

How colour is used within the discipline of visual arts, particularly in fine art painting, to communicate a feeling, emotion or message.

Emma Morgan

1701833

BA(Hons) Illustration

Louise Burston

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons)

University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea

11th December 2019

Word Count: 5545

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	3
Summary of Topic	4
Introduction	4
Chapter 1 – Colour Theory	5-9
Chapter 2 – Colour Psychology and Symbolism	9-14
Chapter 3 – Colour in Fine Art Painting	14-20
Conclusion	20-21
Bibliography	22

Word count: 5545

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Newton, I. (1704) *Colour Circle* Available at: <https://www.the-scientist.com/foundations/newtons-color-theory-ca-1665-31931> (Accessed: 10 November 2019)

Figure 2: Goethe, v W J. (1809-10) *Colour Wheel* Available at: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/08/17/goethe-theory-of-colours/> (Accessed: 10 November 2019)

Figure 3: Itten, J. (1961) *Twelve- part colour circle*

Figure 4: Bonnard, P. (1939-46) *The Studio with Mimosas* [oil on canvas] Available at: <https://life.spectator.co.uk/articles/the-art-of-the-garden-pierre-bonnards-mimosas/> (Accessed: 7 December 2019)

Figure 5: Picasso, P. (1903) *The Tragedy* [oil on wood] Available at: <https://www.nga.gov/features/slideshows/pablo-picasso-the-tragedy.html> (Accessed at:

Figure 6: Gogh, V V. (1888) *Sunflowers* [oil on canvas] Available at: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/vincent-van-gogh-sunflowers> (Accessed: 20 November 2019)

Figure 7: Munch, E. (1893) *The Scream* Available at: [https://www.edvardmunch.org/the-scream.jsp#prettyPhoto\[image1\]/0/](https://www.edvardmunch.org/the-scream.jsp#prettyPhoto[image1]/0/) (Accessed: 20 November 2019)

Figure 8: Rothko, M. (1959) *Red on Maroon* [oil paint, acrylic paint and glue tempera on canvas] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rothko-red-on-maroon-t01165> (Accessed: 22 November 2019)

Figure 9: Rothko, M. (1950-2) *Untitled* [oil paint on canvas] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rothko-untitled-t04148> (Accessed: 22 November 2019)

This Independent Inquiry will explore the research topics of Colour Theory and colour psychology linking their relationships to emotions and effect on an audience. Using the topics to question how colour is used within the visual arts discipline, particularly in fine art painting, to communicate a feeling, emotion or message.

Colour is everywhere around us, whether in nature, in personal and public spaces, or on ourselves.” (Dael, et al, 2015, p.1619) This being said, we live in a world where colour can affect us on a daily basis. Our moods, our decisions and our behavioural responses can all be affected by colour perception and psychology. Colour can be a crucial element which brings the world around us a sense of life and if we imagined a world without colour, everything around us would be seen as dull or almost lifeless.

“Its absence in our lives is unthinkable. Consider a world wherein brilliant sunsets, vivid flower gardens, shimmering butterflies, and tropical fish shed their multicoloured hues and morphed into, monochromatic shades of gray.” (Mollica, 2013, p.4)

This Independent Inquiry is an attempt to explore the act of visual communication in paintings using colour to contextualise emotions and messages. In chapter one, I intend to explore the development and history of colour theory, drawing upon the theories of Isaac Newton, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and more, which will form the basis of my research. In chapter 2, I intend to undergo an in-depth study into the meanings of specific colours, looking further into colour psychology, exploring how colour can be used as a tool for symbolic representation, which is also known as the term ‘symbolism.’ This will lead me to answering the question of ‘how is colour used within the visual arts discipline, particularly in fine art painting, to communicate a feeling, emotion or message’? The idea of fears and phobias from a psychological background in my own practice of work, combined with the idea of colour palettes in the illustration world is what enabled my interest into this particular topic of colour and colour psychology. As an illustrator myself, my research will contribute to knowledge needed to make advancements in my own practice of work and also areas of colour psychology; which is in fact a relatively new subject of research that is still in the development of evolving, and will be explored through an illustrator’s perspective.

Colour theory can be applied to the practicalities of colour mixing, particularly in fine art painting. The initial founding elements of colour theory came from the first colour wheel, which was invented by Isaac Newton in 1666. In this time, Newton performed various scientific experiments using prisms, in which he “split white light into red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet beams” (Adams, et al 2008, p.18), this therefore created what we know to be, the visible spectrum. From Newton’s experiments, it was discovered that the visible spectrum is broken up into seven different colours, which formed his representation of a seven-colour, wheel. (Figure 1) Newton introduced his experimental findings and the first colour circle in his book *Optiks*, which became an important document in the history of colour theory. Throughout the discovery of colour, various theories of how colour can be processed by the eye have been brought to light, beginning with Newton’s prism experiments. Kassia St Clair states “what we are really seeing when we look at, say, a ripe tomato or green paint, is light being reflected off the surface of that object into our eyes.” (St Clair, 2016, p.13), suggesting that colour is merely just a beam of reflected light from an object, which enters our eyes and reaches the retinas.

