



ART-121: COLOR THEORY

Effective Term

Fall 2026

BOT Approval Date

06/12/2025

Discipline

ART - Art

Course Number

121

Course Title

Color Theory

Short Title

Color Theory

Credit Status (CB 04)

D - Credit - Degree applicable

Units**Activity Units**

3.00

Total Units

3.00

Hours**Activity Contact Hours**

96-108

Out of Class Hours Activity

48-54

Total Contact Hours

96 - 108

Total Out of Class Hours

48 - 54

Total Student Learning Hours

144 - 162

Distance Education

No

C-ID (Admin Only)

C-ID ARTS 270

Catalog Description

This course focuses on the organization of visual elements in accordance with the principles of design and color choices. Emphasis is placed on the study of the principles, theories, and applications of additive and subtractive color in two dimensions. Topics will include major historical and contemporary color systems, production of projects in applied color, and the elements of design as they apply to color.



Codes

TOP Code (CB 03)

1030.00* - *Graphic Art and Design

CIP Code

50.0702 - Fine/Studio Arts, General.

Repeatability Code

No

Grading Option

Letter grade OR P/NP

Minimum Qualifications

Minimum Qualifications	And/Or
Art (Masters Required)	End

GE Information

Check GE Types Requested

AA/AS C - Humanities

Learning Objectives

Learning Objectives

Learning Objective
1. Analyze and apply to artwork the principles of color theory including differentiated value scales using appropriate media.
2. Analyze and evaluate artwork for visual effectiveness, and the utilization of design principles and art elements.
3. Define and properly use design terminology.
4. Create artwork that demonstrates an analysis and application of the principles of color theory including differentiated color schemes and the use of the color wheel.
5. Research historical post colonial color practices that explore intersections of gender identity and expression, race, religion, culture, and nationality.
6. Apply color techniques used in various art historical periods and styles.
7. Demonstrate technical and creative skills through an assortment of tools and media.
8. Create artwork that demonstrates an understanding of the principles of composition.
9. Create artwork that demonstrates refined solutions to specific problems regarding the use of color, balance, movement, spatial relationships, and other design concerns.
10. Create artwork that demonstrates creative alternatives, explorations, and solutions.

Learning Outcome Information

Course Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcome
1. Students will comprehend and describe how color is perceived biologically, psychologically, culturally, symbolically and intuitively.
2. Students will skillfully use a variety of artistic materials, techniques and tools.
3. Students will create aesthetically complete designs and images that demonstrate a working knowledge of: Color Schemes, Color Temperature, Value/Hue/Saturation, and composition using color.

Content

Course Activity Content

1. Introduction:
 - a. Safety, including the use of equipment and tools
 - b. Clean up, and storage
 - c. Supplies
2. Art Elements, with emphasis of the effect of color on:
 - a. Point
 - b. Line
 - c. Shape
 - d. Space and perspective
 - e. Form and Modeling
 - f. Value and light
 - g. Texture
 - h. Color
3. Design Principles, with emphasis of the effect of color on:
 - a. Variety
 - b. Harmony
 - c. Movement
 - d. Balance
 - e. Emphasis
 - f. Pattern
 - g. Proportion
 - h. Scale
 - i. Dominance
 - j. Economy
 - k. Contrast
4. Historical Overview
 - a. Historical overview of Western Color Theory (16th Century to present)
 - i. Development of subtractive pigments
 - ii. Newtonian concepts
 - iii. Robert Hooke
 - b. Historical overview of Non-Western Color Theory (Ancient to present)
 - i. Comparison of cultural themes in color design and language
 - ii. Cultural appropriation of color in Asia
5. Technology and Color
 - a. Subtractive and Additive Color Processing
 - b. RGB vs. CMYK in digital art
 - c. Disparity in access to technology for color design
6. Composition
 - a. Planning and developing
 - b. How color is perceived - light, vision, and the brain
7. Color as Value
 - a. The Seven Color Contrasts
 - i. Value
 - ii. Hue
 - iii. Temperature
 - iv. Extension
 - v. Primaries
 - vi. Complementary Colors
 - vii. Saturation
8. Color Theory, in-depth exploration of the following:
 - a. Color wheel
 - b. Properties, including hue, value, intensity and temperature.

