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Research in Practice Essay 11.05.23:

How do artists use colours and colour theory to play with the subject represented and our perception of it?

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Throughout the centuries, artists have continued to transform and push the practice, finding new ways to create art by challenging and revolutionising movements. Using sculpture, painting, installation, performance or photography artists have found ways to translate the world and capturing its beauty. The role of the artist was for a long time to be as truthful to the reality of events as they could. Later on, they thought of new methods to illustrate emotional states and feelings using colours, shadows, light, textures, performances, installations, and even by talking art outside the conventions of galleries and the usual set up.

Painters can capture specific moments using colours to enhance the feeling or atmosphere of that instant. They can also create safe spaces for people to lose themselves into by manipulating the intensity and luminosity of the colours applied. Artists use colours in order to change the viewers perception or reaction to their artwork.

For this essay we will focus on the different techniques and ideas used by artists during the 20th century and the work of various theorists who studied that field.

We will look at Isaac Newton's colour theory and discovery of the colour wheel, the work of Josef Albers, who pursued active research into colour perception by creating a series of paintings and wrote about the theory of colour interaction, Michel Pastoureau and his research on the history of colours, Kassia St Clair's description of shades, and finally artists such as Matisse, Picasso, Albers, and Rothko who worked closely with colours in the 20th century.

- **Colour**

The perception an artist has of his paintings might be different to the viewer's. Artists create artworks in which they chose what they allow the public to see or not and resort to various techniques to guide the eye and the mind. By manipulating colours an artist can play with the lighting, shadows and impression we have of a space or person. Colours are a big part of constructing atmospheres thus by employing them artists produce divergent effects and influence our minds to see or feel things.

In 1666, Isaac Newton proved that light is made of a spectrum of colours. With the use of a prism, he split white light which created a rainbow-coloured spectrum. He then wrapped this spectrum around itself to make the now well-known colour wheel. Being essential for

artists, the colour wheel allows to create balanced colour schemes and complementary colours enhance each other's intensity and are used to produce rich contrasts in images.

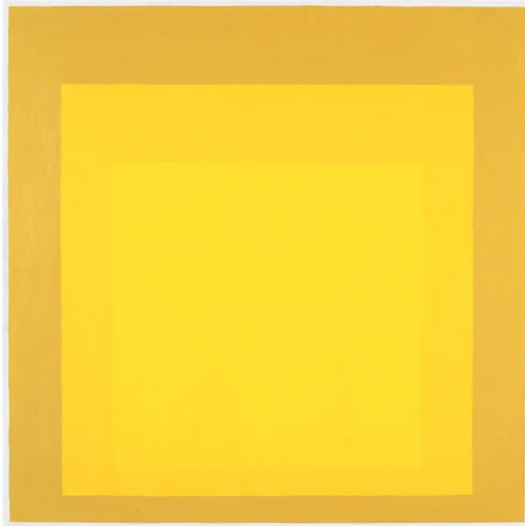


Fig. 1

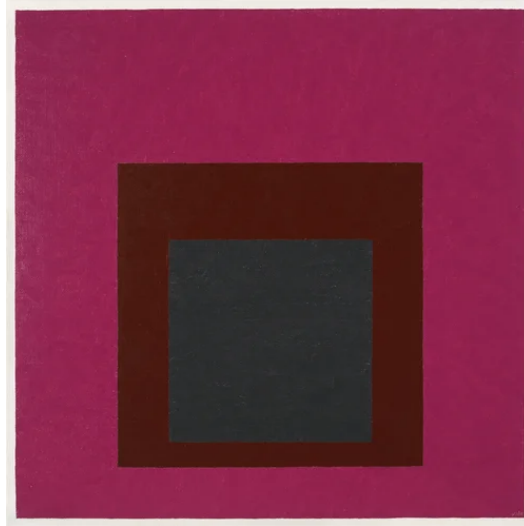


Fig. 2

Josef Albers is a German artist and professor who taught at the Bauhaus, the Black Mountain College and was the head of the design department at Yale University. He is known for his engaged research in colour interaction and his abstract paintings, testimony of his investigation. In his book *Interaction of Colour* (1963) he demonstrated that a colour is never seen as it is physically but always in relation to its environment. Using many examples from experiences achieved with the help of students, he shows how the eye and the mind interpret colours. For example, colours appear darker on a light background and lighter on a darker background. This phenomenon is the result of a gap between the physiological perception of the occurrence and the way our brain interprets it. This book describes and teaches about perception and the mechanics of vision in relation to colours. (Albers, 1963)

"In its visual perception, a colour is almost never seen as it really is -as it is physically. This observation makes colour the most subjective means of expression." (Albers, n.d.)

