

Rainbow View

by Robbie Pattison

Jumping into the brindle issue with both feet (plus four).

No good dog is a bad colour. Wait a minute; I don't think that's necessarily true. There you go, I've written two sentences and I've already lost almost my entire audience – the anti-brindle crowd stopped reading after the first and the pro-brindle bunch after the second. All I'm left with are a half dozen fence sitters, still trying to maintain a precarious balance as the storm rages around them, and I'm sure they're hardly in the mood to focus on a humorous approach to a thorny subject. So I guess I'd better go back and try to explain myself.

The "no good dog is a bad colour" expression is a bit of a truism, and truisms, while seeming to state the obvious, don't always tell the whole story. I'm reminded of the famous Robert Frost poem, *Mending Wall*, its most oft-quoted line the old bromide "Good fences make good neighbours." It's regularly trotted out in support of arguments trying to make just that point, that people get along better if they keep to themselves and don't let their dogs escape the backyard to pee on their neighbour's lawn, but if you take the time to go and read the whole poem you find Frost's message is exactly opposite. (Look it up; it begins "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," which gives you a clue right there that the poet is going to have little good to say about erecting artificial barriers to communication.)

Anyway, I used to pay lip service at least to the theory that when it comes to Salukis colour doesn't matter, but it didn't take long for me to figure out that I was lying through my teeth. Something had to be at work, other than blind luck, to ac-

count for the fact that during my first 30 years of Saluki ownership all my hounds were either red, fawn or cream, mostly cream. Or that in more than 50 years of owning horses I've only had greys, browns and bays. With little or no chrome on the legs, faces or bodies of either species. I think I'm noticing a trend here.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. What I was starting out to say was that a good dog very likely could be a bad colour, in the practical sense. Let's say you hunt with your Salukis and you live in a very hot climate with almost no respite from the sun. Wouldn't a light-coloured dog be more likely to stand up to those conditions better than a black one? Or what if you're into showing in a big way and you're specialising a beautifully put together dog, but he's a particolour whose spots are placed so that they serve to draw the judge's eye in precisely the wrong direction, concealing rather than enhancing his correct structure? Optical illusions are powerful things to overcome, even when you're aware of them.

I perhaps wouldn't go so far as to say that these examples represent good dogs that are **bad** colours, exactly, but they are certainly dogs whose colours must be considered less than ideal, under the circumstances. When you think about it, the account of my own experience selecting dogs and horses from a limited colour range makes the same point. It's pretty hard to avoid noticing your dog's colour, after all, when it's right there in front of you several hours a day, every day. Why should you want to vex yourself by keeping a black dog or a spotted horse

when you really much prefer to look at light-coloured dogs and solid-coloured horses? You can ignore something like a conformation fault (some of them anyway). If your dog's front looks like an egg beater when he's trotting toward you, all you need to do is look the other way for a moment or two until he heads off in another direction. Problem solved. But if he's a colour you don't like you're out of luck, unless you keep him hidden during the daylight hours and only bring him out at night, after you've turned off all the lights.

Colour is an emotive subject, and always has been. Red flags mean danger; green lights mean go. The good guys wear white hats; the bad guys are dressed in black. Grey and brown have generally been thought to be boring (until it became fashionable to paint all our houses these colours, at which point they became "earth tones"). Yellow and cowardice are synonymous. If you're blue you're sad, until the dog ahead of you in the ring picks up the blue ribbon, at which point you are suddenly green with envy.

And that, in a roundabout way, brings me to brindle. (I know, you'd hoped I'd forgotten.) What is it about this colour (or pattern of colours, if you insist) that works so many of us into fits of frenzy? I'm pretty sure the "crossbred" argument is something of a red herring. After all, there have been lots of Salukis over the years whose resemblance to Afghans, Greyhounds, coonhounds and various sorts of retrievers has seemed obvious to many, and others whose official pedigrees have at the very least been the subject of considerable speculation, but we've either



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made jokes about them, derided the dog show judges who've given prizes to such obviously poor specimens, or shrugged our shoulders and said, "So what?"

What then is so sinister about brindle? As someone who has admitted to having some serious colour prejudices when it comes to my own animals, I've tried to analyze my own reaction to it, perhaps to discover some possible answers. I will say off the top I don't much like brindle. I'd place it well below my beloved red or cream but well above chocolate and white particolour grizzle. Maybe I'd rate it somewhere around black and tan. No, strike that; I'd never take a brindle ahead of a nice black and silver (it took almost

35 years, but I've got two of those now, and found the experience not nearly as bad as I thought it would be). After some consideration I've decided I probably prefer brindle to particolour (and I've finally got a spotted Saluki too, though sometimes when I look at her I like to squint my eyes and pretend she's cream, since she's pale gold and white). Obviously my own antipathy toward brindle is fairly mild and further examination of it is unlikely to prove helpful.

That brings me to the word itself; maybe the intensity of the controversy has more to do with language than colour. According to my copy of *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*,

"brindled" has been around since the 17th century and likely has its origins in the Old Norse "brandr," which means burning. Aha! We're into some seriously negative word associations here. Could this be the clue we're looking for? Branding, burning – nasty stuff – and thence to witches, brandishing swords, Joan of Arc, who knows what. The mind boggles.

I think I might be getting out of my depth, so perhaps it's best if I give it a rest. I think I'll grab a bottle of beer from the fridge, put up my feet, and pull another well-thumbed volume off the shelf. Ah, that's what I'm looking for, *American Poetry*, page 662, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall..." ♦