Research in Practice- Essay

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Colour, Culture and Memento Mori

This research document is intending to explore the history and meaning behind the word of Colour, Culture and Memento Mori. What is more, their connection and influence on everyday life and society. Also, giving examples on how these words inspired visual artists and scientists around the world in their work.
I selected these three words as I believe they have enormous impact on the way we have perceive and acknowledgment on our environment.
Knowing and understanding their impact and influence, can help to create more efficient and meaningful designs in the future.
Furthermore, my aim is to create a question for my independent inquiry based on the knowledge I gathered through my research.

Colour

The word colour originated from the Old Latin word 'colos' meaning hide, conceal. (Harper ,2019)
But what really is colour? It depends on the aspect we look at it. It could be viewed as a physical entity generated by electromagnetic radiation of wavelengths visible to the eye. Described by its saturation, hue, and lightness, and could be measured through how much energy is presented in the spectral wavelength by a spectrophotometer. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.)
While we can measure colour objectively, the way we process and perceive colour varies from person to person, depending on their physiology and psychology.
In the early 1960s, trichromatic theory about colour vision confirmed the existence of three kinds of colour receptor cells responsible to sense various length of wavelengths. The absence of any of this receptor cells results some type of colour blindness. In extreme cases a person can perceive only greys due to have no functioning receptor cells at all. (Nassau, 2020)

Although we can view colour as an objective physical entity as described above, we cannot forget the connection between colour and emotion. Our psychological response to colour is

subjective, as emotional connotations conditioned into us from birth by traditions. For example, the colour of mourning can hugely vary in different cultures as some uses black, white, gold or even purple.

However, our cultural background is not the only factor exercise an influence on how we perceive colours.

It also depends on our experiences, age, mental health, and mood. (Nassau, 2019)

Emotions and moods often described by colours, for instance sadness 'in the blues' or 'green with envy'. As a result, many tests have been designed to help identify and interpret personality and cognitive processing attributes by knowing and understanding the connection between colour perception and mood. Some examples of these tests are the Rorschach Inkblot test [Fig.1.], Lüscher Colour test [Fig.2.], or the Lowenfeld Mosaic [Fig.3.], where the test can indicate a disease or mood by solely choosing a single colour by the test subject. (Carruthers, H.R., Morris, J., Tarrier, N. and Whorwell, P.J. ,2010)

Figure 1. Rorschach Inkblot Test

Figure 2. Lüscher Colour Test (1969)

Figure 3. Lowenfeld Mosaic

Colours can be used by many other ways due to our mental connection to them.
As Wassily Kandinsky said: “Colour is power which directly influences the soul. Colour provokes a psychic vibration. Colour hides a power still unknown but real, which acts on every part of the human body.” (Kandinsky, n.d.)

Many ancient cultures believed that colours have healing power. Chromotheraphy or in other name light therapy still used as an alternative, holistic treatment.

Because of our strong association to colours, it is also a very powerful design and marketing tool to influence how we perceive certain products. For instance, using a natural colour palette to present eco-friendly products can gain our trust. Also, it can help to create powerful awareness campaigns keeping the focus on a single colour. For example, Pink associated with Breast Cancer awareness, or red for Heart Disease. (Phillips R., n.d.)
Moreover, it gives us physical and emotional commotions through visual arts like paintings, motion graphics, fashion etc. the list could be endless.

Many artists and scientist developed their colour theory through history. Some focused their research on its physical aspects, like Sir Isaac Newton in 1666, who used prism to separate light into colours.
While others were more interested in the emotional or cultural aspect of colour like Wolfgang Von Goethe in the 1700’s or Mehrabian and Valdez in 1994.

Although each scientist's theory above is hugely significant, one of the biggest influences on modern art in the 19th century was a colour theory created by a French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786 – 1889). (Phillips R., n.d.) [Fig.4.]

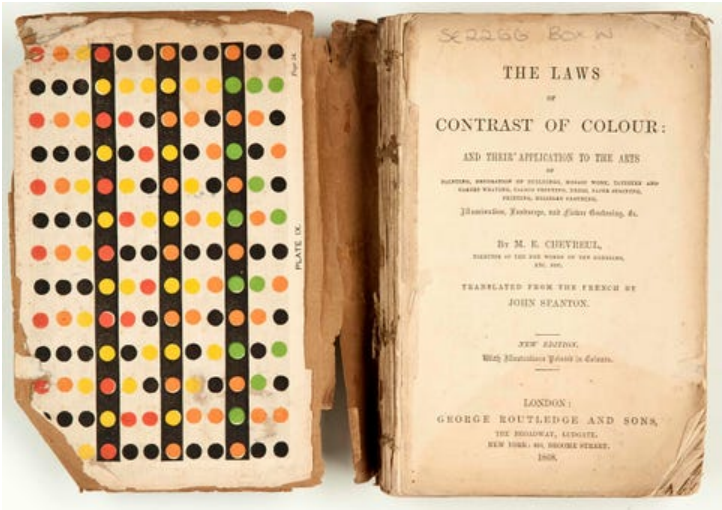

Figure 4. Chevreul E. () 'The Laws of Contrast of Colour: and Their Application to the Arts [book]

