

Art, Colour, Culture, Language and Education

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It is always a pleasure and a privilege to hear artists talking about their work. Such opportunities are to be treasured and offer exceptional learning experiences. One of the best reasons for listening to artists talk about their work is that it helps to dispel the widely-held belief that an artist's work *speaks for itself*—that is, the naive notion that if you spend time just looking at an art work, the complexity of its meaning and the significance of the work will be revealed to you. To be able to look at art sensitively and aesthetically is a learned experience. Art embodies a particular form of language which has to be learned, not only in order to be expressive in art but also to be able to appreciate and understand art.

This appears to be obvious but, curiously, it was not understood in art education until relatively recently—it was assumed that children's art came from the inside out (as a kind of unfolding) rather than from the outside in (learning from art and then using what is learned). Similarly, until a couple of decades ago, students in art colleges were solely engaged in making art with no attempt being made to develop their understanding of the contexts in which they were working. Such contexts were believed at that time to be irrelevant. The notion of *universal imagery*, which was based on the belief that children's drawings from all over the world had a biological basis and, therefore, followed identical patterns of development, has been long discounted. A major step forward in recent years has been the formulation of the national curriculum covering the whole of the UK, which now includes the understanding of and response to art as well as art production and expression as major and related objectives.

Art, like every other aspect of human endeavour, is a product of culture. Each culture determines its own concept of art and this differs from culture to culture. It is only by comparing cultures that this becomes evident and whereas art is often taken to be a *fact of life*, it can then be seen to be only a *fact of culture*. Some years ago, when I was very much involved with promoting art education in a multicultural world, I described western art in this way:

Art in the western world is quite different from that of the rest of the world in a number of ways. Western art, which is basically European art, has developed in a very strong linear pattern and developed its own rules, forms, and materials. It has also determined its own function in society and devised or found its own meanings for embodiment in works of art. The roles of the artist, art critic, art historian, connoisseur, collector and even the art gallery are all clearly enough defined in western culture to form a concept of art, what it is, who it is for, the range of ideas and feelings it can embody and communicate, the particular forms it takes, the places it can be found and, most importantly, the relationship it has to people. (Allison, 1972, p. 5)

The cultural concept of art is exemplified very well by the true story of the Guadalupe Virgin. In December 1531, in the Villa de Guadalupe Hidalgo near Mexico City, Juan Diego, a Mexican convert to Roman Catholicism, claimed he had experienced two visions of the Virgin Mary. The validation which the Holy See required to decree the authentication of the visions took two forms. In the first place, roses grew out of basalt rock and the second confirmation came from the painted image of the Virgin Mary which miraculously appeared on the robe of Juan Diego. A great church was built on the site of the visions and continues to attract thousands of pilgrims annually. In 1754, a Papal Bull made the Virgin of Guadalupe the Patroness and Protector of New Spain and, following the signing of an important treaty in the town, the shrine became the symbol of Mexican Independence. The road to the shrine is coated with the blood of the penitents who crawl on their knees for kilometres to ask for miraculous cures. The walls of the entrance to the shrine is thick with the silver effigies of the parts of bodies which have been cured as a result of the petitions to the Virgin. The robe of Juan Diego carrying the painting of the Virgin which miraculously appeared in 1531 hangs above the high altar in a frame of truly magnificent proportions. The remarkable fact, which is important for the present discussion, is that the image of the Virgin Mary on the robe is in the sixteenth century Spanish style! Clearly, God realised that it was necessary for the image of the Virgin to be represented, in such a way and in a representational style, which could be readily understood by the Cardinals in the Holy See. It would seem that even God recognises the cultural nature of art and how it can be understood!