- c. Color Schemes including, complementary, split complementary, analogous, monochromatic and triadic.
- d. Mixing, matching and analysis.
- e. Space as related to color.
- f. Visual phenomena including afterimage, simultaneous contrast and phantom color.
- g. Color Schemes/Systems
- 9. Visual Presentation of Color
 - a. Printed media
 - b. Painted media
 - c. Ultraviolet preservation methods
 - d. Archival concerns
- 10. Critique
 - a. Oral presentation and critique
 - b. Remediation and revision
 - c. Deconstructing Art History through the lens of Color Theory
- 11. Post Colonial Color Theory
 - a. History of Trade Route Color
 - i. Unfair trading practices
 - ii. Privateering
 - b. Lapis Lazuli
 - i. Historical Economic Impact
 - c. Racist Color Representations of Indigenous Americans
 - d. Use of Color expression in Jim Crow era (USA)
 - e. Contemporary artists using color identity
 - i. Amy Sherald
 - ii. Kerry James Marshall
 - iii. Gajin Fujita
 - iv. William Camargo

Methods of Instruction

Method

Reading

Integration

Students are assigned reading of text and/or handouts dealing with the application terminologies of color, design elements/principles; as well as historical references to professional artists and their practice.

Method

Critique

Integration

In-class oral and written critiques, done individually and in groups, of student work where the students discuss the strengths and weaknesses pertaining to their application of color choices in the composition, aesthetic, and modern/historical references in the work.

Method

Lecture

Integration

Classroom lectures using slides/images and/or demonstrations of color theory, art elements, design principles, figure/field relationships, and composition. There will be presentations on the history of Color Theory with a particular focus on Post Colonial Color Theory woven throughout the course.

Method

Projects

Integration

Guided in-class work on projects dealing with topics taught in lectures and assigned reading that will lead to a critique. Projects will focus on the students' technique of art making through various media and experimentation.

Method

Homework

Integration

Students are assigned long-term homework projects that involve a problem to solve, research, concept proposals, creating of artwork, and written/oral critique of the artwork produced.

Methods of Evaluation**Method**

Projects

Integration

Students are assigned short term and long term projects throughout the semester. Each project focuses on key elements of color theory. Students are evaluated on their adaptation of the color theory concepts into their artwork. Students are additionally assessed on their correct use of terminology during oral critique.

Method

Portfolios

Integration

Students will present a completed portfolio at the end of the semester as their final project. This portfolio will be a comprehensive overview of works created during the semester. Students are assessed on demonstrating growth in the use of the four attributes of color, their color control in their preferred medium, and how well they connect their use of color to creative concepts.

Method

Oral Presentation

Integration

Each student will present work in an oral critique to their peer group and instructor. Students will be assessed on their ability to describe their use of the color concept for the project, how they adapted their technique to overcome design challenges, and how effectively they interact with peer feedback.

Method

Research Projects

Integration

Students will be assigned a research project that requires them to explore historical themes of Post Colonial Color Theory. These projects will explore how color has been a powerful authoritarian tool in advertising, politics, and art. Students are assessed on how well they connect historical examples of Post Colonial Color Theory to contemporary examples. Students will additionally be assessed on the accuracy of the information presented and its relevance to the research prompt.

Assignments

Assignment Type

Other

In-class and/or outside of class

Outside of class

Formative or Summative

Formative

Assignment

Found Color Project

Activity Objectives

This activity is designed to support the following Learning Objectives:

Identify specific attributes of color.

Reflect on how colors differ within a hue family.

Instructions:

This project is really about looking which is at the core of all art. Before we can create, we must observe. We are constantly surrounded by color in packaging, mail, various printed media and beyond. The issue is, however, that we rarely stop to consider the nuanced differences in colors we attribute to be the same. Your challenge in this project will be to observe as many nuanced differences in one color as possible.

Materials:

Bristol paper or some flat base (no foam core)

Color samples (2D only)

Glue sticks or Mod Podge

Scissors or X-acto knife

Miscellaneous crafting supplies

Step 1: Choose a color.

Don't make a meal of this. Choose a color that you understand is readily found in your immediate area. Did I mention this can't be digital? Well, it can't. You have to find physical examples of your colors (and no you can't just print out the internet). Whichever color you choose, stick with that color for the entire project. No changing your mind!

Step 2: Seek and Collect.

You will need to find 100 variations of this color. That is a lot so you want to get moving as soon as possible. Look for 100 different versions of the same color. For example, if you choose red look at as many examples of red you can find (2D samples only) that are approximately 3/4-1 inch in diameter. The shape is really up to you, but you will have to make some deliberate decisions about the aesthetic of this project at some point. As you collect the samples, try to organize them in some way that makes sense to you. You'll have better tools for this later in the semester but do your best for now.

