

# Print Principles

A proven formula for stylish combinations

BY KENNETH D. KING

**L**ooks that bring together two or more patterned fabrics are right up my alley aesthetically. I like to design them, and I often wear them. You may think it takes innate artistic talent to mix prints successfully, but anyone can learn to do it.

At the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, where I teach, students have asked how I mix patterns seemingly by instinct, so they enhance rather than detract from each other. These questions inspired me to write this article.

When I was in college, I took a design class. Along with color theory, I learned a method for mixing patterns that I use all the time to ensure great results. I'll share this approach so you, too, can combine prints creatively—and not end up looking like a clown (unless you want to). These principles work for mixing prints in all sorts of contexts: single, print-blocked garments; entire outfits, including accessories; or in home decoration. Once you grasp the basics, you can bring multiple prints into any design context.

## **DOMINANT AND SUBORDINATE PATTERNS**

My method is based primarily on color, but also on motif type and scale. You'll learn to analyze prints in relation to each other, and to create interesting, successful pattern groupings.

Begin by considering each project, whether it's a garment or an entire room, as a composition. Within a composition, you'll generally have a dominant pattern, which establishes a set of colors to be used in the composition as a whole. The dominant pattern is often the largest scale in the grouping, but not always. Subordinate patterns contain some or all the colors of the dominant pattern, and may introduce new colors.

## **PRINT DISTRIBUTIONS**

The selection and allocation of prints is called the "distribution." There are several distributions that can be counted on to produce appealing, balanced print combinations. Some of these are familiar—you may intuitively understand that they work nicely. Others are surprising and result in assortments that bring sophistication to your garments or home décor. Enjoy the safer combinations, but challenge yourself to try some that are unusual. If you're hesitant to sew a wildly print-blocked dress, introduce extra prints to an ensemble with a scarf, fabric belt, or tote bag. However you approach it, you'll have fun putting together the combinations, and you'll feel great wearing your new looks.

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*Kenneth D. King is frequently complimented on the mixed-print outfits he wears on the streets of New York City.*





*An artistic dress follows Distribution 2 (see page 38) to successfully combine four different black-and-white prints.*

*Pattern: Vogue 9081. Fabrics: printed silks, Mood Designer Fabrics, New York.*



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#### DISTRIBUTION 0

### Monochromatic

The textures differ in scale and type but are all the same color—in this case, a rich off-white. This occurs often in modern interiors and minimalist clothing styles. In this example, the range of textured patterns establishes an interesting interplay.



Dominant

Subordinate

Subordinate

Subordinate

#### DISTRIBUTION 1

### Dominant pattern plus solids

Select one print and draw hues from it. This is the most common distribution and is a good jumping-off point for learning to successfully introduce patterns into your wardrobe, or into a room's furnishings. You can do this easily with a black-and-white print, or go for a print with multiple colors. Experiment with several colors: The print's character may change considerably depending on the surrounding solid hues. For more interest, vary the textures of the solid fabrics, as in Distribution 0.

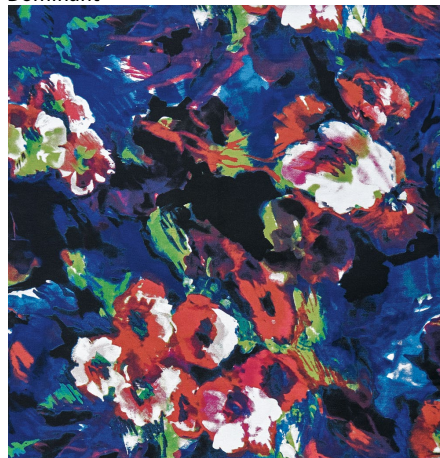
#### DISTRIBUTION 2

### Dominant pattern plus color-matched subordinates

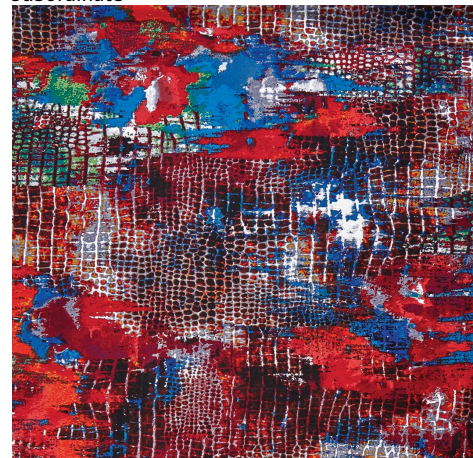
The dominant pattern establishes the palette, and the subordinate pattern or patterns contain all the same colors as the dominant pattern. The subordinate prints should vary in scale from the dominant print, and typically have smaller motifs. Different kinds of pattern may come into play, and they can vary in type and scale, depending on how many subordinate prints you want to include.