Between 1824 – 1852 he was appointed as the director of dyes at the Gobelins textile factory. He tried to find a way to create brighter and more dynamic colours. During his research he recognised how colour depth, hue and value could shift by the influence of the surrounding colour, realising the importance of complementary colours.
He differentiated colour contrast into three different types: successive, mixed and simultaneous contrast.
He realised that simultaneous colour contrast is the highest when complementary or contrasting colours viewed in a small, equal size juxtaposed. This also resulted in an optical colour mixing effect where the viewer's eye merged those colours optically.
This led to inspire the development of impressionism and pointillism. (Costa,2022),

Culture

Definition of culture by Merriam-Webster is:

> The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group *also*: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as

diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time. (Merriam-Webster,2019)

While the word culture comes from a French term, it originates from the Latin word 'colere' meaning cultivation or grow and earth.
Although there is much more to culture then its location, we often describe culture by its geographic origin. For instants Western, Eastern, Latin, Middle Eastern and African culture. (Pappas, McKelvie, 2021)
Nevertheless, culture is constantly evolving and changes partly due to globalization. Many believe globalization is causing cultural homogenization. More and more new social movements, laws, markets establishing on an international level due to the rapidly advancing technology. Cheap flights, internet and multinational companies selling to a global market brought previously foreign cultures to our doorstep.
However, culture is built by people. They can choose what influences they want to integrate into their life or that they wish to discard. Many embrace the other cultures, others defending theirs, and some still searching to find their cultural heritage. (Wang,2007)
Merging one culture to another in some level is natural. However, how we approach other cultures is imperative.
Cultural Denigration is adopting and using negative stereotypes purely to degrade people of certain ethnicity. For instance, blackface.
Cultural Appropriation is exploiting historically subjugated groups' cultural elements or objects, due to ignorance or lack of understanding. For example, wearing a Native American Feather War bonnet which has huge spiritual significant to its culture as a fancy-dress or as a fashion accessory.
These unacceptable ways of cultural blending can further widen the differences in society.
Cultural Appreciation on the other hand aims to learn and share elements of other culture with admiration. It can help to build respect and better understanding between cultures.
For instants, eating authentic food in an authentic restaurant. (Cuncic, 2020)
Culture is passed on from one generation to another, it is a way of life and living.
Our life is based on and shaped by material and non-material cultural parts.

Material culture is places, objects, tools etc. that have been developed through generations like temples (churches, synagogues, mosques…), utensils (fork, chopsticks…) or clothes (kimono, sari, kilt…) etc.

The material culture formed through values, traditions of non-material culture.

Non-material culture is nonphysical like religions, rituals, ethics, languages, music, dance etc.

Culture is something we learn from previous generations, shared with members of our surrounding. It is never restricted to one person, its developed through social interactions of past and present.

The way social interactions shape our culture, culture shapes our society and forms nations. (BeauteHealthy, 2020).

Culture creates national identity and national identity often inspires people to express their deep connection and pride towards their heritage through their work or art.

Although many artists, designers, writers, and creative people use their culture as an inspiration, Frida Kahlo is especially known for her patriotic art.

While Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderon had both European and Mexican indigenous ancestry, she identified herself as a Mexican woman. Her deep connection and pride to her Mexican culture has always been reflected in her way of living and in her art. Frida's cultural persona embodied all the Mexican revolution's cultural ideas and social values.

She always emphasized her strong belonging to Mexican culture throughout her art and clothing by using intense colours, symbolism, mythology, artisan traditions intrinsic to Mexican indigenous people and wearing typical regional clothing of Oaxaca and Tehuana. (Brittney, 2021). [Fig.5.]

Figure 5. Frida Kahlo (1946) 'Tree of Hope, Remain Strong' [painting]

Memento Mori

The Latin phrase originated from ancient Rome; Memento Mori's meaning is 'Remember that you must die.'

While in modern society this might sound gruesome and frightening as talking about death someway for some can become or feel distasteful, its original message meant to motivate and encourage to embrace life, and really live life for the fullest.

As Steve Jobs said:

> Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart. (Daily Stoic, 2018)

Through history and modern times, Memento Mori took on many shapes from art, literature, architecture, fashion, music and in a form of everyday items like jewellery. Inspired many art styles like 'Danse Macabre' in the Middle Ages, meaning Dance or Death and 'Vanitas' in the 17th century inspiring many artists of the Dutch Golden Age.

