

Title: Independent Project (ADDA6006) - **Independent Inquiry**

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Question:

How do designers use components of visual language to communicate a meaning or narrative with an audience?

To begin this extended essay of writing, I will discuss and investigate the question/ statement on the above page. Firstly, I will begin by breaking down the question into smaller sections to aid the discussion and to create a complete concise extended essay. I would like to begin this writing by investigating a number of essential components within design and more focusing in on wallpaper and fabric pattern print. An element I would like to discuss first would be Colour, investigating various artists who use colour as a foundation of their work, theorists who have developed an understanding of how colour is included and how it completes a design, and how it is seen by the eye and brain. From this, I would like to continue exploring colour but including other elements of design such as pattern and begin exploring how these components of design build a narrative within a designed pattern or textile.

Secondly, I will be developing an understanding of how narrative is brought to the forefront of design work through the use of the elements and foundations of design. I will consider this through the work of current and past designers and artists who focus on narrative components within their work, and who use narrative as a communitive response to create discussion within their work for those viewing and understanding the conversation the artists or designers were trying to discuss. I will look at designers such as William Morris, as a narrative driven designer, this will begin to build a collection of case studies to help aid the theories and discussions I will be undertaking to develop an understanding of how narrative is an essential foundation made up of design elements to create conversation and communication between the designer and an audience.

Thirdly, I will be exploring how my own personal practice has helped myself develop my own narrative within my design work, how working closely with designers within the design field from live briefs requests forming a narrative to help create an understanding and communication for my work. I have chosen to investigate this area of linking communication, narrative, and design as, I want to understand how as a designer we create work which speaks to someone, how design is seen and read differently. How can designers speak through visual language without words. I will be looking at my own personal experience within design and how my experience of being at student level is the start of my journey in understanding how visual language is an essential part of creating a strong

narrative to communicate meaning within design work, and an essential form of developing my own design visual language and voice for my present and future design self.

When designers communicate within artwork or design, colour can be at the forefront of the artistic minds, it can determine the basis of how design or art is seen, it can depict different meanings and emotions by the use of colour. Colour can tell a story through the use of hues and frequency of its use, 'colour is a complex construction of human vision.....a construction carefully coordinated with the construction of visual motion, surfaces, depths, transparency, and light sources', (Hoffman et al., 2003, p. 374). It is how an audience sees not just visionally such as how design or art is seen through the eyes of individuals but also understood or read mentally and emotionally. Attaching meaning and emotion to colour creates designs which tell a story, it is how to visually connect with the thoughts of an audience. Whether that being a customer or other artists and designers, the connection is made through how the brain processes the use of colour in artwork. How an audience sees colour, is determined by how they would attach a meaning or connection, the idea that it is a 'construction' just demonstrates how it is something which is built upon and is made up of smaller different components which create an understanding of a meaning or colour theory.

How we understand hues are depicted on their surroundings such as light, design can be understood differently through the eyes of different people but also the stage the art or design was seen at. Garry Fabian Miller's work (Arnolfini, 2023), looks at a relationship between colour and light see figure 1, in a recent exhibition 'Adore', Miller talks of his work as 'its wanting to say this is just a life in which we look at things like nature, light, the sun, how we feel, the things we feel but we don't understand', Miller (2023, quoted in Arnolfini Arts, 2023, 2.28s). The connections Miller makes within his work is very personal, the idea that his work, which includes a visual component of colour, in his life shows how elements of visual language begins to tell the artists or designers story and is their form of communication.



Figure 1 - *The Colour Fields: Golden Yellow enclosing Pink / Pink enclosing the Golden Yellow (diptych)* (Miller, 2021)

It is a form of perception, how an audience really sees colour, is due to perception,

‘this field is created when groups of colours merge in the eye of the viewer and so then if Kashan has a subject, it is colour, movement, light and visual sensation’, Bryony White (2019, quoted in OpenArtsArchive, 2019, 1.03s).

This is seen within Briget Riley’s work see figure 2 these colours are not just hues which sit on a canvas they are small individual components which build an overall understanding to the eye. How people process colour depends on how the eye sees it first, this is the beginning of the story and the journey our eyes take us on to understand the art or design. ‘Perspective makes the eye the centre of the visible world....it takes its visible world with it as it walks’ John Berger (2008, quoted in Ways of Seeing, 2008, 1.48s), therefore building small connections and understandings at each point of the work. Understanding the overall underlying narratives to each visual component.