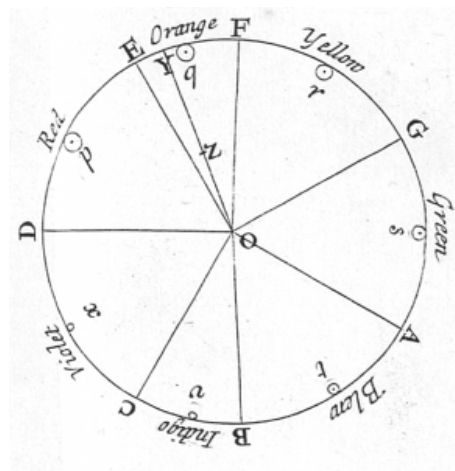


Figure 1: *Colour circle*

“Modern color science finds its birth in the seventeenth century” (Shevell, 2003, p.2), but it was only after Newton’s theory of colour that, colour theory became a popular topic that several other theorists and artists themselves, expanded upon by documenting research and performing experiments, creating their own theories.

During this period of time many variations of the colour wheel were produced in attempt to develop and understand relationships between colours. For this reason, it can be said that, the colour wheel “is a convenient device which helps to visualise how colours relate to each other and what, in theory, happens when they are mixed.” (Author not known, The Guardian, 2009). However, the colour wheel is just one of the main elements within colour theory. Progressing from Newton’s initial scientific findings, in 1809-1810, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a German poet and scientist created his representation of the colour wheel (Figure 2) from a more artistic perspective, exploring the use of pigments and focusing on how they can be mixed together. Unlike Newton, Goethe “was one of the first modern thinkers to investigate and record the function of the eye and its interpretation of color, rather than the properties of light.” (Feisner, et al 2013, p. 19) With this in mind, Goethe began to utilize his colour wheel to explore and examine the psychological effects of colour, which he then proceeded to develop the link between colours and specific emotion, and “his intention was to not just present another colour system but to link colour to many aspects of science, art, design and psychology.” (Loske, 2019, p. 42)

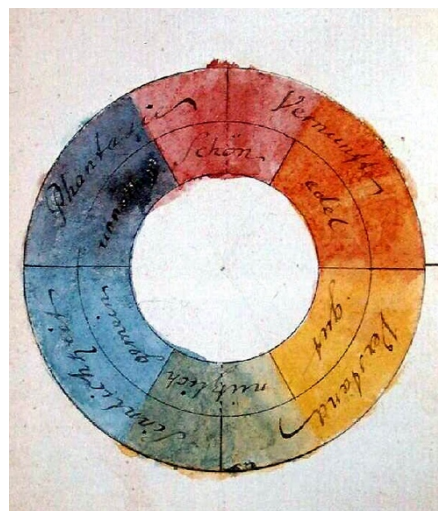


Figure 2: *Colour Wheel*

Combining elements of scientific research, as well as artistic perspectives, Johannes Itten, a Swiss painter, also had a significant contribution to the theory of colour, which he explored in his book ‘*The Art of Colour*’, originally published in 1961 and was a

staple in the development of colour theory. It is commonly recognised that Itten “was considered one of the greatest teachers of the art of color of modern times.” (Itten, 1970, p.6) Itten created a representation of the colour wheel from his perspective, the basis of which was formed from the initial three primary colours, we know as red, yellow and blue, or otherwise known as the RYB system. Itten explained in his book the “study of the twelve-part color circle forms the basis of my constructive theory of colors.” (Itten, 1975, p.32) As a result, Itten constructed his colour circle from twelve individual colours, dividing it into three sections consisting of three primary colours, three secondary colours and six tertiary colours (Figure 3). The primary colours are known as the base of the colour wheel and all the other colours build upon them, as primary colours are not able to be created through the process of colour mixing. “Primary colors are hues that can be mixed to produce a wide gamut of colors.” (Stewart, 2018) The application of mixing two primary colours together results in the creation of the secondary colours and combining a primary colour and a secondary colour results in the tertiary colours being created. Throughout his research into colour, Itten made several discoveries of colour contrasts, in which he was widely known for and overall, he named seven different kinds of contrasts. In order, the seven colour contrasts named are “the pure color (hue) contrast, the light-dark contrast, the cold-warm contrast, the complementary contrast, the simultaneous contrast, contrast of quality (color saturation) and the contrast of quantity.” (Itten, 1975, p.32) The development of these seven colour contrasts advanced from the discoveries of the relationships between each of the colours within the wheel. Therefore, in light of these explorations, the idea of warm and cool colours began to develop and when dissecting the colour wheel, cool colours were classed as the blues, greens and purples, whereas the warm colours were classed as the reds, oranges and yellows. As a result of his exploration of the cold-warm colour contrasts, bringing in the link to colour temperature, Itten stated that “the properties of cold and warm colors are essential to color therapeutics in hospitals.” (1970, p.45) Which can formulate a link between these colours to the treatments of diseases.



