

# Formal Analysis

This page introduces basic tools for use in picture analysis

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The various sections in the menu to the left make up an extensive introduction to form-centered analysis.

You can either study the sections from the top and down, or select a specific subject.

When you click on a menu subject, the contents will open in this window.

To illustrate abstract analytical concepts, the theoretical text is richly illustrated by links to online ads or artworks.

These examples run through the text and appear as **image links** or **text links**.

These links open **in new windows** that you can drag and resize as you wish, but you will need to close them yourselves

All exercises following on a given subject appear below the examples so that it is possible to actively test yourself.

The works to which the exercises refer are also presented as **links**.

Such links also open **in new windows** to allow you to refer directly to the theory and exercise wording.

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**FORMAL ANALYSIS:**

**Composition**

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## On analysis : the 4 phases involved in analysis and interpretation

Usually we read an image as a totality and often in a given context, but when attempting to uncover its many layers of meaning and/or purpose it is also expedient to systematise and organise one's reading of its formal elements in more phases:

1. **Presentation of formal data**
2. **Primary description**
3. **Formal analysis** (the concrete level: Form and aesthetic codes) - How the picture may work aesthetically/perceptually
4. **Interpretation** ( the abstract level: Establishment of meaning and external references through iconography, iconology and semiology) - How the picture may work in (different) context(s).

It is the third phase, the **Formal Analysis** that we will concentrate upon here, although all phases should be included in a wholesome analysis of a given picture. Consequently, all phases will be introduced first. The steps involved in a thorough formal analysis will subsequently be treated in detail below. When it comes to interpreting a given picture there are many ways of doing so, and in this part of the course (visual communication), we will focus on the two interpretative analytical AND interpretational strategies called "Iconography & Iconology", viz. "Semiology", based on theories by Erwin Panofsky and Roland Barthes respectively.

Especially Roland Barthes emphasises that an interpretation will never be completely objective, since both one's own personality and the context in which the picture was created will determine the outcome.

It is therefore very important to substantiate one's interpretation of a given picture by drawing upon concrete observations from the description and analysis, from one's knowledge of the sender, the context and purpose of the picture-

Contextual data such as philosophical, religious or aesthetic currents or time-specific use of symbols, references to politics and cultural codes is, of course, an integral part of an interpretation.

## Elements of formal analysis, step by step

### A. COMPOSITION

When we speak of composition of a given picture, we stick to a 2-dimensional pattern and identify the pattern in which the various elements in the picture are organised on the surface, that is, we identify the way colours, form and lines are structured on the canvas/paper.

This structuring is not coincidental, but governed by certain overall ideas that ultimately aim to mediate the focus/idea/aim/message or effect as clearly as possible. In some cases, the aim may be to provoke the eye – and our inclination to look for balance and harmony and calm aesthetic contemplation. In other cases the aim may rather be to satisfy this inclination and create an enchanted atmosphere.

Such different aims will demand two very different structural patterns and such patterns are not always directly visible in the picture. They may be only implied, while still functioning as an invisible guiding principle for our gaze as it roams about in the pictorial universe, trying to establish a sense of order.

An account of compositional principles and their characteristics is provided below. Its sections should be understood as rules-of-thumbs for reading the main structure of a picture, bearing in mind that more principles can - and most often do - appear in combinations.

#### **Compositional principle Characteristics**

## Examples &amp; Exercises

## STATIC / HARMONIC

- Horizontal composition

This compositional pattern is typically used in depictions of open landscapes. Depending on the placing of the horizontal line, the landscape is endowed with different characteristics.

Typically we find three different relationships between sky and ground (earth/sea, buildings, trees etc.), namely middle, low or high horizon.

In the examples to the right the Dutch landscape painter Jacob van Ruisdael has placed the horizontal line two different places on the canvas, and the thumbnail sketches indicate the schematic governing principle behind the two compositional patterns he has used.



Ruisdael: Wheatfield



Ruisdael: Stormy Weather

**Exercise 1:** Give an account of the effect of the position of the horizontal line in each painting. For example, comment on atmosphere, mood, and/or the viewer's relation to the landscape.

Exercise 2: Click the button below to go to the gallery with nine different landscape photographs.

- Choose one and save it to your hard disk.
- Crop the photography horizontally so that the horizontal line is shifted up- or downwards. Use either the simple crop function in Word or an image editor such as e.g. Photo Shop or Paint Shop Pro.
- Save your cropped copy under a new name.
- Account for the effect of your cropping.

- Vertical composition

Vertical lines create a strong sense of order and stringent structure if they dominate the picture plane. Their distribution across the picture plane can, however, create very different effects. For example, if a vertical line is placed along the central axis of a picture, the result is a symmetrical composition, signaling immobility and perhaps even eternity.

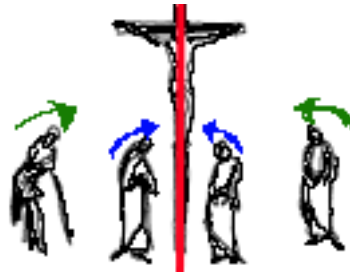
The two picture links below illustrate how one or more vertical axes can be distributed differently across the picture plane. In both pictures the subject is the crucifixion of Christ, and the dominating compositional principle is that of the vertical line, but the effect varies. How?