Step 3: Organize and Design

This is the part where you show off your creativity. Keeping in mind that I don't want you to make a picture of something here, organize the color in some way that makes categorical sense. For example, you can start with darkest to lightest and then maybe look for other ways to try and organize it. The shapes of the samples can be simple or complex. Will the samples touch and overlap or will there be white space between them? All entirely up to you.

Step 4: Glue up and Present

Be sure that you are using either glue sticks, Mod Podge or acrylic matte medium to adhere your samples to the Bristol paper. No tape!!!!!! This will make it clean in presentation without any material distraction. After you know what your design is going to be, glue it up and bring it to the critique in class. Be prepared to discuss how you found 100 different samples of 1 color.

Assignment Type

Reading

In-class and/or outside of class

Outside of class

Formative or Summative

Formative

Assignment

The Problem with Color Symbolism

You've absolutely heard someone say something similar to "I love Red, it's the color of Love!" Is it? Why is that true? That is a form of Color Symbolism (really more of a metaphor but whatever) which attributes emotional properties to certain colors. While this works really well within our homes and personal lives, it becomes very problematic to apply this as a broader cultural stroke.

For this reading assignment, please read: "Color Line" found at the SPLC Learning for Justice website.
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2001/color-lines>

This article may express ideas you find interesting, and some ideas that you may not agree with. Great! Tell me all about it.

Find 3 central ideas within the article that intrigue you. For each idea, please answer the following question. Write this down and bring to your next class for a great discussion about color.

1. What made this ideas stand out to you specifically?
2. Can you point to a contemporary example of this idea? For example, is there an example in film, TV, SM, art, that you can clearly uses this idea?
3. Does this information change how you want to engage with the language of color moving forward? Please explain in a few sentence as to why or why not.

Assignment Type

Other

In-class and/or outside of class

In-class

Formative or Summative

Summative

Assignment

In-Class Atmospheric Perspective Studies

Let's start assembling these individual color concepts we've explored this semester. We are going to look at how arranging color in a careful way, can create the illusion of spatial depth in an image. For this in-class assignment, you will need the following:

CMYK Acrylic Paint Set
Painting supplies
11x14 sheet of Bristol Paper
Scissors
Glue

You will need to focus on the four attributes of color for this project: Hue, Temperature, Saturation, and Value. These color attributes are the key to correctly arranging spatial color.

1. Sketch a simple landscape on your paper (6x9 inches). Don't make this complex with shading or much detail, just simplified shapes so that we can fill them with color. Focus on 4-5 layers of space only.
2. In each layer, paint a color based on the following ideas-
Warm, Dark, and High Saturation colors will appear closer to the viewer
Cool, Light, and Low Saturation color will appear further from the viewer
Greater detail appears closer to the viewer

Less detail appears further away

3. If you need to work in a simpler way, simply paint 4-5 individual 6x9 pieces of paper colors based on what is described in step 2. You can then cut them out into shapes and arrange. Once you feel that your arrangement is good, glue it in place.

4. Pin up your work on the critique wall and discuss the effective use of Atmospheric Perspective in each other's work.

Assignment Type

Writing

In-class and/or outside of class

Outside of class

Formative or Summative

Summative

Assignment

The Closing of the Bauhaus

Research the creation of the Bauhaus School in the early 20th century. Find out who the main players were in establishing the school and define what roles each played in doing so. Discuss how the school was closed by the Nazi party during their rise in Germany. Why do you think the Nazis would oppose an art school? What parallels, if any, can you draw to our society today?

For this assignment, you can either write a 3-5 page paper and present your findings, or you can create a video to play in class. The video should be 6-7 minutes long and you must submit a bibliography with it citing your research. You will be required to make a brief presentation for this project either way.

Please find 3-4 scholarly sources for your research that is not imagery or Wikipedia. You may also use those sources, but they will be in addition to the 3-4.

Course Materials

Textbooks

Stephen Pentak (2003). Color Thompson. ISBN: 0534613896

Albers, Josef (2008). Interaction of Color: Revised and Expanded Edition Yale University Press. ISBN: 0300115954

Sean Adams (2017). The Designer's Dictionary of Color Harry N. Abrams. ISBN: 9781419723919

Class Size Information

Class Size

32

Class Size Category

G - Large lab 32

Diversity and Inclusion

Course Design and Materials: Course will incorporate diverse perspectives, authors, and examples that reflect a variety of cultures, identities, and lived experiences. Instructional materials will be reviewed regularly to ensure representation, inclusivity, and alignment with equity-minded practices across disciplines.