Figure 3: *Twelve-part colour circle*

During this period of time in the 19th century, Max Luscher, a Swiss psychologist created a link between colours and psychology using The Luscher Test, which he originally invented. Luscher used:

four colours as a tool for psychological assessment. To the three primary pigments he adds the colour green. As he sees it:

Red – Self-Confidence

Blue – Contemplation

Yellow – Freedom

Green – Self-Respect (McLeod, 2016, p.394)

Another essential element that evolves the history of colour theory beyond the colour wheel is known as a colour scheme. Colour schemes can be an important factor in terms of art and design, as they can help to determine whether or not the colours look visually appealing when next to one another. There can be various colour combinations taken from the colour wheel, that form a colour scheme, one of these combinations being Monochromatic colours. “Monochromatic color starts with a single hue – anything from red to beige to purple – and the design is created with a palette using derivatives of that color.” (Cousins, 2015) As a result, this brings in the association of tints, which are formed only when a specific hue like ‘red, beige or purple’ is mixed with white, and shades which are formed when the same hue is mixed with black. Another combination can be a colour scheme consisting of only

complementary colours, these are colours that can be found directly opposite one another within the colour wheel.

Newton's colour wheel also imposed order on the relationship between complementary colours. These were colour pairs – for example, green and red, blue and orange – that were found to resonate strongly with each other when placed side by side. (Clair, 2016, p.30)

This statement provides examples of several pairs of complementary colours and expanding on the red and green pair, the red as already clarified from previous research, is the primary colour and the green would be classed as the complementary colour of the red. The statement also suggests that the complementary colours have a significant contrast against one another, which usually creates a vibrant effect, especially when used within fine art painting. For this reason, “artists including Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch used them to give structure and add drama to their paintings” (St Clair, 2016, p.30) Simply because of how complementary colours can bring upon a heightened intensity. A third combination can be known as analogous colours. “Analogous schemes are created by using three colors that are next to each other on the 12-spoke color wheel.” (Chapman, 2010) From this statement and the placement of analogous colours within the colour wheel, it can be deduced that that analogous colours work rather well with one another, since they all consist of similar hues, which can create a certain harmonious effect within a painting. When considering analogous colours within a painting or even within a photograph, a prime example of where they can be found could be sunsets, where there are multiple hues of yellows, oranges and sometimes reds/pinks.

This chapter will focus primarily on an in-depth study of the various colours within the colour wheel and what they symbolise, drawing upon colour psychology. Colour psychology is a relatively new topic area of research, which is an on-going process, and is commonly referred to as “the study of how colors affect human behaviour, mood or physiological processes.” (Bailey, 2019) When used effectively to communicate an emotion or create a visual image, colour has the potential to be a particularly powerful tool. The use of colour can imply many meanings and the symbolisation of a colour is

often dependent on a wide array of reasons, and it can be problematic to pin down all these reasons due to the diverse symbolism in different cultures.

June McLeod, a colour consultant and author has provided various detailed insights into the colour psychology field, using research and her own studies, presented in her book '*Colour Psychology Today*'. McLeod states that "colour association can be historical, national, cultural, personal and linguistic, but one thing that we can't deny is that it is also visual." (2016, p.968) This statement suggests that the symbolic meanings of a specific colour can depend on an individual's history, a certain place, a culture, a past experience, a language or a visual image. In terms of colour psychology, it can be said that "colour prompts a range of different human responses: psychological, biological, and behavioral." (O'Connor, 2011, p.233) This indicates that when a colour is processed by the eye, it can change a person's behaviour and can also be a significant influence on their physical or mental state, affecting specifically what emotion can be felt. In relation to this, Goethe's experiments with colour perception can be linked, as during his experiments "Goethe realises that the sensations of colour reaching the brain are also shaped by physiological aspects of colour perception." (KÖNIG, et al, 2009, p.231)