Here, I've chosen an unexpected pairing of a large, multicolored, painterly floral with an abstracted reptile-skin design. The prints' shared colorway makes them compatible.

Dominant



Subordinate





## Dominant pattern plus subordinates with only some matching colors

The dominant print sets the tone, and subordinate prints or solids take some—but not all—colors from it. There are two versions of this:

- The dominant pattern is largest in scale and covers the largest percentage of the composition.

Dominant



Subordinate



- The dominant pattern is used for a smaller part of the composition. Here, a multicolored top carries the dominant pattern, with the solid pants and tweed jacket picking up some of its hues. This small piece is the key that ties the ensemble together.

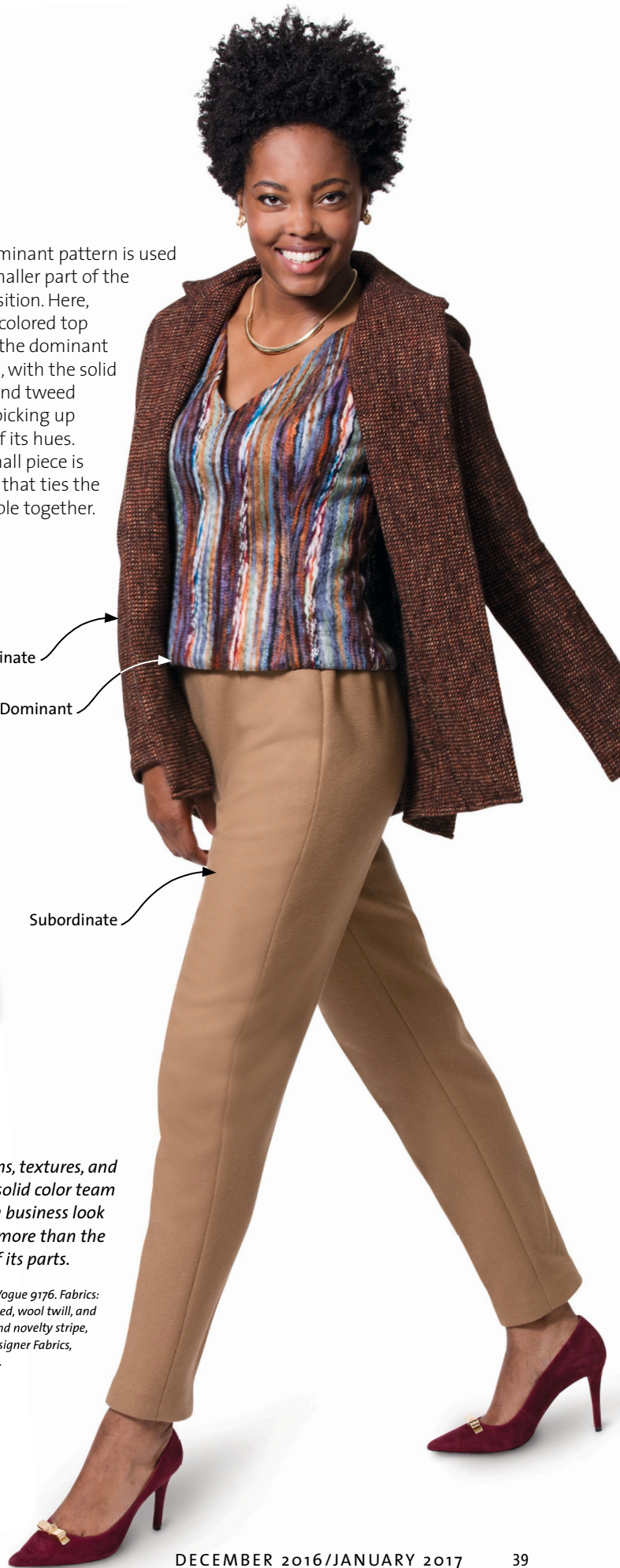
Subordinate

Dominant

Subordinate

*Patterns, textures, and a rich solid color team up in a business look that's more than the sum of its parts.*

*Pattern: Vogue 9176. Fabrics: wool tweed, wool twill, and wool-blend novelty stripe, Mood Designer Fabrics, New York.*





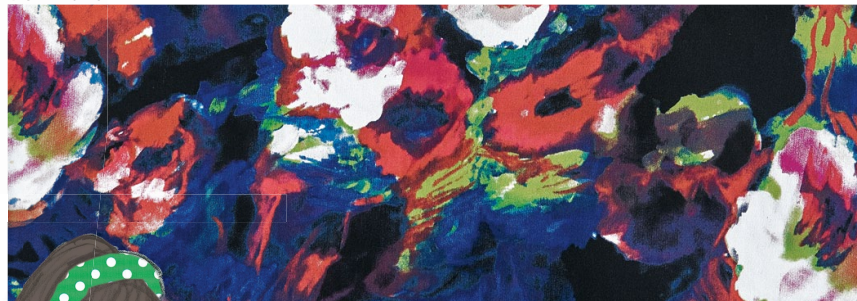


#### DISTRIBUTION 4

### Dominant pattern plus subordinates with one matching color

This distribution is uncommon but shows up in high-fashion runway shows. The dominant print includes two or more colors, and the subordinate uses as its main color just one of the hues from the dominant print (and it may include additional colors as well).

