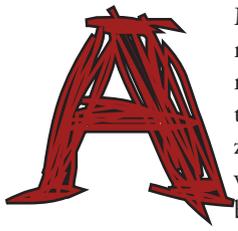




Welcome to
COLORING BOOK
LAND MENSANS INVITED

By AJecia Blake



Mensan publishes a book – it’s not exactly headline news. Mensa members put out so many books there’s even a section of this magazine devoted to reviews of their works. I too recently published a book. It’s on Amazon and everything. What’s it about? Well, it might not be what you’d expect from a Mensan.

I remember the exact day I discovered adult coloring – March 30, 2015. In the Business section of the previous day’s *New York Times* I saw the following: “Grown-Ups Get Out Their Crayons.” I was amazed to read that a coloring book for adults, *Secret Garden: An Inky Treasure Hunt and Coloring Book*, had become a global best-seller with, at that point, sales of more than 1.4 million copies. It had shot to the top of Amazon’s best-seller list that month, overtaking books by Harper Lee, Anthony Doerr and Paula Hawkins. The author, Johanna Basford, and her publishers were caught off guard by the surging demand for this book, and social media was rapidly spreading the word of this most non-digital pastime.

My first reaction was, *a coloring book? For adults?* But after my initial astonishment I thought, I could do that – and I want to do that! But what could an artist like myself contribute to the library of coloring books already in print?

I had some false starts. The first five illustrations I attempted were detailed but generic drawings, including underwater fish scenes and floral patterns. And although I was enjoying the process, I couldn’t figure out how to focus on a specific subject. And then it came to me.

My illustration career has included work for major fashion designers, magazines and companies. Combining my experience from my career in fashion illustration with my love of patterns and details, I had the idea for my first book. I could lovingly produce page after page of hand-drawn, intricate settings and patterns and willowy, graceful figures. Each page would be a unique vision and concept, fun and creative for me to illustrate and hopefully just as satisfying to color. I decided on a working title, *Color in Fashion: A Stylish Adult Coloring Book*.

My next task was to learn more about my prospective audience. Who were these people who liked to color? I hadn’t since I was 6. Sure enough, though, they’re out there. I found newspaper and magazine trend pieces all over detailing hobbyists’ search for an escape. From a July 3, 2015, article in the *Houston Chronicle*, “Let’s Color. Coloring Books For Adults Still Trending”: “Coloring isn’t so much entertaining as transporting. Coloring forces you to limit your focus to the page and your hand.” People were turning to coloring not just as a means to turn their brains off but, in some cases, to do just the opposite and hone their focus. In “Meet the Adults Who Love to Color” (*New York Magazine*, May 7, 2015), Jessica Roy hailed the hobby’s potential for enabling mind-

fulness but without “all that ‘concentrate on your breathing’ stuff.”

Scientists have even studied the coloring craze in an attempt to pinpoint its appeal. In a post on *New York Magazine*’s “Science of Us” blog, Jordan Gaines Lewis, a neuroscience Ph.D. student at Penn State College of Medicine, explained the paradox of wanting to feel creative while still coloring within the lines. He wrote, “In part, it’s a way for people who have never felt very artsy to literally add some more color into their lives.”

To be sure, the coloring craze has found fans in both sexes. There are even coloring books marketed directly to men. *Amazing Coloring Book For Men* has pages full of sports equipment and power tools. In the adult coloring book world, there’s something for virtually everyone’s taste. That neuroscience student, for example, might enjoy *The Human Brain Coloring Book*, which was created by neurosurgeons specifically to help teach med students.

People love sharing their creations on social media. Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram and Twitter all provide outlets for colorists to post their work. Beautiful pages are proudly shared and liked by the thousands. The complexity of some boggle my mind. Coloring contests, bloggers and clubs abound. I’ve even seen coloring listed as an activity for some Mensa Regional Gatherings.

Creating my own coloring book was a labor of love, providing me with some of the same relaxing benefits claimed by colorists. I escaped into my own world of creativity with each illustration I drew. Always in the background I played Chopin, which for some reason is the only music I can listen to when I draw. It is gorgeous and soothing to me at the same time. I worked with a graphic designer and book formatter and learned a lot about technique along the way. Because I draw by hand, one of the important things I learned was to use blue lines instead of a carbon pencil for my drawing. I rediscovered the use of blue transfer paper, which allows me to have a blue drawing on my paper before I ink in the illustration. Stray pencil lines can create a lot of cleanup work, but blue is not captured in reproduction. I am taking this and other lessons to heart as I start on my next coloring book.

When I actually had to color some of my own illustrations for the cover, and for samples, I was truly humbled. This was not kid stuff! In the time since I started researching the coloring book phenomenon back in 2015, the art supplies market for coloring books has exploded. There are a huge number of choices for the colorist in pencils, markers and blending tools. Coloring my detailed illustrations took much skill and thought.

I was cavalier about and dismissive of this hobby to start. Now, I have admiration for the work and technique it takes to use colors in beautiful ways to make each page unique. Individual expression and creativity, along with relaxation and mindfulness, are just a handful of reasons coloring has found so much appeal – even amongst Mensans like me. 🎨