Artists used very strong symbolism to convey and emphasize moral instructions and show the viewers how treasurable life is. (Daily Stoic, 2018)
Some symbols are well-known like skulls, skeletons, hourglass, wilted flowers, roses, candles, coffins etc.
Others might be more hidden like clasping hands, wreath of Laurel: representing immortality and the everlasting human soul, or open book: pure life and draped cloth signifying a short cut life. (Utah State University, n.d.).

While many believe that the philosophy is rooted in Christianity and mainly presented from medieval time till the Victorian period in Europe, many other culture, religion and time period embraced similar concepts.

One example is a Buddhist practice called *Maranasati*. This meditation practice is rooted in some of the early Buddhist traditions and dedicated to mindfulness of death through a series of customs. The tradition of Maranasati encouraged monks to prepare themselves to the inevitable death in a meaningful way, while intensify their gratefulness towards the precious moments of life. (Nash,2021)

Other tradition based on a similar philosophy, is the Japanese, centuries-old ritual called *Hanami* or in another name: 'cherry blossom-viewing', deeply rooted in cultural and religious believes.
Sakura (cherry blossom) has many connotations in Asian culture. Due to its short life, it represents rebirth, life and death. Its fragility and beauty are reminders of Buddhist idea of mindfulness of mortality and the appreciation of life.
Its tradition can be traced back early as 710 to the Nara period, in connection to the mountain deities. Also, later to the feudal Japan to the samurai philosophy *bushido* 'the way of the warrior'. Not to fear death as it is inevitable but value the virtues of life. (Suk H. ,2016)

Although through the centuries we become less and less aware of the philosophy of Memento Mori, it still gives huge inspiration to modern artists and entrepreneurs.

The multiple Grammy winner R&B singer *The Weekend*, used memento Mori as the title for his radio show in 2018. [Fig.6.]

Another musician *Mac Miller* referenced Memento Mori in his final music video *Self Care* just a few weeks before his passing in 2018. (Daily Stoic, 2018) [Fig.7.]

In some cases, an entire brand like the British alternative jewellery brand *Regal Rose*, inspired by memento mori symbolism.

Figure 6. The Weekend (2018) 'Memento Mori' [radio show advertisement]

Figure 7. Mac Miller (2018) 'Self Care' [music video]

One of the most prolific fashion designers of resent time, Alexander McQueen was famously obsessed with mortality, regularly romanticising death in his collections and fashion shows. His collection often inspired by the paradoxical connection between life and death. Frequently drawing historical references from the Victorian Gothic period, from the era most infatuated by Memento Mori philosophy, using strong imagery and symbolism.
Some of his most notably influenced shows by his fascination were *Dante* (autumn/winter 1996-97), Sarabande (spring/summer 2007) and his final posthumous collection: *Angels and Demons* (autumn/winter 2010-11)
His collection often included human hair encased in labels similar to Victorian lockets, skulls, skeletons and taxidermy. (Bolton, 2011) [Fig.8.] [Fig.9.]

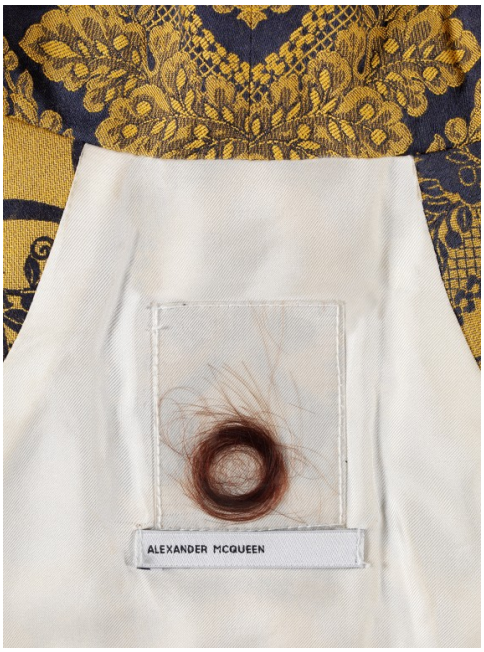

Figure 8. Alexander McQueen (1990) 'King of the Wind' frock coat [costume]

Figure 9. Gary J. McQueen (2009) 'Natural Dis-tinction Un-natural Selection' [invitation, book cover]

Conclusion

For a designer, understanding a motivation behind others way of thinking is the first step to creating an impactful and meaningful design work.
During my research work, I have become more and more aware of how colour, culture, and the way we perceive our mortality is deeply interlinked.
In each section within my essay, I was focusing on the visual artist reverence towards the section's keyword, Frida Kahlo's cultural incentive or Alexander McQueen's relationship to mortality. However, throughout my research I feel it is has become evident that the other keywords were equivalently important and inspiring for both visual artists.

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