Red, a significantly intense and vivid hue, which can be seen as a symbol of love, passion and lust, but alternatively can be a symbol of such negatives like anger, war, blood and danger. On a practical level in everyday life, red can be "used to identify fire equipment and to stop vehicles at traffic lights and signs" (McLeod, 2016, p.529) Being the most important colour in the warm colour palette, red can project positive feelings of warmth and heat, which can create a sense of comfort. "With tremendous emotional impact red affects us on every level of our being – a boost for the metabolism, promotes adrenalin release and produces feelings of warmth." (McLeod, 2016, p.529) Boosting metabolism and promoting the release of adrenalin, red can be used as a practical tool to stimulate high amounts of energy on the brain or on an individual. The overall vividness of red could mean it can be an effective colour to use when aiming to capture attention in paintings, advertising, and also in film. "Red has played a crucial and emphatic role since the beginning of colour film." (Everett, 2007, p.127) Red is a

major aspect and important symbol within the horror film ‘*Don’t Look Now*’ released in 1973. The background of the film comes from the event of a little girl who accidentally drowned and the prominent feature within it was the red raincoat, which she wore. “Images of water, the colour red and broken glass repeatedly intersect in a kaleidoscope of ominous foreshadowing.” (Billson, 2010) This suggests that in the film, red is portraying a picture of the imminent danger that is present, and evidently showing that the red raincoat which the little girl was wearing in the beginning of the film could be a symbol of the danger to come.

Yellow, a colour seen in many cultures as a universal symbol of the sun, happiness and optimism, and the lightest colour found in the warm colour palette and the colour wheel, apart from white. McLeod identifies yellow as a colour that “affects mental abilities, gives hope, motivates and upstages.” (2016, p.726) Yellow, in other words, can be known as a primarily positive colour which can evoke feelings of joy, cheerfulness and even inspiration on an individual. A colour that can be utilised as a tool to stimulate mental states and positive behaviours.

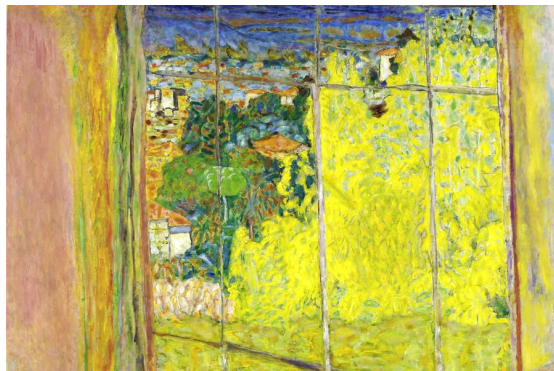


Figure 4: *The Studio with Mimosas*

Pierre Bonnard, a French painter used yellow in a fascinating way in his painting ‘*The Studio with Mimosas*’. (Figure 4) “In Bonnard’s dazzling ‘The Studio with Mimosas’, an energising, diagonal sweep of rich lemon fills over half the canvas” (Morris, 2019) With such an intensely bright lemon hue overpowering the entire landscape, it is difficult to draw the eye’s attention away to observe the bigger picture. The presence of the yellow in this painting is so vivid that the majority of the landscape creates a bold contrast against it, especially the sharp green hue placed next to it. However, yellow

is not all the positive colour that it is made out to be a symbol of. Victoria Finlay expressed in her book “how, with such a bright, happy colour, it has been so necessary to use caution.” (2002, p.225) For example, yellow can be used to represent a symbol of caution in environments like construction sights because of its high visibility, which the eye can process from a distance. “Colour is fundamental to our experiences of the world around us. Think of hi-vis jackets.” (St Clair, 2016, p. 13) Due to the highly intense luminosity of yellow, hi-vis jackets are produced in a bright yellow hue, making it practical and safe for them to be worn in the dark.

Scientifically linking to gender colour association, the typical stereotype was that blue was for boys and pink was for girls, easily resulting in the upbringing of a specific gender colour. Newly born baby boys would be dressed in blue, whereas newly born baby girls would be dressed in pink. However, it is not known whether this causes that specific child to have a preference to the colour associated with their gender when they grow up. Although blue is the known colour for boys in gender colour association, throughout its symbolic meanings, masculinity is never once mentioned. Instead blue is thought to be a calm colour more so associated with the sea or sky, and the main colour of the cool colours in colour theory. The German poet and scientist, Goethe established blue as a colour which “gives us an impression of cold” (1840, p.311) Because of its blue nature, it can be said that “blue calls to mind feelings of calmness or serenity. It is often described as peaceful, tranquil, secure, and orderly. Blue can also create feelings of sadness or aloofness.” (O’Connor, 2011, p. 231) In terms of colour psychology, blue can create positive and negative feelings which can vary from each individual’s perception of it. From a negative point of view, blue can cause an individual to experience feelings of sadness, often referred to as the term ‘feeling blue’, establishing the most common negative effect on the brain from seeing blue.