This quote is a perfect example of his theory. It supports his work with the idea that the colours represented change one another and would look different if they were on their own or next to other colours. In addition, the lighting, artificial or natural, would alter the colours painted. People also perceive colours differently depending on their culture, life experiences, personality, education and age. Art historians and sociologists explained the provenance of this matter in different cultures, during different periods.

Michel Pastoureau is a French professor and art historian whose work includes research on the history of colours. He always has been surrounded by people who made art and were passionate about it: three of his great uncles were painter and his parents frequented artists assemblies and their studios. From a young age he was keen on history and naturally his parents' love for art added to his interest. According to him, colour is a cultural concept whose definition is complex and varies depending on the cultures and the times. He wrote multiple books focussing on different colours (yellow, red, blue, green, white and black), their meaning in various cultures during different periods and other books about different themes regarding colours such as *The Colours of Our Memories* (2010).

"The first colour used in art was red - from ochre. And the first known example of cave art was a red ochre plaque, (...), dated to 75,000 years ago." (Evans, 2019)

Comparable to this article on the history and science of colours, Michel Pastoureau writes that red was the first colour ever manipulated by men. Its meaning and symbolic changes from a culture to the next and has evolved throughout the centuries. For many years it was a dominant colour that was believed to protect, embellish, and bring good luck. In the Mediterranean it was used for bricks, roof tiles, potteries, ceramics, clothing and jewellery,

and carried positive connotations. In Egypt however, it was considered as a colour of violence, war, destruction and is the colour Seth, God of evil forces. Roman painters used to create murals in tones of red. For example, in Pompei, they would paint the backgrounds with red ochre, hematite and cinnabar which is expensive and is a dangerous poison. Essentially from the Palaeolithic to contemporary art, artists have always loved working with red. With its many chromatic deviations, they have found in it ways to give more movement and rhythm, separate the planes, construct a pictural space and accentuate this or that figure in their compositions.

In her book *The Secret Lives of Colour* (2016), Kassia St Clair selected 75 shades that she appreciates the most. From the most basic colours such as beiges to tints with the greatest names like Cochineal, a dark almost brick like red with a touch of purply-pink, St Clair writes about the history of these different shades whilst giving of each one a veristic description. According to her “colour is fundamental to our experience of the world around us” (p.13).

- **Representation**

Figurative paintings are made for the spectators to recognise the subject at first glimpse whereas abstract paintings have the particularity to make us reflect on what we are looking at and figuring out the intention behind it. Is it just a simplified landscape focusing on the exploration of shapes? A transcription of emotions? An appreciation of colours? Colours have a different impact on the viewer depending on the way they are pictured and on the theme of the painting. Also knowing the intention of an artist changes the way we look at the artwork and allows less of a freedom of imagination.