Dominant



Subordinate



#### DISTRIBUTION 5

### Same pattern with variations

This distribution is based on color and on similarities of print or pattern type. With the print motif as a common denominator, there is no true dominant fabric. These combinations produce a visual harmony that's fun and easy to put together. There are several variants:

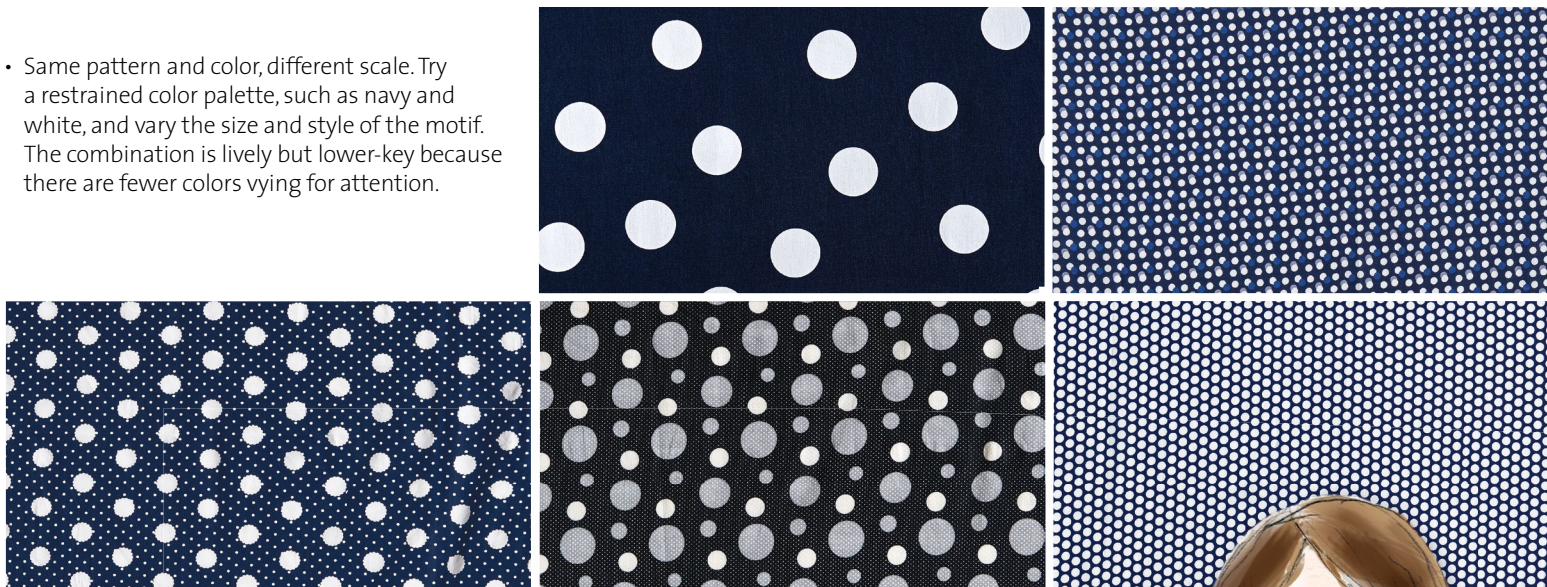
- Same pattern, different colorways. Polka dots are a useful example of this. Keep one color the same—in this case, the white dots—and change the background color for a playful composition.



Photos: (p. 37; 39, right) Jack Deutsch; all others, Mike Yamin. Illustrations: Rosann Berry. Swatches: Mood Designer Fabrics, New York. Stylist: Jessica Saal. Hair and makeup: AgataHelena.com. Styling credits: (p. 37) earrings—HM.com, necklace—Anthropologie.com, shoes—Vince Camuto (DSW.com); (p. 39) earrings and necklace—One Wink (DSW.com), shoes—Michael Kors (DSW.com).



- Same pattern and color, different scale. Try a restrained color palette, such as navy and white, and vary the size and style of the motif. The combination is lively but lower-key because there are fewer colors vying for attention.



- Similar pattern, varied colorways and scales. In this distribution, there's a lot of variation within the patterns in terms of scale, type of plaid, and color values. The limited range of hues and the rectilinear designs unite the fabrics visually.

