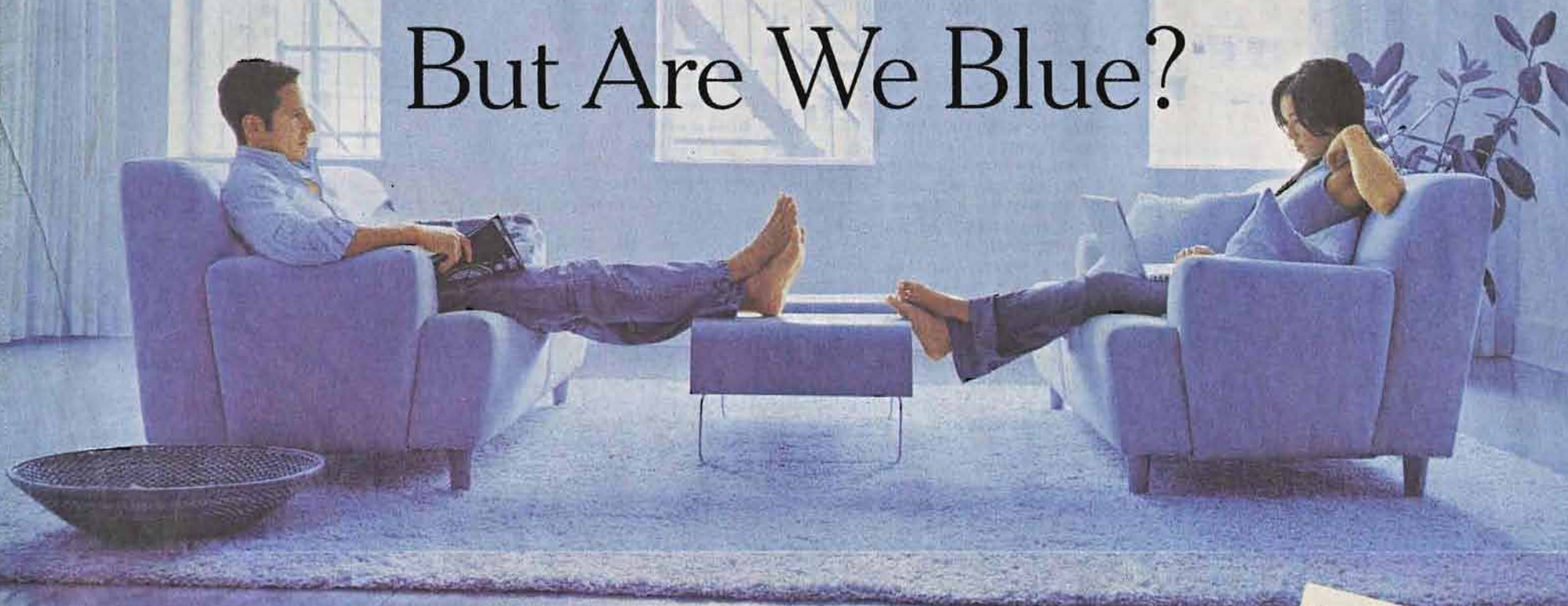


The New York Times

A New Year, A New Color. But Are We Blue?



PANTONE®
18-3943 TCX
Blue Iris

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18-3943 TCX
Blue Iris

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Soul-searching
the 21st-century
rainbow to
find the
perfect hue.

By CATHY HORYN

At least one color authority, Pantone, has taken the plunge and announced its favorite color for 2008. To be sure, this news doesn't seem as delectable as People's Sexiest Man Alive or as snugly affirming as Time's Person of the Year. You probably did not even know that chili pepper red was the color for 2007.

Nonetheless, Pantone's choice of blue iris, or No. 18-3943, got some news media attention last week, which seemed to be partly the objective of the company, which is based in Carlstadt, N.J. In a statement, Leatrice Eiseman, the executive director of the Pantone Color Institute, said: "Blue Iris brings together the dependable aspects of blue, underscored by a strong, soul-searching pur-

ple cast. Emotionally, it is anchoring and meditative with a touch of magic."