Although the first painting by Perugino is symmetrically composed, there is still a sense of subtle movement

in the painting. This effect is due to the circular movements of the four accompanying figures on the ground. The movement is, however, toned down due to the exact repetition of symmetrically arranged counter movements so that all movements in the end seem to neutralise each other as illustrated below. What is left is rather a sense of silent rhythm, keeping the central figure in focus.



Perugino



Friedrich

**Exercise 3:** Describe the compositional principle in one of the ad photos below and account for its effect, including a comment on the sense of movement in the photograph.

**a.** Ad photo for Evian )Photographer: Atul Kasbekar (<http://www.atulkasbekar.com/commercial36.html>)

**b.** Commercial for Perceive (by Avon) Photographer: Dean Isidro (<http://www.imagesdeparfums.fr.st/>)

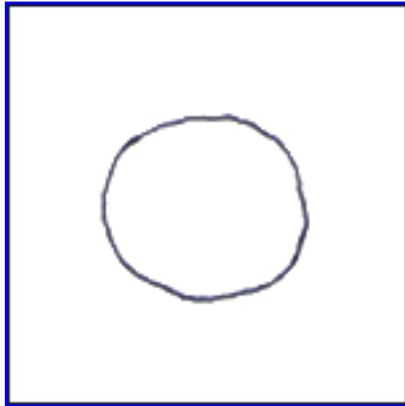
- Circular or circular arc composition

The circle is especially used to emphasise divinity, eternity or plain rhythm. Especially the use of the circular arc as the main compositional principle can endow an image with a harmonic “reading” rhythm.

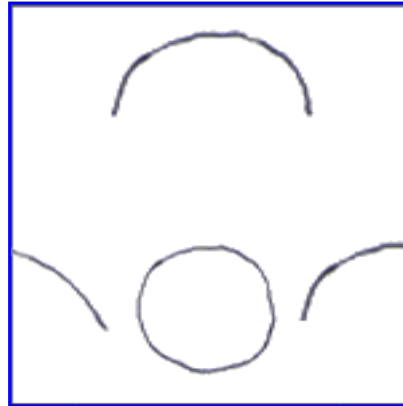
Not only the divine connotations of the circular composition have a long history in the world of art, but also the allusion to the cyclic is often illustrated by means of the circle.

Renaissance artists such as the painter Raphael and the architect Brunelleschi typically used the circular arc to combine a divine expression with a steady harmonic and rhythmic flow.

In the advertising industry, the circle is therefore often used to imply that the product is of unlimited endurance.



Raphael



Raphael

**Exercise 4:** Account for the compositional principles and their effects in one or more of the commercials below. Why do you think this particular principle has been chosen for this particular product?

**a.** Advertisement for Chacok, 2001.

Model: Joan Chabanol (Images des Parfums: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/imagesdeparfums/indexfr.htm>)

**b.** Advertisement for "True Love" 1996 by Elizabeth Arden (Images des Parfums: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/imagesdeparfums/indexfr.htm>)

**c.** Advertisement for "Kingdom" from Alexander McQueen Model: Louise Kasbrik (Images des Parfums: [http://perso.wanadoo.fr/imagesdeparfums/McQueen\\_Alexander/TN\\_Kingdom\\_2003.JPG](http://perso.wanadoo.fr/imagesdeparfums/McQueen_Alexander/TN_Kingdom_2003.JPG))

## Triangular/pyramidal composition

Both the isosceles triangle and the equilateral triangle connote harmony or even divinity.

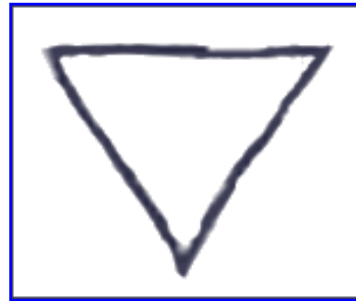
Think, for example, of the Holy Trinity (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) or consider religious art and its depictions of divine saints, such as the Virgin Mary, St. John the Baptist with Christ.

Such saints are very often depicted in triangular compositions due to the religious connotations of the triangle. Typically, Christ is placed at the apex.

When a pyramid/triangle stands on its base it signals the highest degree of solidity and stability, whereas inversion causes it to balance only on its apex, thereby signalling less stability.



Masaccio



Salvador Dali.

- **Exercise 5:** Account for the compositional principle and its effect in one or both of the ads below:

a. Levi's (From Luerzer's archive, <http://www.luerzersarchive.com>)

b. Dockers (From Luerzer's archive, <http://www.luerzersarchive.com>)

## The Golden Section

"The Golden Section" is a compositional principle that has interested philosophers and artists for thousands of years and which has been believed for centuries to possess a certain unrivalled beauty and harmony.

The legend tells about a philosopher named Eudoxos who once wandered around with a stick and asked a random number of people to place a mark on his stick precisely where it would be most beautifully divided in their opinion.