The shift from a monocultural (European) notion of the world to the present acceptance of many different cultures has reinforced the understanding of the ways culture influences perception and, consequently, the concepts we hold. These concepts, in turn, shape the ways we understand the world and the things in it. Perception is the system by which we interpret the incoming stimuli when we see, listen, smell and touch. The way we learn to perceive, and a major factor in the development of perception, visual perception as well as other perceptual modes, is language. We learn, for example, to see colours and by associating names with those colour percepts we form colour concepts, normally as part of our early childhood development—concepts of red, blue, green, yellow, etc. By being able to learn to associate the name 'red' to a certain visual experience, young children are able to relate new perceptual encounters of that colour under a concept of *redness*. Phenomenologically, no experience of a particular colour, for example, is ever precisely the same as another, but we learn to classify the variants into culturally acceptable concepts. Without having names for our perceptual experiences, we could not classify them into workable concepts. For example, anyone who has spent time with a young child might be frustrated by the incessant questioning of the *what is that?* kind. What is that?—it is a door. What is that?—that is also a door. What is that?—it is a door. What is that?—it is a door and so on. Each door is different in shape, form, colour and location, and each is a different percept. By encounters with these different percepts, children form a concept with the name of a *door*. The concept with the name of *door* enables encounters of hitherto unseen examples of doors to be understood and classified as doors.

A question arising from this is whether or not we can actually see in any meaningful way anything in an art work or elsewhere for which we do not have a concept and, therefore, a name or word.

Not so long ago a colleague of mine in Japan and I carried out a cross-cultural comparison on the use and experience of colour in England and Japan (Allison & Iwata, 1990). It was assumed that there would be significant differences between Japan and England in the use and response to colour, despite present Japanese art being extensively influenced by Western art. This assumption was based on studies in perception and its relation to language and relied to a considerable degree on what has been termed the *Whorfian Hypothesis*, which posits that the structure, form and content of language is an *a priori* determinant for experiencing the world. In this linguistic context, it is taken that the nature and range of vocabulary available to a culture determines what, in fact, can be experienced. Similarities and differences between vocabularies available to cultures, therefore, might be assumed to indicate similarities and differences between what people in those cultures are able to perceive. A major problem in studying such similarities and differences, however, lies in the extent to which words in one culture can be translated into the language of another culture.

Some studies I had been involved in over the years, about the cross-cultural use of language in relation to art, showed that some words in one language have direct equivalent words when translated into another language. Other words do not have an equivalent and require a description, simile, or metaphor to convey meaning. However, the studies also showed that some words are not able to be translated from one language to another suggesting that the language available to a culture structures and, indeed, determines the perception of the culture. What may be perceivable in one culture, as indicated by the availability of a linguistic concept, may simply not be perceivable by people in the other culture.

The study, which my Japanese colleague and I more recently carried out, looked at similarities and differences between Japan and England in terms of the naming of colours and preference for colours. The study was in two parts—the first looked at the vocabulary of colour terms available in the two languages, and second looked at the three constituent elements of colour—hue, value, and saturation.

At the present time, the naming of colours is used to identify particular colours or to communicate something about a colour to someone else. These names were given to colours, invariably, by many different people over long historical time. Many names have been invented, retained and used in daily life, including art and literature, and their existence, therefore, has a particular cultural significance. The variety of names given to, for example, colours in narrow chromatic bands also shows the dominance of certain areas of the spectrum in the life of a culture. The remarkably wide range of names given to the visual appearance of snow by the Inuit peoples, for example, illustrates the importance of different snow conditions to the existence and survival of people living in that severe climatic area.

To cut a long story short, we identified 2,802 colour terms in the Japanese and English languages, of which 1,210 were Japanese and 1,592 were English. Leaving out systematic colour terms, which were drawn from scientific systems, we

sorted out the remainder in terms of their associations into the main categories of *Plant*, *Animal*, *Mineral*, *Proper Noun* and any we couldn't fit into these categories we listed as *Other*.

