

Independent Inquiry Proposal: How does an artist use colour successfully? And what are the parameters for this success?

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Student Number: 1802758

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Tutor: Alex Duncan

Colour, Perception and Composition

This essay investigates the connection between colour, perception and composition, presenting the obstacles that surround the theory of colour and its development between eras. Humanity seeks to understand and label the different aspects of the world, this of course includes colour. The use of colour will continue to expand with the invention of new techniques and philosophies. This research is based on the effect different stimuli have on both colour and how it is seen including analysis of work from Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Vincent van Gogh, Wassily Kandinsky and Eugene Delacroix.

Colour

“The appearance that things have that results from the way in which they reflect light. Red, orange and green are colours.”(colour - Definition, | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2020)

The object that is visible does selective absorption of light and the light that is reflected has a specific wavelength, that is what gives it its colour. Colour as much as subject matter, style and composition, enables us to recognise paintings as typical of a particular period, place or artist. (Bomford and Roy, 2009) Access to material colours is limited by location, time period and wage; these are the restrictions surrounding the procuring of different pigments. Ever since the Middle Ages painters were constantly reminded of how inadequate their palette was for capturing the true glory of the natural world. The colour maker George Field remarked in the 1840s that the old Masters had been forced to harmonize much below nature because the pigments were not bright enough. (Ball, n.d.) An example of this is Hokusai's unmistakable 'Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji' easily identifiable from the style. The muted colours are a clear marker to a piece recognizable through its colour.



Figure 1 Inume Pass, Kōshū (Hokusai, 1764-1849)

The range of colours available today is only possible through the curiosity and invention of humanity. For example the colour tyrian purple has a history dating back at least 3500 years to a mollusc native to the ancient phoenician city of Tyre. A single ounce required around 250.000 snails.

“Purple is the most extravagant of colours. It is traditionally associated with royalty and nobility because Tyrian purple was only affordable for the elite. During the Roman empire, ‘The Purple’ meant the Roman Emperor, a term derived from the colour of his robe.”(Coles, 2018)

This class separation is a stereotypical example of the restrictions of access to colour. This brief history is an example of all three components and shows why the colours accessible today are so important. Cultures use and create colour in different ways, not all colour is available everywhere. The artist has to develop their palette and skill with these restrictions. An example of such is when aboriginals from different tribes use different colour body paint, this paint is normally made from clay or ochre. The regional restriction limits their palette but the outcome is no less beautiful.

“In northwest Queensland, men rub their foreheads with charcoal and paint a white band...White and red bands are painted across the chest and the rest of the body is covered in red”(Aboriginal Body Painting Art, n.d.) Each type of painting or decoration is part of Aboriginal laws or regulation building key parts of their culture around these rites. The symbols hold a purpose to the tribes, inscribing their skin in a contrasting colour makes these symbols all the more active.



Figure 2 Ville D'avray (Corot, 1865)

“Conventions of representation grew up based on mixtures of available colours” (Bomford and Roy, 2009)

While the discovery of new colours is certainly important it is not to be discounted that because of these restrictions artists have had to be creative in how they chose to illustrate their world. Corot used a reduced palette and still created in Ville D’arry, the constraint of colour brought about the mastery of tones, shades and technique.

Perception

“an idea, a belief or an image you have as a result of how you see or understand something”(Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2020)

Two categories influence perception of colour: internal and external. The internal effect is specific to an individual's physiology and external is the effect of the environment on either individual or the colour.

Biology influences how you perceive colour, for instance, the likelihood of being colour blind. “*The Colours of all-natural Bodies have no other origin than this, that they are variously qualified to reflect one sort of light in greater plenty then another*”(Newton, 1672). Light is projected onto the retina which is comprised of ‘rod’ and ‘cone’ cells The (normal) eye contains 3 types of cone cells, each containing a different pigment: Color blindness occurs when one or more types of cones are either totally absent or have limited spectral sensitivity. This limit means that an artist, for instance, would be unable to see the full range of colour available. However this opens up a new line of colour inquiry.