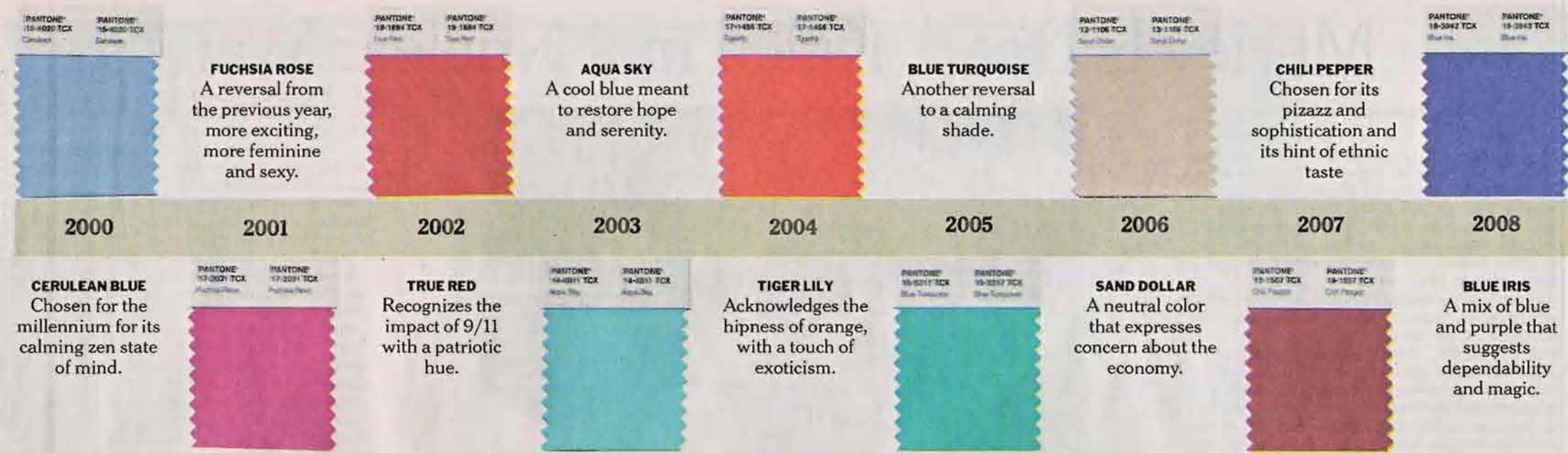
Later, in a telephone interview, Ms. Eiseman said the selection process had been very thoughtful, based on various influences, and that indeed the final choice reflected a "need for thoughtfulness." Five individuals were involved in the selection process. "With blue iris, we felt that it answered several needs, hopes, desires, that kind of thing," she said.

If that strikes you as hazy, you're not alone. "It's a little bit on the funny side," said Micha Riss, the creative director of Flying Machine, a branding and design firm in New York, whose clients

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BLUE IRIS IS IT

If you got to pick, shocking chartreuse might be in, but you didn't get to, now did you?



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include ESPN and Sky Italia. "I respect Pantone a lot, but I see them as a technical service. If Helmut Lang were to make such a projection, I would listen."

Mr. Lang is, alas, no longer making clothes. Still, designers of his caliber tend to avoid such industrial predictions, on the ground that it leaves them less room to exert their particular influence. After all, where would the world be without Miuccia Prada's beautification of ugly brown, Tom Ford's elevation of candy-floss lilac? If a fashion label can be said to own a color, then shocking pink belongs to Schiaparelli. Red is to Valentino what orange is to Tide.

The higher-ups in fashion tend to profess a horror of predictions, anyway. It's so prosaic, like In and Out lists. As Alber Elbaz, the designer at Lanvin, characterized the shortcomings of forecasts, in a call to his Paris office: "We think we can read 'How to Become a Millionaire' or 'Find a Gorgeous Husband in Three Weeks,' but a book is a book. We have to go with intuition." He

A light green called bamboo could have been a contender.

said forecasts are for the mass market, for retailers and manufacturers who want to be sure they have enough blue sweaters in stock next winter.

Pantone provides standardized palettes for a number of industries, mainly graphics, fashion textiles and interior design. Not surprisingly, Pantone's competitors in the area of forecasting are skeptical of its choice, if not the motive behind it.