Inclusive Learning Environment: Instructors will establish classroom norms and policies that promote respect, civil discourse, and belonging in both online and face-to-face classes. Clear expectations for communication and engagement will support a learning space where all students feel valued and heard.

Accessible Instruction: Course content will be delivered using accessible design. Materials will follow accessibility guidelines within the CMS, including captioned media, readable document formats, and multiple means of engagement to support diverse learning.

Equitable Teaching Practices: Instructors will use transparent and grading criteria, varied assessment methods, and timely feedback to promote fairness and student success. Opportunities for revision, reflection, and multiple demonstrations of learning may be incorporated when appropriate to the discipline.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogies: Instructional strategies will encourage critical thinking about diverse perspectives and systems of power relevant to the course content. Faculty will foster opportunities for students to connect course material to real-world contexts.

Ongoing Reflection and Improvement: Faculty will engage in continuous professional development related to IDEAA principles and reflect on course practices using metacognition to identify opportunities for increased equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

Explain how diversity and inclusion(e.g., gender, culture/race, sexuality, etc.) is infused into the course.

Color Theory focuses heavily on exposing students to as many diverse perspectives in art as possible along lines of gender identity, sexual expression, cultural identity, and racial identity. Color Theory also places a great deal of emphasis on exploring Post Colonial Color Theory as both a historical and contemporary practice. We accomplish this by showing students works of art from each of these categories throughout the full spectrum of art history. Going beyond simply showing these works of art and diverse artists, students are then required to examine their personal identity and synthesize original works of art that reflect these values. Students will then communicate to the instructor and to each other how they have responded to these varied examples and identities in their work.

Describe how assignments, instruction, evaluation, course content, and interactions are contextualized for diverse learners promoting an equitable course.

Assignments, Instruction and Content will all be delivered using Universal Design as the main concept. This will entail providing each student with multiple platforms and paths to the information needed to reach the Learning Objectives. This course will use the CMS, printed material, direct instruction and supplemental instruction to ensure all strategies for learning are addressed. There will be flexible adaptations for use of specialized tools such as digital drawing tablets, accessibly modified drawing furniture such as easels, tables, stools, etc. Evaluations will use explicit rubrics which are distributed at the time the work is assigned and where applicable, alternate forms of evaluations such as oral presentation, written presentation and conference will be applied.

Interactions

Explain how the course will incorporate student-to-student interaction.

Student to Student contact will be incorporated in each class session as this course uses a great deal of collaborative instruction and group feedback. Students are required to work on color theory experiments such as color wheels, scales, simultaneous contrast, etc. as a group. The purpose of these peer focus exercises is to strengthen their use of language, demonstration of concept, and critical evaluation of color theory concepts. Students will discuss, as a group, their completed individual color theory works and remark on the works completed by others. Students will also be required to interact with each during our regular work sessions to offer light, real-time critical feedback.

Explain how the course will incorporate instructor-to-student interaction.

Instructor to Student interactions will be varied. Lecture presentations on historical and contemporary uses of color design, one on one instruction during studio sessions, written feedback on completed projects, and skill demonstrations. Students in this course will also work individually with the instructor to develop future bodies of art work and portfolio development.

Explain how the course will incorporate student-to-content interaction.

Student to Content interactions will occur daily in this course as the content is embedded in all activity. Students will have to demonstrate an understanding of color concepts such as the Seven Color Contrasts through completed demonstrative experiments, and how they will incorporate these ideas into larger works of art in this course. Students are assigned a research project that requires them to independently explore Color Theory as either a historical practice, or they may create a work of art that demonstrates a particular aspect of Color Theory.

Explain how the course will incorporate student-to-self interaction (metacognitive).

Student to Self interactions will occur within each assignment. Each project and assignment will require the submission of a self analysis based on the project rubric. The student will evaluate how effectively they have understood the Color Theory concepts and how they have applied them in their individual artwork. This reflection should focus on not just the formal aspects of using color in artwork, but should outline their understanding of Post Colonial Color Theory and how it informs contemporary and historical art practices. They will then create a plan for responding to this self evaluation in future assignments and art projects.