Figure 2 – *Kashan* (Riley, 1984)

Although there is a link between both a mental journey with colour, there is also a physical one, 'the parvocellular pathway, which processes information about colour, can affect the magnocellular pathway, which processes information about motion', (Hoffman et al., 2003, p. 365), the way this is understood, is that colour and motion have an interlinked relationship which dictates how colour can be perceived. If motion can affect the outlook of colour, can we truly dictate how colour is seen in design, although motion in Hoffman's chapter of the book, it could also suggest a motion of time or moment. Such as capturing an emotion from a time in a person's life which they have now attached to a design through the use of colour, therefore creating that visual language.

The idea that colour has been a continuous movement throughout time, creating narrative and meaning, can show an understanding of how symbolism and visual language plays a part within design. From an early age, cave paintings were an incredibly early sign of colour association due to the small selection of hues that were able to be made from natural

materials, (MacKenzie, 1922, pp. 136 - 169). These initial artworks were the very beginning of design with a story, the early colour palette came from the surroundings and found materials, as 'in ancient societies, red appeared not only as the first color, but also as the color par excellence' (Pastoureau, 2017, p.12). This suggests how hues may have entered the art or design world, each colour has a distinct narrative or association to a particular time or period. Behind every hue there is a narrative, which explains how when used within design or art, there is always an underlying history of connotations to symbolism and communication.

Without first knowing, all colours have a reference to a meaning or association. The breakdown of how that shade came into art has a significance to the use of it today, although there can be differing opinions surrounding shades of colours, the original context is still evident such as red, 'as the colour of blood, red is also strongly associated with power', (St Clair, 2016, p. 136). Red was seen as the earliest and most dominant colour, it was known to be most used compared to other hues, this was the beginning colour which represented story, not just for pattern or design but for original story documentation of the first people or life from early ages. This hue and other colours found in early cave art as seen in figure 3 depict the earlier signs of meaning and narrative.



Figure 3 - *digital photograph (colour)* (Coulson, 1996)

Design is a form of communication, it is a language spoken by artists, 'Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling', (Langer, 1953, p. 40) Susanne Langer talks of how symbols are portrayed within art, Langer suggests there is a deeper connection between language and symbols within the art world. The suggestion of emotions and thoughts which are considered within design, allow for the idea that art has meaning and can be understood differently due to how a human perceives and deconstructs a visual element. Art and design creates its own language which can be used between the artist, the designer, the art and the audience, this language is non-verbal, it is understood through a series of elements and semantics, it is not exact but interpreted. How a design looks has a huge effect on the discussion the audience has with the work, understanding can be changed by the elements within a design, 'Design is a plan for arranging elements in such a way as best to accomplish a particular purpose', Charles Eames (2023 quoted in Black et al, 2023, p. 211), this purpose would be to communicate, understanding that there will be a function but for a design to be successful or sit within the design world, it needs to say something, it needs to have and be the voice of the artist or designer, designs allow for a conversation to be had between the artist and audience without a single word to be spoken. That is true design. As a designer, there is a need to connect with the audience, the connection is made from human emotions fuelling the narrative or underlying meaning within the artwork or design.

In the article from the Journal of Visual Art Practice, Kathryn Moore begins the writing about how 'Visual Skill is often believed to be the ability to think in pictures, which apparently explains how we make sense of images or recognize shapes, reason in pictures', (Moore, 2005, pp. 179). Moore talks about how there is such a skill which allows for people to understand and read art and design. This skill is essentially used to understand visual elements within design, the skill is used to deconstruct the different components within artwork or design and then meaning is attached to give an explanation or feeling towards the overall visual. These components then build upon the other elements and create a link to each other, therefore building a narrative or meaningful context to the whole thought process of the work. How an audience views a piece of art or design depends on their thought process but also their life experiences, the understandings come from moments and emotions felt through life.

‘The artist is the figure whose thought and action caused the work to look the way it does, who experienced the work as it was being created and in its finished state, and who was as well placed as anyone to consider and anticipate its use by others’, (Rose, 2022, p.9).

Sam Rose talks about how the artwork or design is the response to a moment or experience within the artists life, the idea that the artist cannot control how their work is understood but they can only use what they know to create it and then let it sit within the world to be deconstructed by those who understand a visual language.