According to the legend, the vast majority put their mark exactly where the stick was divided in the golden section.

Greek philosophers, e.g. Platon, Euclid and Pythagoras, who lived a few centuries B.C., studied the golden proportions of the world order, whether universally, in nature, in music or the human proportions.

They concluded that the proportion of the golden section was a divine proportion, a hidden governing principle in a countless number of proportional relationships in nature. For this reason the aesthetics of the "Golden Section" or "Divine Proportion" has continued to play an extremely important role in visual media, both artistically and in terms of visual production and general layout.

### A mathematical definition of the divine proportion of the Golden Section:

In the diagram below there are TWO lines, namely **AC** (the red line) and **CB** (the blue line).

When seen as ONE line called **AB** (the red + the blue line), the proportion between the length of **AC** and **CB** is defined as the the divine proportion.

**The point C is therefore the Golden section**

**This (divine) proportion between AC and CB is the exact equivalent to that of AB and AC**

$$AC / CB = AB / AC$$



Example:



Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*

### Exercise 5:

Comment on - and compare - the use of the Golden Section in the advertisements below:

United Colors of Benetton. From campaign 1991: Photographer: Oliviero Toscani (<http://www.benetton.com/press>)

- United Colors of Benetton. From campaign 1990: Photographer: Oliviero Toscani (<http://www.benetton.com/press>)

Cropping - "visual synecdoche"

It can - and has - been argued that cropping an image is similar to the use of synecdoche in linguistic production.

Sometimes cropping is employed to let a fragment of a person, object, place or concept denote the whole.



See [Daniel Chandler: Semiotics for Beginners](#) for further explanation.

The signifier is the fragment and the signified is the person, object, place or concept to which the fragment refers.

My claim is that currently the use of what I propose to term "visual synecdoche" is very popular in the images that we encounter daily on the internet, in printed advertisements, and in contemporary art.

It is difficult to explain why, but one explanation - and in my point of view a very plausible one - could be that the lack of immediate overview inherent in such visual effects mirrors contemporary life and our fluctuating life style of TV zapping, superficial internet browsing and quick and incomplete scanning of our surroundings.

This claim is, however, just pure speculation, and in no way theoretically substantiated.

### **Exercise 6:**

Account for the use of cropping in one or more of the following examples:  
Would you describe the image in question as "visual synecdoche"?

**NB.** To solve this exercise, Roland Barthes' analysis of a Panzani advertisement in the essay "Rhetoric of the Image" may prove helpful.

a. [The perfume named "Femme"](#) by Rochas, 1989-1990

(Images des Parfums: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/imagesdeparfums/indexfr.htm>)

b. [The fragrance "Strenesse"](#) by Gabriele Strehle, 2001. Photographer: Craig Mc Dean. Model: Amy Wesson

(Images des Parfums: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/imagesdeparfums/indexfr.htm>)

c. [The fragrance "Very Valentino"](#) by Valentino, 2001-2002. Photographer: Liz Collins.

(Images des Parfums: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/imagesdeparfums/indexfr.htm>)

## DYNAMIC/DISHARMONIOUS COMPOSITIONAL PRINCIPLES: Dynamic balance

Although the examples of compositional principles above all show a certain degree of movement, they are still primarily static and movement - if any - mostly arises from steady rhythm. Certain compositional principles possess an implicit sense of movement or dynamism. Here are a few examples.



- Diagonal composition

The diagonal composition is but a straight vertical or horizontal line that has been stretched and knocked off (static) balance, and for this reason it seems much more dynamic than the vertical or horizontal axis.

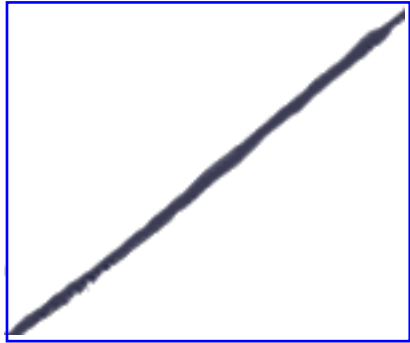
In an image, the diagonal typically **emphasises drama, movement or depth**, which means that the diagonal works in both two and three dimensions.

The examples to the right illustrate different use of these dramatic and spatial effects in baroque paintings by the Flemish painter Rubens and the Italian painter Caravaggio.

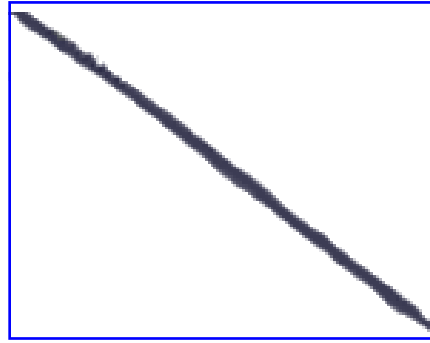
Not surprisingly, the diagonal compositional principle was favoured by baroque artists.

Baroque paintings typically emphasised drama and movement as an integral aspect of the politically and religiously unstable era the artists portrayed.

