my hair, what I needed was a color analysis.

She led me to image consultant Carolyn Bendall, president of The Fashion Academy (fashionacademy.net), who happened to be teaching a class on the subject for Continuing Education at the University of Memphis.

There were only four other women in the class, which made me wonder if everyone else had already been analyzed or if they were walking around in hot pink as clueless as I was.

Bendall showed us several place mats in various shades of brown. Every skin tone under the sun was on one of those mats, she said. They are "idiot proof" unless you're a heavy smoker, undergoing chemotherapy or have liver problems.

The Fashion Academy system allowed for nuances in skin tone and personality not found in the old formula, which labeled you either winter, spring, summer or fall.

One by one, she called us up and stuck the cards beside our face. She searched the edge of the cards, which showed eye colors, then used them to find our skin tone. She battled between two cards for me before deciding that I was definitely a "warm golden."

She then passed us out a checkbook-size folder with our color -- oops, "colour" -- palettes. I tried hard to find my match with the pink, olive print shirt I was wearing.

It's not your shade, she told me as others in the room nodded in agreement. I had bought this shirt just a few months ago, as I made a mental note to toss it.

I flipped through my book looking for my staples, my blacks, my browns. They weren't there.

Your black is a charcoal, Bendall explained, as she covered the bottom of a color blob to show the darker tip. My brown was milk chocolate, not the dark chocolate that filled my closet. At least denim blue was on the card, so I could still wear jeans.

We talked a bit about personality and how that will fit into the style of clothes we buy. I decided my personality is a natural/romantic, which means don't put me in a fancy dress and high heels and expect Cinderella to glide across a room. I'm more at home in comfy clothes.

We're going to talk about lines at our next session, so last week I weeded my closet simply by colors. I held my palette against the clothes in my closet. My orange was too orange, my pink not baby enough. I found two shirts that would work. The rest would have to go. There was nary a parsley, apple or lettuce green to be found. No daisy or daffodil yellow, no marigold or nasturtium.

I realized that I was no longer free to scour the clearance rack. I would be forever bound to this little book of colors, a road map to fashion sense that worked as long as I wear clothes right-side out.