Almost half of all Japanese colour names were in the Plant category, which reflects the Japanese love of flowers, as well as, plant and plant juices being major sources in Japan of dyes for paper and cloth. A smaller proportion of English colour names came into this category reflecting a lesser cultural concern for nature by the English but a more evident concern for scientific enquiry. In clear contrast to that of Japan, the second largest category of colour names in the English language was that of Proper Nouns and constituted almost one third of the total. In Japan the association of colour names with Proper Nouns, for example, *Saga-nezumi*, *Yoshioka-zome* and *Rikyu-iro*, relate mainly to places or people in Japan whereas the English names, such as African brown, Bengal blue, Medici crimson and Napoleon blue, are drawn from all over the world. More than two thirds of the colour terms associated with Proper Nouns in the English language refer to geographic locations. The differences between two languages in this respect appears to reflect the differences between the two countries, until relatively recently, in their approaches to travel, exploration and international commerce, as well as, the differences between the two countries in their respective willingness to engage in cultural exchange.

Much more could be said about the naming issue but another important finding related to differences in colour preferences, which came under what might be described as a *quantifiable colour sense*. This, of course, leads on to the question as to whether or not there are colours which are perceivable in one country but not in the other. Overall, the colours preferred by the Japanese tended to be darker than those preferred in England. It can be argued that the preference for darker, subdued colours may have been influenced by traditional Japanese aesthetics, particularly *WABI*, which is a taste for a dim, quiet and simple atmosphere, *SABI*, which is a taste for a tranquil and antique atmosphere, and *YUGEN*, which is a taste for a subtle profundity.

It would seem that the Japanese traditional aesthetic sensitivity regarding colours continues to be pervasive and is influential on colour choices in various aspects of everyday life, such as fashion, interior design, household, and commercial commodities. It can be argued that the clearest manifestation of preferences for colours within a culture, as well as being an important influence on those preferences, can be found in the art forms of the culture. Of course, as cultures are not static, the visual arts of both Japan and England have taken many forms over long histories but, nevertheless, it is possible to make some broad generalisations about their characteristic forms.

The visual art forms of Japan and England differ in a number of ways, not least in terms of subject matter and representational styles. However, they also differ in the ranges of colours used by the artists in the two cultures and this may be taken to reflect the cultural preferences for colour as much as any kind of artistic expression. If you took representative examples of both traditional and contemporary Japanese painting, you would find a predominance of subdued colour ranges, whereas a similar range of examples of traditional and contemporary English painting would show the use of wider ranges of colours and brighter colours than could be said to typify Japanese painting. It

is interesting that, despite the enormous Western influences on Japan during this century, the strong traditions of Japanese colour have been maintained.

Finally, of the over 1000 colours which had names in both the Japanese and English languages, it is interesting to note that several of them had different meanings and were not direct translations. That these colours had both Japanese and English names would indicate that some colours are in common usage in both cultures. In contrast, that some colours had names in only one or the other language would seem to indicate that those colours had little significance in the cultures which did not name them and, it could be argued, that they might even fall outside perceptual experience.

So, do the Japanese and English, when looking at Japanese and western paintings, see the same things and the same colours or, put more sophisticatedly, do they have the same aesthetic experiences? The evidence would suggest that they do not. It is clear that there are qualities in Japanese paintings which are not perceivable to the English eye—and there is no translatable way of drawing them to our attention or into our aesthetic experience (e.g., Japanese fan poetry painting and the tea ceremony pot). The same, of course, applies to the art forms of virtually any other culture.

The recognition of the essential role of language, art vocabulary, art criticism, and the development of perception as being elemental to both the experience of art and its production and expression has been one of the most influential forces in the development of the current National Curricula for Art in England, Scotland, and Wales, as well as, in the curricula of many other countries. Up to almost thirty years ago, art in schools was only concerned with *making*. *School Art* was what children made in schools—truckloads of it. Now, thankfully, art is becoming something to be experienced. In 1972, I wrote,

To be *educated in art* means considerably more than being able to manipulate some art materials, however skillful and expressive that manipulation might be. It also means to be perceptually developed and visually discriminative, to be able to realise the relationship of materials to the form and function of art expression and communication, to be able to critically analyse and appraise art forms and phenomena, to be able to realise the historical context of what is encountered and to be able to appreciate the contributions to, and functions within, differing cultures and societies that art makes. (Allison, p. 4)

We are still some way from achieving a younger generation in our schools which is *educated in art*, but we are slowly getting there. Art educators in many countries in the world are making valuable contributions to that endeavour.

References

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