Design and visual language are the components which are seen to then be understood by an audience and interpreted for a discussion. ‘Threads were among the earliest transmitters of meaning’, (Albers et al., 2017, p. 50), the emphasise on relaying an understanding of a story portrayed in cloth, re-emphasises the idea that the visual components of weave, stitch or thread are a designers form of language. They are the foundations of how designers communicate and create discussions within their work to allow for an audience to interpret the true meaning or story of the work or design.

Comparing to art, line is still a crucial element within design, but textiles designers would argue that line can be regarded as stitch or cloth making. The work on the Nettle Dress by Allan Brown (2022, quoted in Howitt, 2022, 0.06s), ‘it is like the history of the last seven years, crystalised into this material’, this visual component of a line and in this case would be a line of thread made from nettles. Fuelling this idea that design has a visual language, the elements when broken down has narrative and meaning attached to them, therefore communicating with the audience. The idea of weaving is ‘the process of making a fabric by intermeshing twisted or spun threads’ (Clarke, 2010, Word - Weaving), it is known that thread can be made into fabric or cloth which it therefore used for design, if thread is this element of visual language, the history shows how it is seen, as

Lynn Huggins-Cooper mentions ‘myths and legends also feature spinning and weaving imagery – in Norse mythology, for example, the *norns* (the spinners of the threads of fate) are named for a word which in Old Norse means ‘to twine’ (Huggins – Cooper, 2019, p. 2).

Thread in art and design is seen as this powerful component, if thread can be seen as holding history, entwining story and therefore that story is life.

How an audience first sees a design, is different to how it is read. In terms of weaving, it is not only how it is seen but also the journey the thread took to create the overall visual effect of the weave. Otti Berger's weave work for the Bauhaus see Figure 4 was significant as she did not just make cloth, but her cloth told her story of how she created a name for herself but also for other female designers (Public Delivery, 2022).

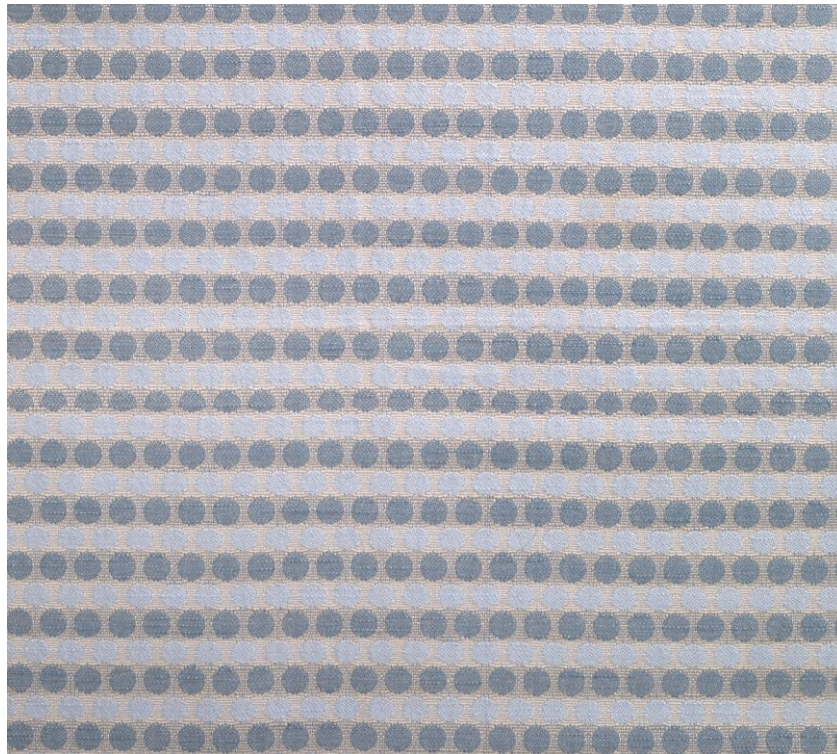


Figure 4 - *Eldrig* (Berger, 1938)

It is not just design but textiles itself, textiles and cloth have been throughout history, as products but also as a form of storytelling, 'Textiles is an ambiguous concept. It is material, it is concept, it is language, it is metaphor', (Dormor, 2020, p.1). The idea that it has been a form of communication throughout time, signifies that words are not always needed in design, the designers use visuals to voice their narratives, the designer or artist contributes to the world using visuals and language in the form of textiles elements. The elements make up the image to create an understanding similar to a conversation, designer Noritaka Tatehana (2023, quoted in Crafts Council, 2023, p. 29), 'creating an artwork isn't just a combination of materials and techniques, it's an encounter between people'. This brings it back to the original statement that visual components are not only just that but a beginning of a conversation within design, these elements create a narrative whether that is a story

made by the designer or a conversation a designer wants to hear in the design world, a meaning or message which needs to be said through visual language.