"It's very good for publicity, and it certainly shows a lot of bravado," said Margaret Walch, the director of the Color Association, a forecasting group founded in 1915, when the vast majority of its members were milliners, glove makers and hosiery suppliers. Because consumer tastes and values are under a variety of influences — economic, environmental, global — anointing one color isn't all that meaningful, she said. Is there a color she might have picked instead? Ms. Walch laughed lightly, as if to say, "O.K., I'll play along." She answered, "My color for 2008 is bamboo." A yellowed green, chosen from the association's interior palette, she said, it "represents the stable green that is most on people's minds." She said it's similar to a hue called Vineyard, adding: "I feel it just has a power. You know, these are very insecure times."

Before you have a complete freak-out and crawl into your bamboo-colored hole to await the purple dawn, let's pause and consider a few things. There has indeed been a surge of blue on the runways in the last year, beginning last February with Raf Simons's dresses and pantsuits, in an Yves Klein blue, for Jil Sander and extending into the spring 2008 collections with Nicolas Ghesquiere's explosive floral prints for Balenciaga. Mr. Elbaz



used a deep lagoon blue in his spring Lanvin show, and one found lighter but no less robust shades in collections by Marni and Chloé, and in the men's lines of Prada and Alexander McQueen. Dolce & Gabbana called its new fragrance Light Blue. And JWT, the advertising and marketing company, just named blue as one of the top 10 trends for 2008, saying that "blue is the new green," particularly as it denotes ecological concerns.

"I'm thrilled," Terron Schaefer, senior vice president of marketing at Saks Fifth Avenue, said of the blue news. This fall, Mr. Schaefer worked with an Am-



FOR 2008
Clockwise from upper left, designs from the new collections of Balenciaga, Nina Ricci, Jil Sander and Carolina Herrera.

sterdam-based designer, Pete Paris, on new shopping bags for the spring. As it happens, the bags have a large element of a watery blue.

Ms. Eiseman of the Color Institute said she gathers information from various sources, including trade shows like the influential Milan furniture fair. From a marketing standpoint, there's plenty of reason to think that blue may have eclipsed green.

"I think green is being abused to death," said Regis Pean, creative director of Studio Red, a branding and design division of the Rockwell Group, which works with companies like Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Procter & Gamble. "Everybody wants to be green." (Notably, Barneys New York, which is promoting a "green Christmas.") For educated

consumers, Mr. Pean said, the overuse of green in marketing is increasingly a turn-off.

There is no doubt that color influences consumer choices, whether it's as durable as a Tiffany blue box, as sharp and crystal clear as an Apple store, or as seasonal (and socially attuned) as Gap's Red campaign.

"What if Coke decided to become green?" said Leslie Singer, the president and chief creative officer of G2 Branding & Design. Well, for one thing, the public would lose a prime visual signpost in the supermarket. "Color drives the way you navigate through a store," Mr. Pean said, pointing out that stores employ what's called an r and K strategy, based on a mathematical equation. Either they flood an aisle with a block of color or they go for selective, standout placement.

As Ms. Singer points out, heritage brands like Coke and Burberry aren't really affected by color forecasts. They already have a look and a palette: why confuse matters? For fashion designers the concerns are different. Mr. Elbaz says a color can look one way in a swatch, another in a bolt of cloth, and still another when you cut into it. "There are three stages and each is different," said Mr. Elbaz, who finds that some of his best colors come from cosmetics — "because they've been tested on the face."

Paradoxically, fashion may not be as responsible for stimulating interest in color as other creative fields — architecture, furniture design and technology. "In the fashion business, we're a bit dead at the moment because we sold out to bling," said David Shah, a clothing maker and a forecaster based in Amsterdam, whose View publishing company produces magazines on color and retail trends (including one for Pantone). "The architects and the furniture designers are the new sexy ones."

Nonetheless, all these creative forces, along with a desire to have more humor, will feed demand for color, Mr. Shah predicted. "Color is now seen as an item of luxury," he said. Yes, like an orange Hermès box, or a once-humble box of chocolates.