They even contributed to this with "rhetorical" paintings that often functioned as religious propaganda, aiming to convert their audience to "the right faith".



Rubens



Caravaggio

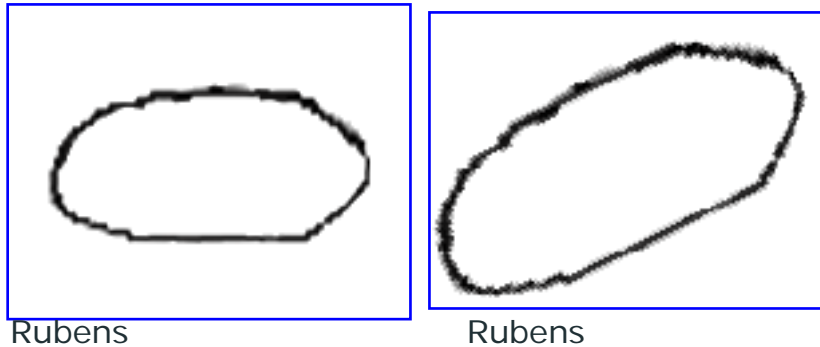
**Exercise 6:**

Account for the use of the diagonal in one or more of the following examples

- a. Playlife collection, spring/summer 2002 by Benetton. Photographer: Ewa-Marie Rundquist  
(at Benetton Press Office: <http://www.benetton.com/press/>)
- b. Playlife collection, spring/summer 2001 by Benetton, Photographer: Magnus Marding  
(at Benetton Press Office: <http://www.benetton.com/press/>)
- c. Billboard ad for Killer Loop by Benetton, 2000. Photographer: Stephan Ruiz  
(at Benetton Press Office: <http://www.benetton.com/press/>)
- d. Identify and analyse the effect of cropping in the curriculum for Marketing and Management Communication at the Århus School of Business.  
Why are almost all the images cropped???

- Oval composition

The oval is but a circle that has been elongated, resulting in an increased sense of dynamism and movement. If the oval is placed diagonally in the picture plane it tends to intensify the expression of drama and movement because its length axis becomes diagonal rather than horizontal/vertical. Not least for this reason the oval is often employed as the main compositional principle in pictorial compositions that wish to emphasise drama, staginess or exultation.



**Exercise 7:** Above you have seen an example of a composition based on the harmonic and divine principle of the Golden Section, namely Alessandro Botticelli's "Birth of Venus". Botticelli did not exclusively base his Venus on static harmony (the Golden Section); he added some effects to his painting by contrasting the vertical and horizontal primarily harmonic compositional patterns with that of the oval.

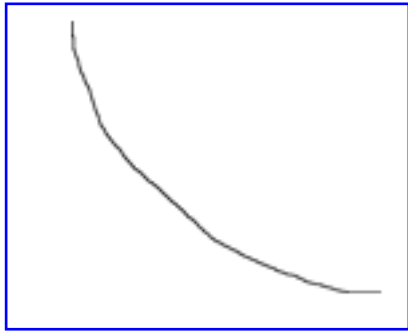
- Identify the oval in Botticelli's Birth of Venus
- What effect(s) did Botticelli achieve by combining the Golden Section and the oval in his compositional scheme

### Hyperbolic composition

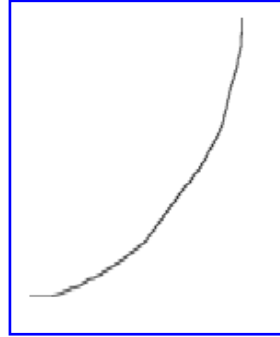
The hyperbole combines the movement of the straight diagonal with the rhythm of the circle/circular arc. When it follows the reading direction (from left to right) in a descending manner, it often suggests a continuous, rhythmical time sequence or time span.

In the first example this principle is employed in Juan Cotan's still life with vegetables to symbolise the 4 ages of man (infantry, youth, maturity, old age) as a natural and inevitable process.

In the second example the principle accentuates the gentle and smooth process of the deposition, anticipating his coming to rest.



Juan Cotan



Rubens

- **Exercise 8:** Compare the sense of movement and time in the two examples.
- Which moves most smoothly and why?
- Describe and explain the effect of the compositional pattern in this [ad for Panzani pasta](#) (You may find Roland Barthes' "Rhetoric of the Image" useful in this context!)
- **UNSTABLE COMPOSITIONAL PRINCIPLES:**  
Disharmony, instability and lack of balance.

All compositional principles covered so far are in overall balance, whether static or dynamic.

However, they can easily be knocked off balance, if one wishes to create a chaotic or confusing pictorial space, in which instability is the leading compositional principle.

Such compositions typically employ many tilted, twisted or staggering lines, and will to a higher degree disturb or even provoke the natural sense of order and harmony that the human eye is said to search for. Typical unstable compositional patterns



**Click on the image below to study Breughel's use of instability**



Breughel

## Composition and movement: An overview of corresponding static and dynamic compositional principles

- Static versus dynamic balance

As mentioned, shapes that have been dislocated from their resting or balanced zero position seem dynamic and in movement.