Figure 5 - *Moordale – Douglas Fir* (Mini Moderns, 2023)

Mini Moderns a pattern design company has a motive of creating 'Pattern with a story' (Mini Moderns, 2023a), when it comes to designing, this is there first thought when creating. Wanting to produce work and designs with an idea or narrative creates an instant connection with an audience, it is not only creating a purpose for a design but creating a personal connection with each design. The use of colour and pattern elements in Mini Moderns work is very clean, simple and effective, they have a limited colour palette such as one colour against white, but this allows for the design narratives to speak for themselves. The use of pattern motifs are line or block, this suggests that form and composition can effectively change a design through the use of shape.

Visual Language plays a significant part in the design world, a significant part in everyday life, pattern is how textiles designers share their stories similar to Mini Moderns, we share stories in the home, 'for our house is our corner of the world' (Bachelard et al, 2014, p. 1). If the home is our space, the area of the earth that is only attached to each individual, this then signifies the importance of narrative in design, if individuals are highlighting a pattern with a relation to a meaning or narrative within a sacred place to them, they have understood that personal connection to the visual language. Therefore, has completed the goal of the designer to use visual elements to communicate with an audience.

In figure 5, Mini Moderns has designed a print based on their life experiences (Mini Moderns, 2023b), the designers have portrayed a narrative within the design to communicate with the audience which is in this case would be wallpaper customers. This type of narrative is a more personal narrative communicated within the design as it is something which would be for a particular audience compared to a design which has a more general message overall. This particular design, see figure 5, is based on the place Moordale which is the equal distance between where Mark and Keith, the designers of Mini Moderns, grew up (Mini Moderns, 2022). This communicates their own personal story; however, suggesting that, design serves as, multifunctional, there is the meaning or narrative created by the designer but then there is the narrative or meaning created by the audience or customer. This is communication within design, it is brought to light through the eyes of the designer, it is creating a conversation spoken from the designer to the audience through the use of design narratives other than words. Using visual language to portray a narrative to communicate with an audience.

Within Surface Pattern practice, similarly, to print and pattern brands those such as Mini Moderns, narrative is the bases and foundations of all projects and modules. A current live brief has shown that narrative is essentially what carries a design forward, it may not be the narrative the designer created that translates but essentially, narrative is determined by the client or customer, and in this case students. Narrative can create discussion. Working with a live brief and therefore a company who is in the design field, allows for conversation, this communication is shown through visual components such as print, pattern, colour and line. Within personal practice, linking place within a current project, has allowed for narrative to be portrayed by the eyes of the viewer, comparing to Mini Moderns, when they include

place as a story, it is a personal story, but allows space for customers own interpretations. However, place can be the narrative on the design but also the place the design becomes situated such as the home, therefore design narrative becomes an experience. Drawing from experiences and therefore communicating visuals within design patterns, as a student within surface pattern practice, drawing from experiences at this level, starts and continues with narrative.

The idea that as an audience, bringing designs such as wallpaper into the home in order to create a message or showcase character (ARCHDIARY MEDIA PRIVATE LIMITED, 2023), wallpaper design can therefore not only be decorative but a way of bringing meaning or a narrative to life, this narrative can be a personal story or journey showcased through design elements and therefore a visual language is made. Designers create story with their designs but not just for the aesthetic but also for the functional aspect, 'have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful' (Morris, 2023). Design has multipurpose, it is not just for the eyes to see beauty but for the brain to question and theorise. Morris has created an array of designs which capture narrative elements, just one of his wallpapers can have numerous print blocks, with various colours, (Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A], 2021). Each stage creates another layer to the story, it is like chapters of a book, each there to support the next, they build the narrative one visual element at a time.