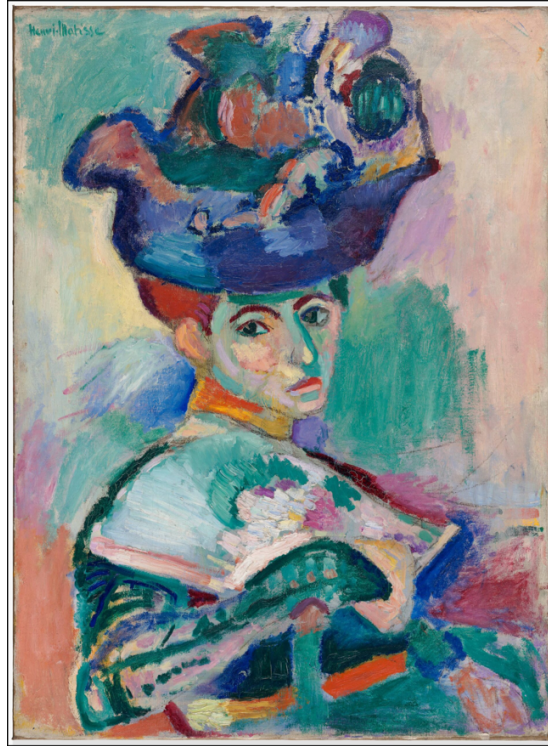


Fig. 3

Fauvism is a movement developed by a group of French artists from 1905 to 1908. Henri Matisse, André Derain, Raoul Dufy, Georges Braque and other of their peers exhibited their work at the “Salon d’Automne” in 1905. The use of intense, non-realistic, vivid colours characteristic of these artists shocked the public. Matisse’s *Woman with a Hat* next to a Renaissance statue got art critique Louis Vauxcelles to point at the painting and exclaim: “Donatello parmi les fauves!” (Donatello amongst the wild beasts!). The painters like this title and decided to preserve it. The aspirations of these artists were to use colours as a means of representation of emotions and for decorative effects. As a development of neo-impressionism with the bright, vibrant colours taken directly out of the tube or with very little mixing, and of post-impressionism with the distinct loose brush marks. This group of artists were interested in colour theory, especially complementary colours and looked at ways to expand the representation and use of colour in painting.

Henri Matisse wrote about this period in his “Notes of a Painter” (1908) and said his aim was to discover “the essential character of things” and to produce an art of “balance, purity, and serenity” (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Magdalena Dabrowski, 2004). Artists’ new way of using colours is not arbitrary but calculated to modify and play with our perception of paintings, our feelings towards them and create more energetic scenes. For instance, Matisse in his painting *Woman with a Hat*, the quick brush strokes letting the canvas show through and the vivid hues of green, red, blue reveal the expressive look of the woman and create a dynamic picture.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Besides being part of art movements, colours can be specific to emotional moments in an artist’s life. Notorious Spanish painter and sculptor Pablo Picasso is known to have lived two affecting phases during his career that he translated into his work: his Blue and Rose

periods. In 1901, Pablo Picasso entered a time of depression and melancholy after receiving news that his good friend Carlos Casagemas committed suicide after a disastrous love affair. Picasso's sorrow was accentuated by the situation of poverty in which he lived in. He began painting darker ambiances in various shades of blue evidence of his sadness and "testimony to the painter's state of mind" (Musée Picasso Paris). His blue paintings portrayed people with apparent expressions of sadness and often with cheeks hollowed out of hunger probably evidence of the artist's poverty. Most of his paintings from that moment on touched upon themes of human suffering, pain and guilt.

We can notice a switch in his work from 1905. He settled in the Bateau-Lavoir, a residence for artists situated in Montmartre, an area on the edge of Paris where artists would gather. Picasso frequented other artists and poets at a café called "Au Lapin Agile" where they would spend evenings taking part in philosophical debates, playing music and the owner would accept paintings as payments for drinks. The artist also joined the Médrano circus, and the Parisian theatre troupes. Picasso converted his prosperity through his "Rose Period": a stage of well-being characterised by a return to brighter shades, in particular pinks, reds and earth tones. In his painting *Acrobat and Young Harlequin*, 1905 (Fig. 3) we can see the transition between the two phases. The two performers are sitting in front of a blue background, Harlequin on the left recognisable by his diamond patterned costume is looking at the acrobat in a pink suit. Both have a pale face and a sad look. The two figures, Harlequin in blue tones and the acrobat in rose and pink, appear to be the portrayal of the two stages. These two chapters in Picasso's life show how he manipulated colour and the meaning behind them to express his emotions.

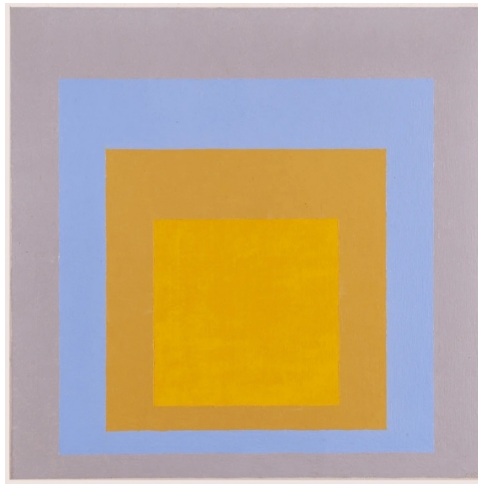


Fig. 6

Another form in which artists employ colour is abstraction. Such representation enables them to concentrate on the colours and conduct a better influence on the perception. Prior to the publishing of his book on colour interaction in 1963, Josef Albers created a series of paintings called *Homage to the Square*. He started this series comprising of more than two thousand paintings in 1949 until his death in 1976. This experiment on the perception of colours was a deliberate play of surface, colours, environment, and a demonstration of the tendency of colours to change depending on their environment and the colours they are next to. Albers' aim was not to deceive the viewers' perception but to challenge the eye by observing and analysing the colours on the canvas.

