

Study Unit 1

Colour Awareness

Welcome to the LAC course in colour theory. We intend to make you wiser about a subject which is very enjoyable, but enormously complex. There are plenty of theories and theorists who have contributed to this area of human knowledge. We aim to show you some of the fundamental aspects of this subject, providing an authoritative (but not exhaustive) terminology and give you ideas and exercises to work with allowing you to build upon your experiences and knowledge with confidence.

The course is based upon a painters approach to colour; it consists of five study units which you can work on at your own speed. These units will cover:-

- 1) Preparation for the course - colour awareness
- 2) Colour perception and context
- 3) Types of colour contrast
- 4) Analysis of colour
- 5) Colour theory in relation to commercial printing

MATERIALS

To make the best use of your learning time you will require a few basic materials which are listed as follows.

Paint brushes (round and flat, sizes 2 - 6, for acrylic painting)

A selection of cartridge paper and white mounting card

Pencils and eraser

Ruler and compass

Mixing palette (see later)

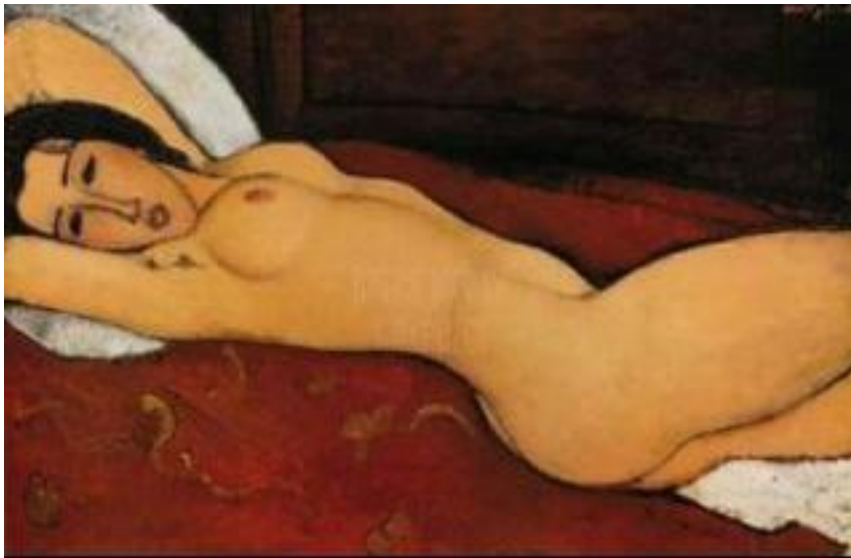
Daylight adjusted bulb

Gouache paints - spectrum res, blue and yellow. A tube of lamp black and one of zinc white.

In addition to this you will need a flat table to work on and occasional use of a photocopier. If you haven't got all of these things it is worth buying them now as it will be worth it in the end. Try to buy the best quality you can afford, and get what brushes you think you need, but please stick to the specified types and colour of paint as these are crucial to the course.

Between the two polarities are the many shades of grey. We can refer to greys or neutrals as being *achromatic* - without colour. The other colours such as red etc. we can call *chromatic* colours.

Greys, neutrals or achromatic colours are very important in a painting. They give space for the stronger colours to act and they have a dynamic quality about them which allows potent colours to 'move'. An achromatic area next to a large region of, say, red will tend to suggest the complementary colour - green. Look at many paintings of nudes and you will find the flesh colours quite achromatic, the surrounding drapes rich and full of colour.



Reclining Nude,
Modigliani



The Grand Odalisque,
Ingres

EXERCISE 1

Now, we don't want to send you dotty - but, just so you get the concept, we are asking you to mix up some of your gouache paints to match the three main process colours - Cyan, Magenta and Yellow. (You will need to look at the examples provided.) Before you do this find a portrait image of someone who is currently in the news. Then using dots and dabs of these three colours and black make your own version of this image simplifying it as you work. Make the image no larger than A6 (105mm x 148 mm). See if you can emulate the four colour print process, Seurat and Roy Lichtenstein!

COLOUR HARMONY

So far we have considered an outline of four colour process printing. Now we are going to look at what constitutes harmony according to colour theory.

What is harmony? People define it in lots of ways. We often associate harmonics with music. There are ways of eliciting visually harmonious sensations. To get straight to the point we have supplied a transparent overlay for you to use with your colour wheel. This overlay contains three geometric shapes, a square, an equilateral triangle and an isosceles triangle. Place the transparency over your colour wheel and rotate it so the apex of the isosceles triangle is pointed at the spectrum yellow on the outer division of the wheel. Note that the two corners of the equilateral triangle now point to spectrum blue and red and the one combined with the apex of the isosceles triangle points to spectrum yellow. This group of colours - the three primaries are known as the *fundamental triad*. These colours are considered to be harmonious.

How do we define what is harmonious in terms of colour? Apparently our eyes always seek equilibrium. Remember our exercises about *successive contrast* and *after images*? Here we discovered that if we look at a colour for a while and then look away at a white or neutral grey space and after image of the colours complementary will become apparent.

One colour theorist called Ostwald said "Harmony equals order". Another called Goethe explained that our eyes will always seek the opposite of one colour on the colour wheel, thus actively looking for the complementary of that colour "encompassing the entire wheel". If we mix equal quantities of the three primaries plus a little white we should get a neutral grey. If we mix two complementary colours plus some white we should get a neutral grey. This is a sign of harmony between colours. Any other result from a mixture of two or more colours indicates they are not harmonious.