What are the differences in the tones of colour, between a non colour blind artist and them? Interestingly a colour blind artist colour create a piece that to them is all one shade and yet to the rest of the world is a canopy clash of colours unhindered by pre programmed association.

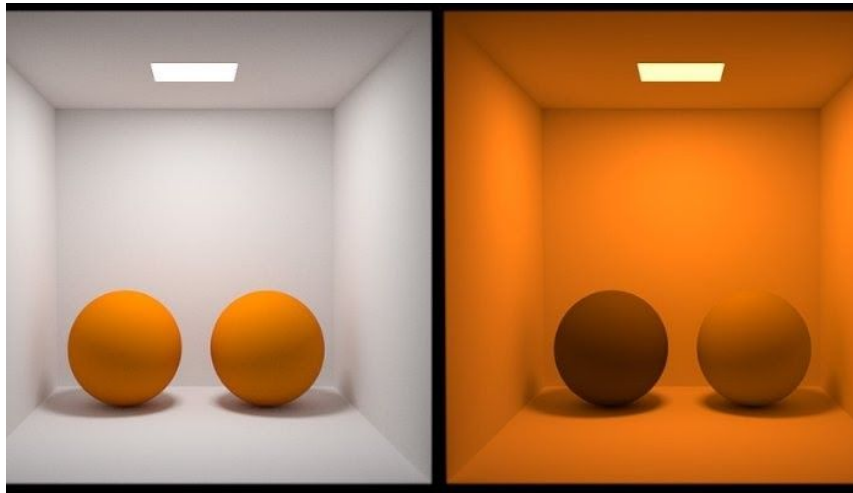


Figure 3 Metamerism (Metamerism, n.d.)

The main factor of external perception is that the type of light projected changes the way the colour is perceived.

For instance “Metamerism is where two colour samples appear to match under one set of lighting conditions but not under another. (Hoskins, 2004)” From an artist’s point of view if they were to attempt to colour match two brands of paint un-tested in a different light source there is no guarantee that the shades will match. The other external variable is the base the colour is layered onto will affect the colour. Hypothesizing that the base material is viable in the finished work. A light background could wash out light colours while ensure darker tones stand out and vice versa.

“Whether the psychic effect of colour is a direct one or whether it is the outcome of association, is perhaps open to question. The soul being one with the body, the former may well experience a psychic shock, caused by association acting on the latter. For example, red may cause a sensation analogous to that caused by flame, because red is the colour of flame.” (Kandinsky and Sadler, 1977)

There is a physical and mental response to seeing colour. It can be used to evoke a certain mood or to create a message or sharp response in the viewer. It is not possible to universally define a colour. A colour is defined by a personal codex of synonyms that is both consciously and unconsciously associated with that shade. The response from colour is inconsistent from person to person. This establishes the question ‘ How can an artist know the impression their work has on the

audience ?’ their only solution is to assume that some of the artist experiences and therefore associations relate to the audience. It is easiest to use an example of the physical: a red stop sign. To the audience and the artist relates to the danger and law connotation. Red can be used to activate nervous system activity. Displayed with other colors, it will appear to be the closest to the viewer. Making red the most suitable to be used to denote an emergence. It forces a physical response to the perceived danger.

Because of the impossibility of matching two shades exactly with limited resources, such as trying to make the colour of the sky with white and blue, this method is mostly ignored. Of course artists seek to represent life in the way they see it so it can be frustrating not being able to convey their world to another. Van gogh ‘Starry night’ is an excellent example of how different colours are to an individual “a painter had better start from the colours on his palette than from the colours in nature “ (Gogh and Leeuw, 1996) meaning that an artist is better off painting with the colours they had access too than trying to match their palette to the environment and also that by creating what they can instead of what is already visible to the world they allows others to better understand their world. It is better to think of a creative workaround for that shade of purple or orange visible in a shadow that spends time and money searching after that pigment.

