A Biographical Note on Faber Birren

By Robert C. Kaufmann

Both heredity and environment acted to embroil Faber Birren in the world of color. Born 21 September 1900, Mr. Birren is the son of Joseph Birren, the noted Chicago artist, and grew up there in an atmosphere of art. He painted early, including murals in his family's home, and while attending secondary school he also took classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he studied life drawing and painting.

Birren's plans to study education at the University of Chicago, where he entered in 1920, were changed by his already advanced interest in color. After two years of study at Chicago, he stopped his university studies and, because no colleges or universities offered instruction, he developed his own program of study. This constituted a reading program on all facets of color and light and at this time he began his long contacts with psychologists, physicists, and ophthalmologists in America and abroad. He also entered a period of experimentation to prove or debunk some old conceptions of color, among them, painting his room vermillion to find out the truth or fallacy in "paint the dungeon red and drive the prisoner mad." He supported himself in the publishing field and by writing journal articles on color. In 1934 he established his own company and as an industrial color consultant advised companies on color for safety, sales, staff morale, and image. One of his first jobs of importance was changing the color of billiard table tops from green, which women associated with not quite respectable billiard parlors, to a purplish tone, so that the sales of billiard tables for home use soared. Other manufacturers became interested in Birren's work and a number of other jobs followed, many of them in the field of color engineering in factories. Birren changed the color of walls in order to reduce eye fatigue, painted machinery bright colors to reduce accidents because of vision, reduced glare and sharp light contrast so that workers were not momentarily blinded by transitions from dark to light areas or vice versa, and his color schemes reduced accidents. During this period the Birren offices moved from Chicago to New York because much of the work was being done there.
In cooperation with the E. I. du Pont de Nemours Company, Birren worked out, in 1944, a master color safety code for business and industry. Replacing red, which had heretofore been the only color to denote danger, was a range of colors identified with certain safety factors: yellow for stumbling, falling, or strike-against hazards, orange for cutting, brushing, burn, or shock possibilities, blue for caution, green for first-aid equipment, etc. This code is credited with reducing accidents by the Armed Services Forces from 46.14 to 5.58 per thousand. During the War Birren developed a color scheme for the United States Navy which has been described as the “largest single color-coordination job ever taken.” He planned a color specification plan for every single item and structure found on naval shore establishments, including clothing. He developed color standards for the Coast Guard and the Navy. He was sent to the World Congress on Accident Prevention in Rome and lectured in Italy on his work there.

The 1960s show a continuation of Faber Birren’s activities in the field of color, including a spurt of publishing activities. In 1963 he began a program for republishing historic landmark texts on color with a facsimile edition of Moses Harris’s *The Natural System of Colours* (1766) with annotations and notes. Other volumes edited by Birren and books by him not already included in the Birren Collection are listed below. For a number of years now most of Birren’s work has been done from an office in Stamford, Connecticut, where he has made his residence for twenty-five years. He is a member of the board of the Stamford Art Association and has lectured at the Ferguson Library in Stamford and at the Yale University Art Gallery in their 1973 series on color.

Faber Birren has a long publishing record, and has written books and articles (now several hundred) on almost all aspects of color. In addition, he has edited historic texts on color, and in this he is a pioneer. A list follows of the monographs he has written and edited not already included in the Birren Collection.

**MONOGRAPHS:**

The Printer’s Art of Color (1934), Functional Color (1937), The Wonderful Wonders of Red-Yellow-Blue (1937), Color in Mod-
The Faber Birren Collection on Color


EDITED TEXTS: