

The Psychological Analysis of Colour Perception in Contemporary Art in Africa

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Abstract

The article is centered on colour and perception as it seeks to interpret colour and its psychology in art. Colour is the aspect of any object that may be described in terms of hue, lightness, and saturation. Scholars have also observed that in physics, colour, is associated specifically with electromagnetic radiation of a certain range of wavelength visible to the human eye. Colour is a spectrum and research has shown that we are capable of seeing millions of them: if you show people two very close shades of green they can tell that they are not the same but rather than name all of these as distinct colours, we tend to categorize them into groups like blue, green and so on Anna Franklin (2019). The paper is a reminiscence of colour and its varied perception in art, it is a reflection on the psychology colours portray especially on personalities, cultural beliefs and moods. Curtis Tappenden and Anita Taylor et al (1988) observed that we are attuned to recognizing and responding to colour combination. The way we respond to colour is intuitive, however, colour evokes a totally, subjective, emotional reaction. The problem comes when we are forced to rely on this subjectivity to select and combine colours for the process of painting. Colour keeps easy record of facts on historical issues and documentations, it is a recollection of happenings, stories of the past, present, season and races.

Keywords: Colour, Perception, Culture, Mood, symbolism

Introduction

Colour is exciting, captivating magnificent and soothing, its aesthetic potentials cannot be ignored. It is the most appreciated element of art in the universe. It is best described as the decomposition of white light

which is composed of the seven colour in the spectrum. Just as other elements of art have connotations for all visual art. It conveys varied meanings which can be a powerful tool to invoke emotions in the viewer. Colour cannot be perceived or appreciated without light, it is for this reason we rely on light for colour to be identified. Colour possesses a psychological dimension, red and yellow, quite naturally, having connotations of warmth, blue and green, coolness.

Generally, warm colours seem to advance, and cool colours recede. The word “colour” describes the appearance or pigmentation of objects, resulting from the light reflected. The colour theory as originally introduced by Sir Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century, provides us with the means to measure relationships among hues, on how to use and combine them effectively. These scholars stress further that nature, as well in art, certain colour combinations are harmonious and others discordant. A synonym for colour is “hue”. A tint is a lighter colour that has a touch or mixed with white while a darker version is known as shade where a darker colour is mixed with it. Tone is sometimes used to describe both or bright variants of a colour they are obtained by adding grey (that is a mixture of white and black). “People see colour differently according to the way their language categorizes them”. Anon (2021) added that how we perceive colour depends on our culture and language. As our ability to see a colour is limited by the words we have to describe it, and understanding more about it could help improve how colour blind children learn and develop. Colour is a spectrum and research has shown that we are capable of seeing millions of them: if you show people two very close shades of green they can tell that they are not the same but rather than name all of these as distinct colours, we tend to categorize them into groups like blue, green and so on Anna Franklin (2019).

Culture is perceived as our everyday exhibits, an individual's life consciously or unconsciously is mostly determine by his origin. Culture; a way we showcase our varied way of life, intuitively reveals diverse traditional norms. It reveals an identity of an ethnic group easily from frequent usage and appearances in their ceremonious state. In Nigeria, different colours are used to portray people of certain geographical location or ethnic groups from attires usually worn. This is observed in

ceremonies, such as festivals, marriages, child births among others. A depiction of colour is a command which convey messages of either calmness or chaotic moments. It is important at all times to pay attention to any depiction of colour than ignoring such display. This is because they may help you easily dictate signs of pandemonium or dangers that lies ahead, just as colour forecast aids in modelling the manner in which we perceive and understand the world. Its perception is a plus in history as it reveals stories of varied contemporary's regarding happenings of the past and present. Colour influences moods, and has the capacity to stimulate responses, it changes opinions, instilling values and deciphering experiences across space and time.

Colour and Varied Expressions

Colour plays an exceptionally prominent role in our lives, they possess various meanings and they also communicate countless signals and ideas in various aspects of life. Thus the need to know the psychology behind these colours and how to effectively adopt them. They influence our thinking, inspire our decision-making and impact our moods. From causing changes to changing reactions, colours are more powerful than we think. Depending on our interpretations, they project both good and evil. Fortunately, we are saddled with the power to welcome and eschew others. The psychology behind colour is fascinating and ever- expanding with that said, new meanings are always coming to light. The more we acquire, the more informed we become. In the same vein, the perceptual property derived from a spectrum of light interacting in the eye with the spectral sensitivities of the receptors. Colour is the property possessed by an object of producing different sensations on the eye as a result of the way it reflects or emits light. These types of colours are the primary secondary and tertiary colours, other colours emanates from the mixture of these.

It is important to note that the feeling evoked by colours are not necessarily universal because cultural differences can also play a role in how they are seen. Philosophers have long struggled to understand the nature of colour. The central role colour plays is in our lives, in visual experience, in art, as a metaphor for emotions had made it suitable for philosophical debates. Just as our mood speaks, so do colours

communicate one's state of mind and emotion. The term colour conveys diverse messages to the world, they generally communicate messages, ideas or a person's personality, it is a precise interpretation of an individual's mood, state of mind, culture, seasons and so on, depending on the intension behind its usage. Knowingly or unknowingly, our emotions or state of mind through our choice of colours, projects our personality traits. There are various technical terms, used to describe the characteristics of colours which are useful to know. Colour psychology and colour interpretations are based on these terms as observed by Ocvik et al (2010) ...

Hue is the common name for a colour, such as cadmium red, cadmium yellow, and French Ultramarine. Blues are highly saturated and so are the closest we can get in pigment to the pure red, yellow and blue primaries. A colour saturation refers to the intensity of colour in an image. Rouse (2020) states that as the saturation decreases, the colours appear to be more washed-out or pale. Unsaturated paint on the other hand, is either transparent, or mixed with a darker hue to produce a shade. In the same vein, Tonal value refers to the lightness or darkness of a colour, the amount of light falling on the hue determines their intensity. Colour temperature describes the warmth or coolness of a colour, those associated with red, yellow or orange are warm while those associated with shadows blue, violet or green are cool. A warm hue placed beside a hotter one will, however, appear to be cool and vice-versa. Lounge (2019) however asserts that, when used in compositions, warm colours optically jump forward while cool colours recede into the background. Warm colours advance and cool colours recede, affecting the perception of depth, this theory is based upon the fact that the eye adjusts when focusing on colours of different wavelengths. Red light waves have a longer wavelength than blue ones. An image containing both cool and warm colours would demonstrate contrast of temperature or warm/cool contrast creating more complex relationships between the colour. Warm colours can read cooler against a higher intensity warm colour and cool colours sometimes can advance against predominately warm palette.



Artist-Suzan Dingba Anthony

Title- Unity

Year-2018

Medium-oil on canvas

Size-100cm X 90cm

This painting portrays the intention to which this essay is anchored, it is a representation of mushrooms in their colony signifying unity and indeed the oneness plants exhibit. This indeed is an inspirational piece worth emulating by human for a peaceful coexistence. It projects a philosophical piece with the national identity of the Nigerian flag, green white and green to which encapsulates the intent of this paper. As perceived, the national identity of the flag mirrors a country (Nigeria) in the same light the essay analyses colour and perception. This is also self-explanatory when perceived the colour depiction of white meant to represent peace and unity is rather grey, implying stain and displeasing situation in the country, just as colours are exciting, they can as well provoke. The significance of white is abused rather depicted as grey, implying a manifesting of bad leadership and dishonesty. These philosophizes the rate of corruption, political strategies, religious sentiments, Boko Haram, Verdicts, Poor governance, herds men...to mention but a few.



Source. Pinterest.com www.google.com (2017)

This image buttresses the intent to which this topic is articulated, the Idoma people of Benue state are domiciled in the southern part of Benue with a population of about 2.5 million. History has it that the region is made of seven local governments. They are well known for the “red and black” colours which represents their traditional cultural attire. The traditional attire is popularly known as “Apa” by many parts of Idoma land, and “edema” by the “edumoga” people. The black colour on the Idoma attire signifies the earth and burial shroud”, while the “red” colour signifies royalty or red feather. The red feather is often the head of the traditional leader this attire is mostly worn during burial ceremonies, weddings, festive periods and local meetings. The attire can be complemented with beads, fly whisk from a cow tails, caps, and shoes. “Opa” is also as Idoma traditional attire worn during burials... it is mostly worn by chiefs and those who are to be buried. The black signifies mourning and the red signifies “Alekwu” which means the dead must be respected Okwoli (2016). Just as a National flag projects a country on the painting analyzed above, the Idoma cultural attire is also synonymous. This painting is affiliated to the above painting of the Nigerians National identity of the flag and the mushrooms.



Artist – Suzan Dingba Anthony

Title - Contemplations

Medium - Oil on canvas

Size - 100 X 80cm

The painting entitled contemplations is a reminiscence of the Tiv attire, commonly seen during marriages and other ceremonious activities. It is a dense portrayal of a cracked effect commonly seen on dry land. This indeed was an inspiration to the title, alongside the liquid rendition which naturally takes its course like a flowing river, over the surface of painting. This makes the painting appear in a minimal manner as a limited exploration of an artist palette. This is deliberate because the artist is only concerned with the philosophy behind the art piece. Hence the reason being executed with only black and white. The painting has a cloudy like appearance that could be described as threatening to rain or a thunder lightening as it strikes with a sonorous sound. The black and white when perceived reminds us of a Zebra and indeed the Tiv attire, commonly known as the Swange dancers. The Biblical context, according to the book of Genesis chapter two (2) verse one to three says the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface...and God said let there be light...then separated the light from the darkness, God called the light day and the darkness night...this shares affinity with this painting.



Source. Pinterest.com www.google.com (2017)

Still in quest of colour and its perception, the essay also sees the above titled painting as indeed a pursuit to this paper. The Tiv ethnic group known as Swange of Benue state, identified for their fascinating black and white attire. Although black and white by some scholars are referred as neutral colours and to some not classified as colours. Whereas to the Tiv's ethnic group, the attire is a cultural identity worn mostly during remarkable occasions. Cultural dance Troupes also wear them at important political meetings and funeral ceremonies. Philosophically, the black implies that the Tiv people have their roots as black people. Their native dressing is known as “A'nger” sometimes it sounds like 'A'nger U Tiv'. This collection is translated as white and black stripes. Casual Tiv clothes, made from A'nger, can also look stylish and fashionable, women can wear them in many different ways they desire. It can be worn by the women as blouse, skirts and head tie. From oral interview also carried out with some of these ethnic group, it revealed that the white colour signifies peace and love. This way, the two colours represent a zebra character in wild nature. The metaphor of a zebra as one of the most peaceful and mild creatures which does not cause people any harm. This virtue is synonymous to the Tiv people and the intent of this study on colour and perception.

Common Colour Symbolism

Colour is said to be one the most expressive elements because it affects human emotions directly Gurin (2019). Symbolism is prevalent because it is significant and a crucial form of communication for the world. Colour represents ideas, feelings and emotions we also process a lot of information through what we see. Our eyes absorb what is before us, sends signals to our brain before the brain interprets...the amount and variety of symbolism in colours is seemingly endless. Colour symbolism is the cultural evolution of our psychological associations with colour. Over the millennia, particular colour have come to represent specific meanings of life events. These meanings often differ, depending on which society we are looking at. For example, red is the colour of blood, which would have been our ancient ancestors' first association with colour. Over time this association has evolved to encompass related cultural values anon (2019). In western cultures, white is often allied with purity and innocence. It is the traditional dress colour of choice for Western brides, the same can be seen on the titled “contemplations”.

Colours forms the integral part of our lives, history has it that, the psychology of colours can be dated back to the ancient Greeks example to Plato, Aristotle, the early Democritus and many others. One of the most important reasons why colours are of philosophical interest is that they raise serious metaphysical issues, concerning the nature both of the physical reality and the mind. Colours are exceedingly familiar, seemingly simple features that become enigmatic under scrutiny and they are difficult to capture in any familiar - sounding, unsophisticated theory and through colour one can confront various problems that can span the breath of philosophy including problems pertaining to perception. The mind-body relation, the nature of science, skepticism, meta-ethics and aesthetics. The power of colours cannot be denied, more so, as it is the sole instance of life on earth. Although sight and the human brain has helped in identifying colours and their delights, it's interesting to note what colours means to us in totality.

Conclusion

Moreover, scientist have discovered evidence that over 40, 000 years ago, stone Age hunters and gatherers ground up red clay to use in making

body paint. Another use was for protection into the afterlife. In the Paleolithic period, people buried their dead with red powder so as to cleanse the body off evil spirits potentially neutralize colour. A visible and tangible work of art is a kind of persisting event. Every work of art was made at a particular time and place by particular persons, even if we do not always know just when, where, and by whom. Though it is the creation of the past, it continues to exist in the present, long surviving its times, Charlemagne has been dead for a thousand years, but his chapel still stands at Aachen Gardner's. Certain colours can be used in the identification of works form a particular era.

There are some universal colour connotations these are shared across a range of culture and geographies...colour generally can induce influential response, for instance, the colours surrounding us in the environment can affect us emotionally, and even affect our behavior. Artist need to comprehend the basic science of colour, as laid down in theories dating back to Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century, implemented by Agbanl (2022) in the early eighteenth century because it is indeed a powerful tool. By knowing the theories surrounding colour, more deliberate choices can be made when painting pictures, and the desired outcome is more achievable of course, our responses to colour are to some extent individual, hence the use of colour when painting will be subject to personal preference and experimentation Abani (2022).

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