Composition

“The different parts that something is made of; the way in which the different parts are organized” (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2020)

The composition of colour is defined by two variables; theory and physical. Colour theory is used as a practical guide documenting the effect of a colour in differing factors. Colour is determined by measurement of hue, saturation, and brightness of the reflected light, these categories create a natural balance that is used to determine the reason behind colour schemes. Primary, secondary and tertiary hue is at a level of full saturation, or brightness, which means that there is no black, white, or grey added. Colour is described in terms of value, which is the lightness or darkness of a colour or the relative amount of white or black in a hue. (Whelan, n.d.) By having a basic grasp of colour theory this system can be utilized to ensure that the colour scheme suits the particular project or individual sensibly.



Figure 4 The Prisoner of Chillon (Delacroix, 1834)

“Some of the most vibrant paintings of Delacroix and the Impressionists are based on the simultaneous contrast effect, with direct orange – blue, red-green or yellow - violet complementary pairings. Secondly, the tinting of shadows with the complementary of an adjacent highlight mimicked the physiological behaviour of the human eye, fatigued by exposure to bright colour.” (Bomford and Roy, 2009)

A popular example of a colour scheme is the use of complementary colours which uses opposites on the colour wheel. By knowing the composition of a piece it can then be broken down into the basic theory used here that is shown to be effective on multiple levels. This piece perfectly applies complementary colour theory. The source of light, yellow-orange, directed to the foreground of the piece is in direct contrast with the purple-blue tones in the background creating the depth of a room and reflecting both the life of the prisoners and their distressing situation. The shadows created by the primary human figure are created using light blue once again stressing the contrast to the human skin tone of orange- Brown. The use of using minimal black in the piece is that it is more alive and realistic than the majority of

modern painting which outlines its components. When using dark tones to create shadows instead of using black the piece retains its vibrancy

The physical factors of composition are the materials and methods used to create the colour. It is essential to understand how the materials will react so that factors affected by the vehicle, such as drying time do not affect the overall piece. An example of this would be to paint a time sensitive commission with oil paint, a substance that takes days to dry. *“The term vehicle indicates its own function. Its passenger is the pigment. The vehicle is both the carrier and glue for the colour”* (Hoskins, 2004)

Different vehicles create different textures of colour. Using oil as the vehicle creates oil paint and gum arabic is used in water paint to keep the pigment in suspension. The materials used as a binder for the pigment inform the artist about how to use the medium. What predetermined techniques are suitable to use to ensure the best chance of success. This can mean anything from a technically perfect piece to the abstract use of colour seen in Kadinsky’s work. By experimenting and therefore learning that watercolour paint runs with an abundance of water, the artist knows how to make a wash background. Or by forming a base with oil paints an artist can layer the paint to mimic the form of the object they are painting. Such is the techniques used in Rembrandt's ‘Belshazzar's feast’



Figure 5 Belshazzar's Feast(Rembrandt, 1635)

Exploring colour, perception and composition has answered many queries regarding my own work, Through this research a method of study can be developed to enhance an artist's practice. Learning about colour theory, the effect of perspective and the interaction of the materials used to make medium used in art infers that there must be a method to invoke the wanted reaction from the audience. This poses many questions. To cause the desired response from the audience if that is the goal, the artist must first understand the audience. Logically forming a target audience that will presumably view their work by hypnotizing their background with a generalization they can assume a minimal response. However like it is not universally possible to define colour it is not possible to know all of what a person has experienced and know what part of them will resonate with what colour and shape. Changing the parameters from the norm, does the artist make work for themselves or for the audience, as themselves is the only person they can assume to know. Is a piece only successful if it is understood by the audience, if it can be defined and grouped. What determines the success of an artwork? The question I wish to discuss in my dissertation is How does an artist use colour successfully? And what are the parameters for this success ?

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