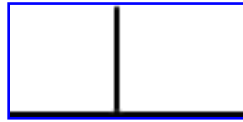
To the right there are some typical examples of such dynamic dislocation.

Dislocation and extreme instability was often used by modernist painters, such as

- Dadaists
- Futurists
- Expressionists
- Surrealists

Especially in the period during and after World War 1, many German expressionist painters used strong angular lines, crossing and colliding, to express the terror of the war.

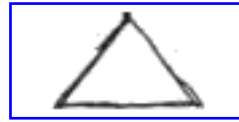
- **Place the cursor** on a centred (static) shape and see its dislocated and dynamic counterpart.
- **If you click** on the images, examples of such dislocations will open in a new window.



Rubens



Rubens



Friedrich



Tatlin



Kandinsky

### Exercise 9:

Decide whether the images below are based on static or dynamic compositional patterns + discuss their effect on balance and movement as you compare the choice of composition to the type and name of the advertised product.

a. [Adidas Adventure Team, photo album](#)

b. [Evian commercial](#). Photographer: Atul Kasbekar  
(at Atul Kasbekar Photography: <http://www.atulkasbekar.com> )

c. [United colors of benetton](#). (from campaign 1992). Photographer: Lucinda Devlin  
(at Benetton Press Office: <http://www.benetton.com/press/>)

d. [Sensi](#) - fragrance for women by Giorgio Armani, 2002-3.  
Photographer: Erin Wasson. Model: Zhang Yimou.  
(Images des Parfums: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/imagesdeparfums/indexfr.htm>)

e. [Ad for Keep it Kool](#) by Killer Loop, Benetton, 2000. Photographer: Stefan Ruiz.

(at Benetton Press Office: <http://www.benetton.com/press/>)

- f Ad for Playlife fall/winter 2003 by Benetton, Photographer: Emmet Malmström  
(at Benetton Press Office: <http://www.benetton.com/press/>)

## B. SPACE: creating a perfect illusion of three dimensions

Two dimensional art must always consider spatial representation, even if the artist chooses to negate space. Throughout history pictorial representations have oscillated between the two extremes of either repressing or creating perfect space. Creating space on a two-dimensional surface, however, involves choosing between - and/or- combining many different techniques, of which the most important are discussed and exemplified below.

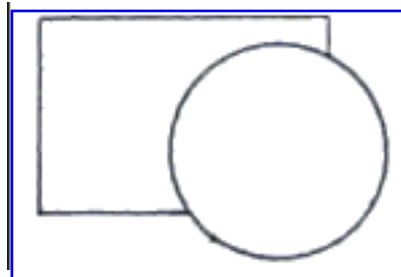
- Overlapping

Overlapping creates a very limited depth, and emphasises the flatness of an image.

Throughout art history, it has typically dominated in art that has had an explicit wish to move beyond reality, either into the religious (heavenly) sphere or just into pure visual abstractions of colour and form.

An example of the former is icons from the middle ages, whereas modern art from the beginning of the 20th century is an example of the latter.

In visual representation based on overlapping, the continuous contour is often used as "visual glue" that emphasises the flatness of an object and keeps it firmly tied to the two-dimensionality of the surface. Overlapping thus enhances the abstract aesthetic qualities of form and colour as pure design with minimal spatial qualities.



**Exercise 10:** In Matisse's "Harmony in Red", spatial representation is clearly sacrificed in favour of aesthetic arrangements of colour, form and beautifully curved lines. Still, we do get an impression of what the artist has wanted to represent.

- Identify overlapping features suggest at least a minimum of spatial arrangement and depth.
- Identify features that repress the sense of depth.
- Comment on the artist's choice of title.

- Repoussoir

In contrast to the technique of overlapping the **repoussoir technique** creates an explicit sense of depth in an image.

The name stems from French and relates to the idea of “pushing something backwards”, and it refers to pictorial elements/objects which are deliberately placed in the foreground to create the **illusion of immense distance** between one or more depth planes of a picture.

### Example:

Imagine a picture of a landscape with a foreground, a middle ground and a background. In this landscape we see a sea gull, suspended in the air, and the size of this sea gull – as compared to e.g. the mountains – gives us an idea of the distance between the two. The seagull is a repoussoir, and had it not been there, the sense of distance wouldn't have been as clear as it is now. For that reason the repoussoir– effect is a brilliant tool to create illusions about distance and pictorial depth.



Pieter Breughel: "Hunters in the snow"

- Shading/hatching

**Shading (hatching) creates volume, plasticity and depth.**

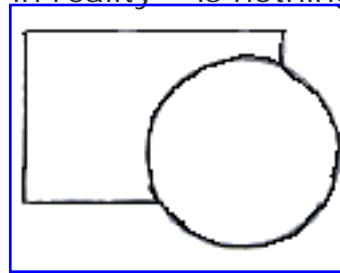
Furthermore, it allows us to determine from which point an object is illuminated, define its volume by use of light and shade, and to place that object firmly on the ground.

It is therefore a very realistic representation of space and three-dimensionality.

