Colour Communication

Describing colour is a difficult business.

As humans we do not have a particularly well developed colour language.

If you've ever tried to accurately describe a colour to someone, then you'll know just how tricky it is.

Clear and accurate colour communication is essential within the colour using industries so, as our everyday language is insufficient, we need a different way of describing colours.

Most descriptive systems agree on three key attributes of colour, but the names for these attributes vary from one industry to the next. The most recognised method for describing colour is the Munsell system which uses the terms hue, value and chroma.

- Hue - the basic colour

- Value – the lightness of the colour (in paint terms adding black or white to the colour) so sometimes called lightness or brightness.

- Chroma – the intensity or saturation of the colour. The degree of departure from the equivalent neutral shade. This is sometimes called saturation.

Other colour order systems you may come across include the

- Natural Colour System, or NCS, and

- CIE l,a,b space or CIELAB.

Each system has its advantages and disadvantages, but they all have the same aim of helping with colour communication.

Colours can also be described in terms of the mixture required to make them.

- Amounts of red, green and blue for on screen colours - RGB . Additive colour mixing.

- Amounts of cyan, magenta and yellow (and possibly black) for printed colours – CMYK. Subtractive colour mixing.

We can also measure the light that a colour reflects and use that to describe the colour. These "Reflectance curves" can also be a useful visual illustration of a colour.

All in all there are plenty of ways that can be used to clearly and accurately describe and communicate colour.