Each of them focuses on different variations and combinations of colours and is formed of three to four squares of different colours to study the way they expand or shrink. The square shape of the paintings accentuates their man-made quality and furthers them from nature to centre the attention on the interaction between the colours represented. For the purpose of these paintings to be affective, the viewers need to be aware of what they are looking at. If they don't the paintings fail to serve as a learning matter but succeed as simply esthetical

compositions. Each of the paintings of this series is therefore a manifestation of colour interaction, a lesson on perception and purely a contemplative artwork.



Fig. 7

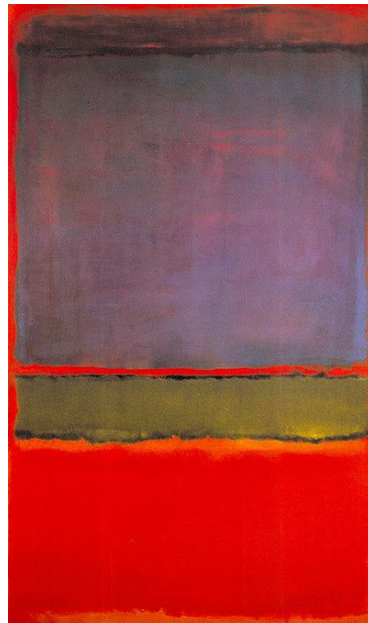


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Equally to Albers' work, Mark Rothko's paintings are defined around colour but serve a different purpose: to produce emotions. In 1947, Rothko began to develop his own style: large, vertical, juxtaposed rectangles of colour with softly uneven edges, giving a blurry, dynamic quality and making them look as if they are floating over the canvas. These paintings force the viewers to get lost in the contemplation of the colours and experience a deep connection to them. In opposition to Albers, Rothko's work appears organic, less determined and without such a rigidity.

Homage to the Square is a series which intends to teach about our perception of colour and its environment whereas Rothko's work aims to make the viewers react emotionally rather than intellectually.

- **Perception**

When looking at colours in paintings, we can distinguish a split between the artist's own perception and feelings about a subject and the viewer's impression and reaction to it. The artist's life experiences, and personality are seen through the paintings and the public can sense its mood and relate to the artist's feelings. The techniques applied to the making of a painting influences the way we will look at it and is sometimes a translation of the artist's state of mind. Colours having divergent meaning around the world, in various cultures, it is more likely for people to react differently at a colourful painting. In addition, many circumstances alter our perception of a painting: our education, religion, genetics, the environment and context in which the artwork is presented, or even our own emotional state at that moment. Colours affect us in different ways. For instance, people who have synaesthesia (a condition in which they experience a blending of their senses, like seeing letters and numbers in colour) can be more sensitive to certain colours and in that way can change their reception of an artwork.

"Perceptual Psychology" describes a theory focusing on the relationship between an individual's experience (perceptions, goals, beliefs, meanings) and their behaviour (action, expression). So, how events in our life can explain our actions and reactions and, in a way, it is equivalent to artists making art and people's reaction to it.

In Addition, Michel Pastoureau states in his book *Red: The History of a Colour* (2016, p.26) that:

"The perception of a colour is not only a biological or neurological phenomenon; it is also a cultural phenomenon, which solicits knowledge, memory, imagination, feelings, relationships with others and, more broadly, life in society."

In this book, he also explains that societies seem to have different associations of colours to everyday objects. The most universal colour association appears to be red: it is generally linked, in most parts of the world, to being the colour of blood or fire whereas other colours are attached to different objects.

Ultimately, in this essay we have seen how artists and theorists from the 20th century have influenced the way we perceive artworks. Whether in abstract or figurative painting, by putting certain colours next to each other, and by being truthful and accurate in the representation of impactful personal life events, using theories around perception and other techniques to trick the viewer.

In my practice, I often follow a similar pattern where I focus on transcribing my feelings and hoping to generate reciprocal emotions from the audience. I also insert colour theory in my work to emphasise these feelings. In the future I wish to further these ideas of perception and chromatic hues.

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