“Although traditionally the colour of sadness, many cultures, including the ancient Egyptians, Hindus and the North African Tuareg tribe, have included a special place for blue and blue things in their lives.” (St Clair, 2016, p.181)



Figure 5: *The Tragedy*

The Tragedy (Figure 5) was painted in 1903 by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso and can show an effective depiction of colour emotion within a painting. The aim of this painting was to portray the feelings of a difficult and upsetting event that occurred in Picasso's lifetime. "Casagemas' death had caused Picasso to paint this monumental picture." (Walther et al, 2000, p.16) The painting can be observed as a reflection of Picasso's own feelings due to the death of someone around him, which suggests that psychologically he was in a sadden state of mind. It is painted solely in monochromatic tones of blue, which can provoke emotions of sadness and despair, and represents the paintings title. "Blue seemed to be particularly suitable to express his feelings of sadness and grief." (Walther et al, 2000, p.16)

With some similar effects to the colour blue, green can be recognised as being "restful, soothing, cheerful and health-giving. Green is thought to relieve stress and help heal." (O'Connor, 2011, p.231) This somewhat portrays green as a very effective therapeutic colour, which could be utilised in places like hospitals and psychologist offices to ease and reduce an individual's pain or suffering, whether that be from work related stress, a traumatic event, or from a specific medical condition, such as anxiety or depression. Green can be thought of as a universally symbolic representation of health, growth, nature and wealth, identifying green as a natural harmonious colour. For this reason,

“many cultures associate the colour positively with garden and springs.” (St Clair, 2016, p209) Goethe believed that green signalled “a distinctly grateful impression.” (1840, p.316) and from this quote, green can be implied to be a colour which creates a feeling of appreciation and drawing upon ideas of behavioural responses, it could result in someone acting thankful or fairly pleasant. Alongside the colour meanings, when green is combined specifically in a colour palette with red, this creates a symbol of Christmas, and the two colours can be known as complimentary colours.

Black, a colour that is not a colour but rather “an expression of light, in this case its absence.” (St Clair, 2016, p261) It has long been a topic of debate on whether or not black is actually a colour, however “no, say scientists. In the visible spectrum, white reflects light and so is actually a presence of all colours. But black absorbs it, sucks it all in.” (Carter, 2015) Since the evolution and transformation of colour “for most people, in most cases, it is enough to regard black-and-white films simply as films without colour.” (Misek, 2010, p.5)

Within the visual arts discipline, especially in fine art painting, “color is more than just a visual phenomenon – it is a uniquely emotional language and a symbolic tool.” (Adams, et al 2008, p.6) For example, artists like Vincent Van Gogh and Edvard Munch often communicated their personal experiences and feelings through their paintings using forms of expression. Symbolism within paintings can be shown through the representation of colour as explained in the previous chapter, however, can also be shown through the form of a shape or object, take Vincent van Gogh’s ‘*sunflowers*’ (Figure 6) as a prime example of how colour is used within paintings to effectively communicate an emotion or feeling. “Through the sunflower’s, we can see into Van Gogh’s creative process, at a time when his artistic powers were at their height.” (Bailey, 2019, p.14)



Figure 6: *Sunflowers*

Van Gogh created a series of sunflower paintings which are displayed in various museums, and this version is currently hanging in the National Gallery in London. “Since it entered the National Gallery’s collection in 1924, it has also proved phenomenally popular.” (Sooke, 2014) The incline in the ‘*Sunflowers*’ popularity ensured that many bids were placed on it within auction in 1987, where “two anonymous telephone competitors drove the price of a single painting, one of Van Gogh’s ‘sunflowers’, to an auction record of \$39.9 million.” (Clines, 1987)

Identifying the colour schemes within this version of the sunflowers, it can be said that this particular painting consists mainly of a monochromatic colour scheme because it is painted in many shades and tints of yellow hues, apart from the green hue that Van Gogh included for the stalks of the sunflowers and other small areas of the brown or black colour that can be seen in the painting, but in effect the yellow hues are still the dominant colour. Although, unlike Pierre Bonnard’s intense use of yellow in ‘*The Studio of Mimosas*’, the application of yellow hues in the ‘*Sunflowers*’ painting is fairly more subtle with much less saturation. Francis X. Clines claimed that the painting is “a dramatic still life executed in the thick swirls of chrome yellow and yellow ochre that represented hope to the desperate post-impressionist genius.” (Clines, 1987)

The *Sunflowers* were “painted during a rare period of excited optimism, while Van Gogh awaited the arrival of his hero, the avant-garde painter Paul Gauguin.” (Author not known, The National Gallery, 2019) The chrome yellow and yellow ochre which