Figure 6 – *Acanthus* (Morris, 1875)

William Morris' work has a distinct visual language, the colours and design elements such as the motifs have a significant role in how his designs have been classic recurring prints throughout decades see figure 6. Morris' designs contain narrative, they have been highly successful in creating a visual story for an audience. As visual language is used to communicate, designs may speak for a sign of a time period or experiences the designer has had, knowing these stories can create a relevancy to present time. Many of Morris' prints and designs are being recoloured; this suggests that just by changing one visual element, it can change the whole meaning or language spoken within a design, reflecting 'the transformative power of colour', (Nicholls, 2021). Recolouring design can have a huge significance to the overall visual effect of it, how an audience connects and communicates with a design can change dependent on the colour, it can make emotions change. The idea that William Morris' designs contained a successful narrative during his time but continues to be relevant to present day with only adjustments to colour, this would be to suit the

customers' needs and wants today. This suggests that narrative is a foundation to an overall design, it is and was how design and an audience communicates a visual language.

Lucienne Day's work reflects aspects of visual language; her work was created through experiences of her time but also experiences of what society was going through. She used her work as a form of visual language to communicate with society, she looked at what the world needed and created that idea visually, creating a language when words could not or did not know how to be said. Lucienne Day was an amazing visual artist; her work reflected many geometric forms but also considered colour. Day began designing after a period of war, (Jackson, 2010, p. 24), she used her work as a way of connecting with society to bring joy and bright designs for the home. The narrative for her work was mainly to bring a new direction post war, her designs were a visual language for a change in society. Her narrative was based on experience similar to Mini Moderns, both designers were mid-century themed, but whereas Mini Moderns were based on that time period, Lucienne Day's work was produced during that time. Using visual elements such as colour and motif creates narrative within Day's work. This connects her to her audience which at the time was society post war, she listened to the needs and wants of society and communicated with design (Victoria and Albert Museum [V&A], 2023) to create inexpensive design.

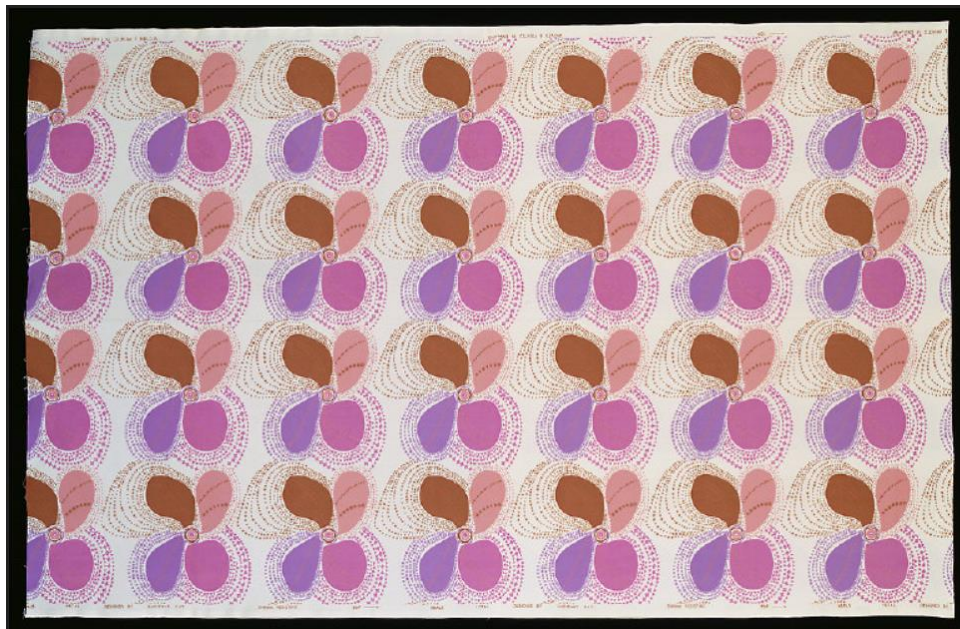


Figure 7 - *Petal* (Day, L., and Heal Fabrics, 1972)

From her work, the designs suggest components of repeat, colour and simple forms or shape, similarly to Mini Moderns, these shapes tell a story, her work in figure 7 portrays the idea of 'motion', (Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2023). The suggestion that movement is a narrative in her work, reiterates the idea that visual elements tell a story, her work showed change, reflecting the time the work was being produced in, signifying design with experiences which need communicating. With the sign of florals in Days work, she used this to signify change (Lesso, 2021), this was her narrative, she wanted to create change but also help explain and showcase it, she designed using experience similar to Mini Moderns, whereas Mini Moderns created a personal story, Lucienne Day created narrative which was a personal language for many to communicate with. The colours would and do also tell a story, they are a visual element, this brought another aspect to her designs at the time of post war society, not only wanting to create aesthetic designs but also designs which were needed, colours which could reflect change and a shift in feeling and emotion, this was her language, to connect and inspire a society which needed to communicate through a difficult period.