Clearly, there is a world of difference between the way we perceive space and volume, although the basic sizes of the forms are identical in the two sketches, making up the image.

The sense of space in the "hidden layer" stems from the hatching of areas which are placed in the shade, while simultaneously leaving the lightest area illuminated by an imaginary light source. The direction of the imaginary light source determines which areas are to be shaded and which illuminated.

The final result is that a given object appears to be tangible, as if one could actually reach into the image and grab an apparent sphere, which – in reality – is nothing but a two-dimensional circle, in the company of a few straight lines and hatching.



Michelangelo's Doni Tondo

**Exercise 12**

- Identify the light source and its direction in Michelangelo's Doni tondo
- Although Michelangelo has created pictorial depth in this painting, there is at least one element which represses depth - which?

- Colour perspective

The sense - and/or repression - of distance and depth can also be achieved by means of colour, since different colours tend to have each their "temperature".

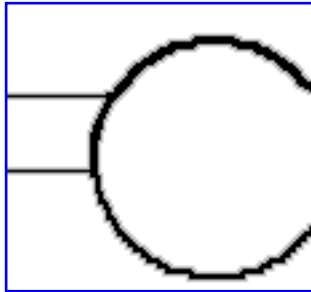
Cool colours, e.g. a greyish blue, are perceived as being further away from the viewer than are warm colours such as e.g. reddish/orange hues, which tend to force themselves forwards to the foreground of a picture and thereby appear closer to the viewer.

An artist like Paul Cezanne experimented much with colour perspective and in his landscape paintings he typically painted

- a cool bluish background
- a neutral green middle ground
- a warm golden/orange foreground.

Such a use of colours as indicators of depth is called **colour perspective**.

### Example



Paul Cezanne: "Mont Sainte-Victoire"

In some cases one may want to create a deliberately ambiguous sense of space, and perhaps for that reason decides to **reverse colour perspective**. The difference is illustrated in the geometric figures below. The left illustration feels "right", whereas the right one tends to irritate the eye; something seems "wrong" because the warm colour pushes itself forwards, whereas the cool colour seems to withdraw, resulting in a virtual "colour crash".

The effect is that the distance between the two forms seems much shorter in the illustration to the right than in the one to the left and the pictorial space in the left much bigger than in the right.



Normal colour perspective vs. reversed colour perspective

**Exercise 13:**

Account for the relation between colour and space (if any!) in one or more of the examples below.

a. [Promotional postcard for Calvin Klein eyewear](#), 2000. Model: Chris Klein

b. [Ad for Calvin Klein Jeans](#). Model: Kate Moss.

c. [Promotional postcard for Calvin Klein](#), 2000. Model: Vinessa Shaw

c. [Promotional Postcard for Calvin Klein Jeans](#), 2000. Model: Macy Gray.

- Linear perspective

Differences in size can, of course, also be perceived as space and distance. The size of objects in an image, which is constructed by means of linear perspective, can be determined mathematically correct by means of diagonal lines directed inwards to meet in the so-called **“vanishing point”** in **the horizontal line**.

In an image based on a mathematically constructed linear perspective, the illusion of perfect space can be very convincing.

**In the centralised linear perspective** pictorial space is typically balanced, harmonious, symmetrical and

static. This creates a comforting overview for the viewer who may feel the (s)he is present in – or even in control of - the pictorial space.

**Example: Raphael: "The School of Athens"**



A mathematically perfect linear perspective was first constructed by humanists in the renaissance era, in which man felt in control of the universe, and – crudely put – artists constructed their pictorial universe accordingly.

When the renaissance artist Rafael painted the "School of Athens" for the Vatican in Rome, he chose the perfect linear perspective as the governing spatial/compositional principle. The painting represents famous classical thinkers, and not surprisingly, he placed two of the most famous ones – Socrates and Plato – at centre, just like renaissance philosophers placed man at centre of the universe.

The centralised version of the linear perspective became extremely important for humanist artists, not lest because it reflected a harmonic world view, in which mankind is in control of the surroundings, and – with the discovery of the linear perspective in art.

- "Raumflucht"

The implicit sense of order in the centralised linear perspective can easily be suspended in favour of so-called "**Raumflucht**" or "**spatial flight**", which is characterised by a much higher degree of dynamism and movement than the centralised linear perspective. If the vanishing point is dislocated, so is the overall sense of balance, symmetry and order, and the result is lack of order, overview, and thus a much more dynamic if not chaotic spatial representation. The effect of this type of spatial representation is **lack of harmony and a lot of drama**, depending on how far the vanishing point is moved from the centre of a given image. The sense of space and spatialextension, however, becomes accentuated.

**Example**



Jacopo Tintoretto

The above of a decentralised vanishing point illustrates how "Raumflucht" does not necessarily dispose of a certain compositional harmony: rather it extends space and diminishes the viewer's sense of control over the pictorial space. The viewer loses the sense of overview that he gets from watching a composition based on linear perspective. In effect, "raumflucht" adds drama to the scene, since the composition becomes diagonal and dynamic.