Van Gogh produced the painting in, comes from not only the colour of realistic sunflowers but also the symbolic representation of that period of 'optimism' that Van Gogh was trying to effectively portray from his own personal feelings. The painting has many focused elements of yellow, however the sunflowers within the painting show exactly how symbolic representation can take not only the form of a colour or several colours, but also as the form of a shape or a certain object. In this case the sunflowers within the painting are the known object. "Yellow, for him, was an emblem of happiness – in Dutch literature, the sunflower was a symbol of devotion and loyalty" (Author not known, The National Gallery, 2019), hence the relationship between the sunflowers and Paul Gauguin being Van Gogh's hero, as the meaning of sunflowers often comes from the idea of being loyal to something or someone, which it is known that Van Gogh looked up to Gauguin as an inspiration. Goethe explained that "we find from experience, again, that yellow excites a warm and agreeable impression. Hence in painting it belongs to the illumined and emphatic side." (1840, p.307) In other words, it can be said that yellow projects a pleasant and positive effect when processed by the eye, and when the colour is used within a painting like the 'sunflowers', it can lighten up the painting and also brighten up a person's mood, thus can make them experience feelings of happiness and content.

A second example of how colour can be used within a painting to effectively communicate a feeling or emotion, is shown within the painting '*The Scream*', originally painted in 1893 by the expressionist painter Edvard Munch. (Figure 7)

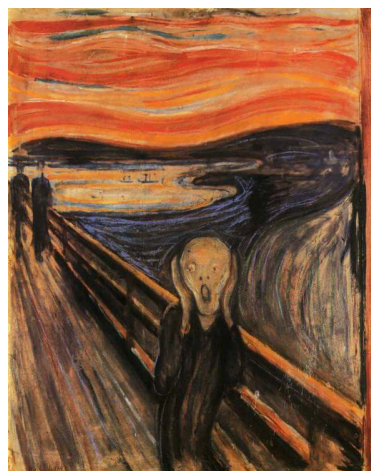


Figure 7: *The Scream*

There are three main elements within this painting, which are the figures, the background and the bridge. It would be suggested that the painting is focused on the depiction of a figure screaming, which appears to be widely distorted and also centrally placed. This painting represents the feelings of Munch and an experience that happened to him, which "Munch's own journals make it clear that the spectacular twilight in *The Scream* was inspired by an actual event." (Olson, et al, 2004, p.29) This painting is composed of an assortment of hues, which are a range of reds to oranges and blues to browns, therefore there is no apparent one colour scheme within it. Although, in this painting, the colours that draw the most attention to the eye from their contrasting effects can be considered as the reds and oranges because of their bold vividness, which are being utilised as a representation of the sky and from the previous chapter, it is already familiar that the symbolisation of the colour red can take upon various meanings, but in this case it can be seen as a clear symbolic representation of danger.

All at once the sky became blood-red . . . clouds like blood and tongues of fire hung above the blue-black fjord and the city . . . and I stood alone, trembling with anxiety . . . I felt a great unending scream piercing through nature (Jaroff, The New York Times, 2003)

The above quote is a detailed description of the experience that supposedly happened to Edvard Munch, and explains what feelings and emotions were felt at that period of time, all of which are being effectively communicated within the painting throughout the use of colours and objects, or in this instance a person. In the description by Munch, the sky is described to be 'blood-red', which as mentioned above symbolises the danger, hence the representation of the sky in a colour palette consisting of the warm colours - red, orange and yellow, which are also all somewhat vivid and contrasting hues. Although the sky is representing the danger of an experience, from a different point of view, the sky could be a depiction of simply just a sunset because the colours of a sunset are usually seen as reds, pinks and other similar hues. The distorted figure also has a significant symbolic meaning of the danger portrayed, as it is visualised as screaming and the depiction of the face shows a considerable amount of fear. In this regard, the symbolisation of the colours and objects in this painting, in no way represent any positive feeling and do not give off a positive effect to an

audience because it can be clearly seen by the eye, that this painting has been produced from a very negative experience. In addition, from the same quote, it is noted that Munch was alone and so scared that he was shaking, this could be a reason why the figure within the painting was created to look so distorted, as the figure could therefore be a representation of Munch himself and what he envisioned himself looking like during the experience when it happened. The application of colour in this painting is applied through the use of bold expressive strokes of vivid paints, creating an exaggerated composition.

A great inspiration of simple paintings that have notably large expressions from colour and form is artist Mark Rothko, which is expressed in the following quote, “Rothko was a protagonist within the movement of American painters who became known as the Abstract Expressionists.” (Baal-Teshuva, 2003, p.7) Simply explaining that Mark Rothko was among one of the many founders of ‘Abstract Expressionism’, a term that was originally invented around the 1940’s and 1950’s. Abstract Expressionism, an art movement that is known to be distinguished by the use of bold brush strokes, resulting in expressive and exaggerated mark making. Abstract Expressionism can represent a pure depiction of expressive colour and its potential to reveal emotions. Rothko was most famously referred to as the pioneer of the term ‘colour field painting.’ Colour field painting is its own particular style within abstract expressionism paintings, which is restricted to the creation of flat colour. “Color field painters relied solely on areas of color placement to impart their messages.” (Feisner, 2006, p.144) With Rothko’s simplistic paintings of geometric shapes and the use of flat bold colour, his intention could be to reveal hidden human emotion, applying his knowledge of abstract expressionism and colour fields. Rothko’s paintings lie open to a diverse array of interpretations, and each interpretation can vary from viewer to viewer depending on their perception of colour. Christopher Rothko explained that “Mark Rothko’s works have given viewers pause and left them wondering what they have seen, if indeed they have seen anything at all.” (2015, p.1) This shows the openness of interpretation within Rothko’s paintings, also suggesting that an audience could possibly be left questioning the work and its meaning or message. Overall, creating the sense that these paintings are always left as a mystery or in other words, unknown. “Seeing a