How designs are perceived can change how it is seen, 'perspective centres everything on the eye of the beholder', John Berger (2008, quoted in *Ways of Seeing*, 2008, 1.32s), Berger talks of how people see visuals through each individuals' eyes, it is not the same experience and therefore personal to the viewer. Understanding that design is a form of communication and essentially how designers create a language, it is seen by the audience differently. Seeing visual elements, starts a discussion but how it is seen depends on the experiences of that specific person, which allows a narrative to be portrayed, it is seen through their eyes and understood with their language. This is where the discussion of narrative begins, through how design is seen. 'The brain is the engine of understanding' (Gregory, 1997, p.1), it is the connection from the eye to the brain which then creates the understanding of the narrative, design is subjective to experience and therefore subjective to personal narratives and understandings of what is being communicated within the design. Design such as textiles can be hugely narrative led, 'a traditional textile conveys to the knowing eye a great deal about not only the creators, but also about those for whom it is created' (Nosch, Feng and Varadarajan, 2014, p. 304), therefore once the eye sees what it perceives, the brain understands the narrative but the design itself has a story which is a

physical product of language, the design or textile is the discussion, it is how the designer and the audience communicates and forms a conversation without words, it is a silent language but speaks volumes through visual elements.

Within this essay, I have explored and investigated the foundations of visual language and how using these components allow for artists, designers and myself to create narrative and meaning as a form of communication to allow for visual conversation between the designer and an audience. Firstly, investigating colour within design, colour is used as a foundation and the base of design, it is the first step of creating and changing the narrative of design. Colour is considered to be powerful and create emotion or can change how a design is seen, simply changing the tone or how a colour is weighted can allow for a design to change the narrative. These narratives and meanings can be controlled by how colour is seen and then how a design is seen. This was explored through how the brain reads colour and what we know about colour, this allows for designs to speak and communicate with an audience due to how people attach emotion and story to colour and design elements. Each viewer sees the colour differently therefore it is their eyes which start the journey of the narrative within various designs, before being understood by the brain and visually understood.

Design is an experience both personal and public, however as an audience it is read differently, investigating various theories, perception of how and when an audience has seen or sees a design in their life can create a new understanding of the narrative all together, seeing design being affected by the light can have a powerful reaction to the hues within design, therefore changing the overall appearance and how we read the design.

Design elements such as colour has a relationship with motion, I determine this motion is through time, as an audience viewing art and design, there has been a chose to create a narrative for design to speak and to have a voice without words needing to be spoken.

Design has a purpose; it is not only composed in a way to look appealing but also serves as multifunctional, it is there to create a function, design should be considered a language, it is a language spoken without a single word, it contains elements which have been considered essential to tell narrative through time such as cave paintings.

Another purpose would also be how visual language is considered a skill, as an audience, we have to understand the various visual elements and depict our own meaning, reiterating the idea that design is multifunctional, the narrative the designer gave the work will not always

be how the design is perceived therefore, creating a form of conversation to discuss the connection the audience has with the work and then from the work to the designer.

Designers such as Mini Moderns display their own personal experiences as their narratives whereas Lucienne Day creates narrative due to experiences that can be more relatable to the time. William Morris is known for his classic designs, his designs are to suit the home, his narratives are to be made to be loved in the home. I have been taught this as a student and shown it visually through researching and investigating designers in the field. These are three amazing designers who highlights these components of visual language to communicate narrative with an audience, it is how narrative is an essential part of design, it is a designer's greatest language.

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Figure 1:

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Figure 2:

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Figure 3:

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Figure 4:

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Figure 5:

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Figure 6:

Morris, W. (1875) *Acanthus* [Wallpaper]. Available at: [Acanthus | Morris, William | V&A Explore The Collections \(vam.ac.uk\)](#) (Accessed: 2 December 2023).

Figure 7:

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