### **C. VIEWPOINT - VISUAL ANGLE: The relationship between viewer and viewed.**

It is no surprise that any perception of space, distance or depth depends on where one is standing when perceiving. When the objects are shown in the so-called frontal perspective, viewer and viewed object are located on the same level, as in the centralised perspective, where the horizon line is inevitably located at eye level. If an image is defined as a visual narrative just like a written or oral text is defined as a verbal narrative, it turns out that just like in textual analysis much, can be learned by examining the visually "narrative" point of view and its manipulating effects.

Visual objects are often presented either from above (bird's-eye view) or from below (worm's eye view). It is rather amazing how much a given object can change when perceived from an unusual angle, for example the human body. The artist who painted the self-portrait in one of the examples below is a slender tall woman, but her self portrait from an extreme worm's eye presents her to the viewer as simply huge.

Below is an account of both the frontal and "normal perspective" and the variants of bird's- and worm's eye views, accompanied by illustrative examples and accounts of their general effect. Click the thumbnail illustrations to see other examples.

**Bird's-eye view:**

a. Looking straight ahead from an elevated position.



b. Looking down from an elevated position



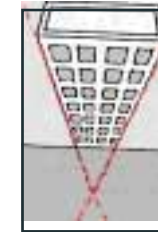
Both these examples of bird's-eye view leave the viewer with a feeling of overview, that is, of being in control.

**Examples**



Claude Monet

(Click on the images)



Salvador Dali

**Exercise:**

Define the type of visual angle employed in the two examples above

- **Worm's eye view**

- a. Looking straight forward from a low position

- **Worm's eye view**

- b. Tilting one's head backwards, looking up.



Examples: Click on the images



Jenny Saville



Low angle Golf Swing

The worm's eye view makes the viewer lose the sense of having an overview, that is, of being in charge of the scene. The viewer is overwhelmed by the viewed, which - especially in example b - appears monumental, if not threatening. The viewer is given a humble position in relation to the viewed.

- **Normal eye level view** See the also the section on [linear perspective](#)

The viewer is at level with the viewed, so that proportions are not distorted in any way. The horizon is at eye level, and the viewer is therefore "on equal terms" with that which is depicted. If it is a person, for example, the person would be your visual "equal"

**Example:**



Yours truly

## D. LIGHT & light symbolism

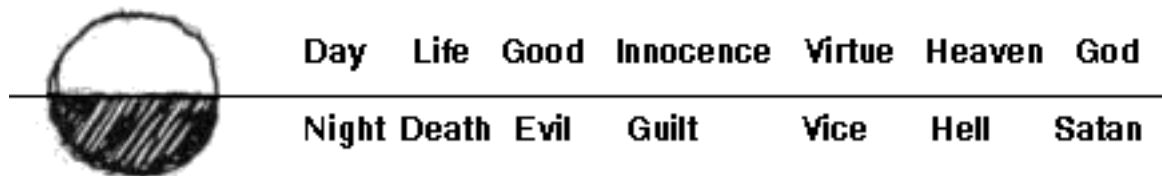


In visual art, light is extremely important, since it endows an image with a wide range of different formal and/or atmospheric qualities (apart from being an important element in the suggestion of three-dimensional forms as discussed above).

This section offers some illustrative examples.

- **Symbolic light**

The contrast between light and darkness, i.e. the black/white contrast is fundamentally symbolic. In many cases we tend to transfer the polarity of the binary opposition black/white to a realm of corresponding existential and moral binary oppositions such as those mentioned in the illustration to the right.



- Radiating light power from a depicted object.

“God is light” is a common saying.

Religious artists have often taken the consequence by claiming that precisely for that reason, divine objects or beings could not be illuminated as they were light sources themselves.

Subjecting a divine being to an external light source would mean acknowledging the existence of something bigger and more powerful than this being, and in religious art from the middle ages this would be heresy. Precisely for this reason, religious icons from medieval times - as the one below - represents saints and holy beings on a background of pure gold, thus utilizing the reflective properties of that material for a religious purpose.

**Example:** Gold used to signify holiness



Cimabue (Click on the image)

- Modelling light.  
(linear style)

**Modelling light** is an even and regular daylight which models figures and objects in a few smooth transitional zones of gradual transition between light and darkness. Shadows are often one-sided only, and typically, a given object is circumscribed by a very thin and sharp contour.

Every object in a given image is equally in focus, equally visible and equally important, so a soft modelling light is **a visual “democracy of forms”**, leaving the viewer with a feeling of having an overview and being in control.



Perugino: Madonna with child

Typically the term covers two ways of employing light, namely sfumato and clair obscur:

a. *Sfumato*

As the root of the Italian term “sfumato” suggests, this lightening effect is characterised by a smoke-like quality, modeling shapes and objects very softly from strongly lit areas to almost pure black – just like a smoke screen tends to blur transitions. All contours are thereby suspended, and consequently details such as corners of the eyes and mouth are endowed with a certain mysterious air.