Rothko painting is a process that unfolds dynamically over time.” (Phillips, 2005, p.2/3) It is simply not possible to grasp the concept of Rothko’s paintings just by observing it once. In order to thoroughly observe and fully understand a Rothko painting, it requires an audience to repeatedly look, each time picking up on small details which would not have been picked up on in the initial glance and it can be said that each time details of the painting can appear to be different.



Figure 8: *Red on Maroon*

The painting (Figure 8) named ‘*Red on Maroon*’ was painted in 1959. The composition is produced in simplified geometric shapes – rectangles, consisting of only two hues, maroon and red. Applying the term ‘Abstract Expressionism’, the painting makes use of thick bold brush strokes in a minimalistic composition, using various tones within the two colours to create the sense of depth. Considering colour placement in color field painting, the vertical rectangular shapes in this painting are placed in a way which could suggest that the painting is a depiction of a structure, such as a door or a window, although this cannot be proved for definite. Colour field painting is usually created on excessively large canvases that can make the painting appear to be more inviting and open. *Red on Maroon* was created in the dimensions of 2667 x 2388 x 35 mm, which can be seen as a considerable size scale painting. A canvas with these dimensions can give an audience the ability to uncover smaller details hidden within a painting, which may not be able to be found by the human eye in a painting of small proportion.



Figure 9: *Untitled*

This painting was created in 1950-2, and Rothko kept the name of this painting as *Untitled*. The dimensions of this particular painting compared to *Red on Maroon* are 1900 x 1011 x 35 mm, which prove to be dramatically smaller in scale. Even though this painting is smaller in size, Rothko's intention of minimal but bold mark making still remains the same. The painting has relatively different approaches to *Red on Maroon* in terms of proportion and colour. It is constructed of a flat luminous yellow and white colour, although there appears to be tints of red present within the painting. In terms of composition the painting is horizontal rather than vertical and does not appear to have any kind of structural depiction. Despite the fact that some believe that "Rothko's color is neither symbolic nor structural." (Wilkin et al, 2007, p.13) This painting can still be seen as a depiction of luminous yellow flat colour in a rather abstract sense.

In summary of this Independent Inquiry and to answer the question 'how is colour used within the visual arts discipline, particularly in fine art painting, to communicate a feeling, emotion or message'? There is no one apparent way to answer this proposed question, simply because colour can be used within a painting in so many broad ways and unless we are the artist themselves, it is problematic to find out why a specific colour has been used. The emotion, feeling or message that an artist is trying to effectively communicate through a painting doesn't necessarily mean that the feeling,

emotion or message is picked by the observing audience. However, the role of colour within the visual arts discipline, particularly in fine art painting can be decorative or communicative, or both combined in one. Colour is an essential element of visual communication, heavily reliant on the impact it projects onto an audience and the stimulation of moods. The idea of colour and emotion is a relationship formed from colour perception from a particular audience and their background, often being determined by cultural association. Not only is cultural association a main factor in colour symbolism but also how colour can be linked to moods and feelings through colour psychology. Colour is seen as a symbolic tool that has the potential to express a wide variety of emotions and messages, through expressive and exaggerated colour fields, seen especially in paintings shown above by Van Gogh and Mark Rothko. Colour is a significant component that is needed within our lives, no matter how small, as it can provoke emotional responses, change our behaviour and vary symbolic interpretations. Without the effective use of colour and colour schemes, brands and companies would be considered as unrecognisable, cultural associations would be limited and colour would merely be a restriction of black and white light. Therefore, it is not just about how the colour is used within the painting, but about the human perception of the colour.

Bibliography

Books:

- Bailey, M. (2019) *The Sunflowers Are Mine: The Story of Van Gogh's Masterpiece*. White Lion Publishing.
- Clair St, K. (2016) *The Secret Lives of Colour*. John Murray Publishers.
- Everett, W. Everett, E W. (2007) *Questions of Colour in Cinema: From Paintbrush to Pixel*. Peter Lang.
- Feisner, A E. (2006) *Colour: How to Use Colour in Art and Design*. Laurence King Publishing.
- Feisner, A E. Reed, R. (2013) *Color Studies*. A&C Black.
- Finlay, V. (2002) *Colour, Travels Through the Paintbox*. Sceptre.
- Gifford, C. (2018) *The Colours of History: How Colours Shaped the World*. QED Publishing.
- Goethe von Wolfgang, J. (1840) *Theory of Colours*. The M.I.T Press.
- Itten, J. (1970) *The Elements of Color*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Itten, J. (1975) *Design and Form: The Basic Course at the Bauhaus and Later*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Loske, A. (2019) *Tate: Colour: A Visual History: The Exploration of Colour from Newton*. Hachette UK.
- McLeod, J. (2016) *Colour Psychology Today*. Kindle Edition. John Hunt Publishing.
- Misek, R. (2010) *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Color*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mollica, P. (2013) *Color Theory: An Essential Guide to Color- from Basic Principles to Practical Application*. Walter Foster Publishing.
- Phillips, G. Crow, T. (2005) *Seeing Rothko*. Getty Publications.
- Rothko, C. (2015) *Mark Rothko: From the inside out*. Yale University Press.
- Rothko, C. Bishop, J. (2017) *Rothko: The Color Field Paintings*. Chronicle Books.
- Shevell K, S. (2003) *The Science of Color*. Elsevier.

- Stone Lee, T. Adams, S. Morioko, N. (2008) *Colour Design Workbook: A Real World Guide to Using Color in Graphic Design*. Rockport Publishers.
- Teshuva-Baal, J. Rothko, M. (2003) *Rothko*. Ediz. Ingles. Taschen.
- Walther, F I. Picasso, P. (2000) *Picasso*. Taschen.
- Wilkin, K. Belz, C. (2007) *Color as Field: American Painting, 1950-1975*. Yale University Press.

Journals/Articles:

- Dael, N. Perseguers, N M. Cynthia Marchand. Antonietti, P J. Mohr, C. (2015) *Put on that colour, it fits your emotion: Colour appropriateness as a function of expressed emotion*. Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, Volume 69, Issue 8. Sage Journals
- KÖNIG, C S; Collins, M W. (2009) *Goethe, Eastlake and Turner: From Colour Theory To Art*. International Journal of Design & Nature and Ecodynamics, Vol. 4, Issue, 3
- O'Connor, Z. (2011) *Colour Research & Application*. Volume 36, Number 3. Wiley Periodicals, Inc
- Olson, W D. Doescher, L R. Olson, S M. (2004) *When the sky ran red – The Story Behind The Scream*. Sky Publishing Corp

Websites:

- Author not known. (2009) *Painting Exercises: The colour wheel*. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/sep/20/guide-to-painting-colour-wheel>
- Author not known. (2019) *Sunflowers: Symbols of happiness*. Available at <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/learn-about-art/paintings-in-depth/sunflowers-symbols-of-happiness> ,
<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/learn-about-art/paintings-in-depth/sunflowers-symbols-of-happiness?viewPage=2>
- Bailey, R. (2019) *How Colors Affect Human Behavior*. Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/color-psychology-and-human-behavior-4151666>

- Billson, N. (2010) *Don't Look Now: No 3 best horror film of all time*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/22/dont-look-now-roeg-horror>
- Carter, K. (2015) *Coming out of the dark: why black is such a positive colour*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/09/coming-out-of-the-dark-why-black-is-such-a-positive-colour>
- Chapman, C. (2010) *Color Theory for Designers: How To Create Your Own Color Schemes*. Available at: <https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/02/color-theory-for-designer-part-3-creating-your-own-color-palettes/>
- Clines, X F. (1987) *Van Gogh sets auction record: \$39.9 million*. The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/31/arts/van-gogh-sets-auction-record-39.9-million.html>
- Cousins, C. (2015) *Monochromatic Color: How to Use It Effectively*. Available at: <https://designshack.net/articles/inspiration/monochromatic-color-how-to-use-it-effectively/>
- Jaroff, L. (2003) *More Than a 'scream'*. The New York Times. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/09/science/more-than-a-scream-a-blast-felt-round-the-world.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FMunch%2C%20Edvard&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=search&contentPlacement=18&pgtype=collection
- Kedmey, K. (2017) *Mark Rothko, American, born, Russia (now Latvia). 1903-1970* Available at: <https://www.moma.org/artists/5047>
- Morris, N. (2019) *The Art of the Garden: Pierre Bonnard's Mimosas*
- Sooke, A. (2014) *Van Gogh's Sunflowers: The unknown history*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/culture/story/20140120-van-goghs-flower-power>
- Stewart, J. (2018) *Learn How Color Theory Can Push Your Creativity to the Next Level*. Available at: <https://mymodernmet.com/basic-color-theory/>