Example: Sfumato is said to be the main reason for the secret and mysterious smile of perhaps the most famous painting in the world: Leonardo da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa”, making her a universal object of admiration and contemplation, of adoration almost to the extent that all modern media, from end of the year calendars to advertising, have used her and sometimes excessively so.

*Clair obscur (chiaroscuro)*

Clair obscur is a technique in which an external light source, functions as a sharp projector in an otherwise dark and indefinable space. Thus, Clair obscur is typically employed for selective or manipulative purposes, since the artist is in complete control of what is important and needs to meet the spectator’s eye. He or she is the visual “director”, staging our reading of a given image and thereby controlling our gaze. Clair obscur uses only few middle tones, fragmenting the form so it is difficult to define where form ends and space begins. It also has a strong atmospheric effect, which makes it particularly adept at creating a mysterious mood.

In Leonardo da Vinci's celebrated *Mona Lisa* the glaze, skilfully worked, heightens the effects of light and shade on the face, constituting what Leonardo himself called "sfumato". This technique enables the perfect imitation of living flesh, due to refined treatment of the human figure plunged into half-obscurity and results in a high degree of realism.



Click on the image to study Leonardo's Mona Lisa.

**Example:**

During the religious struggles between Protestantism and Catholicism in the baroque era (17th ct.), clair obscur was the favoured technique of the catholic church painters, who employed the technique in their religious paintings to overwhelm and convince – perhaps even convert – the audience to the “proper faith”. The propagandistic quality of clair obscur is still utilized in public relations, marketing and advertising industry because of its highly manipulative effect.



Click to study Caravaggio's use of clair obscur.

**Exercise 14:**

Account for the effect of clair obscur in this [fashion photograph by Atul Kasbekar](#)

- Impressionist light

Impressionist light emphasises the play of light in the tactile surface of an object. This play of light seems if not more important, then equally important to the object on which it plays.

In impressionist light depictions, pure light tends to break up the colours in complementary colour dots so that light and colours are united in a flickering unity, whereas form is only of secondary importance. The use of impressionist light typically assigns great importance to surface, tactility and textural effect. Therefore, images that focus on materials and surfaces – e.g. of skin or fabric - will often tend to employ impressionistic light effects, thus foregrounding tactile values.

**Example:**

In Renoir's swarms of people, light and light play is equally important to the people posing for the picture - if not more important!



[Click to study Renoir's use of impressionist light](#)

## E. COLOUR AND COLOUR RELATIONS

The most important characteristic of colours is that they are RELATIVE.

Colours change character, depending on their surroundings, and for that reason they should be analysed in context.

**Colours can be described and categorised according to intensity, specific gravity, contrasts and temperature.**

- The spectral colours (intensity)

Among the spectral colours – the ones we perceive when we see a rainbow, a spot of oil on a street or a light beam reflected through a prism – there are three colours we need to single out;

**red**, **blue** and **yellow**.

These three colours form the basis of all other spectral colours and for that reason they are named “primary colours”. If the primary colours are mixed according to the formula below, they form the so-called “secondary colours” orange, green and purple.

The secondary colours are complementary colours to the primaries.

Mixing secondary colours from primaries:

Red + yellow = orange

Blue + yellow = green

Red + blue = purple

A special characteristic of all spectral colours is that they are the clearest, the purest and the most saturated colours that the human eye can possibly perceive. They work directly and actively in our visual perception, because their colouristic expression is so unambiguous and intense.

**Example:**

The principle of colours that work well together is best illustrated by means of the colour circle by the artist and art teacher Johannes Itten from the design- and art institution BAUHAUS.

Note that in Itten's colour circle, the primary colours and the secondary colours are located directly opposite each other.



Johannes Itten's colour circle

P = primary colours (red, blue, yellow)

S= secondary colours (green, orange, purple)

T= tertiary colours (middle tones)

- Achromatic (non)colours: black, white and grey

In opposition to the colour intensity of the spectral colours we find the **achromatic (non-)colours black and white**, which are not real colours but achromatic, since they do not contain any hint of spectral colour and are purely neutral.

Still, the achromatic white, grey and black are extremely important, partly in their pure quality, partly because they can be used to either strengthen or weaken the intensity of accompanying colours. The colour grey in its many tones is said to bring out the very best in other colours when functioning as background.

**Example:**



A Gucci screen saver.

- **Broken colours:**

(toning down colour intensity, while increasing subtlety of nuances)

The intensity of a spectral colour can be reduced by “breaking” it with achromatic colours or mixing it with its complimentary colour. When a spectral colour is broken, it will lose some of its intensity and saturation, but it will gain in richness of nuances. It is often a very good idea to use broken colours in visual presentations, because too many spectral colours tend to end up looking like a poster from an amusement park, diverting the viewer’s attention from any accompanying linguistic messages.

**Example:**

The illustration below illustrates different degrees of colour intensity, from the next-to-greyscale photograph left to the very intense and almost “hyper-coloured” photograph to the right.

Neither extreme is realistic representation, but which is?




Intense colours can be broken in different ways. Here are a few examples  
 a. Breaking spectral colours with black and white

When colours are broken by adding black or white, the main colour hue stays the same but becomes darker or lighter. If white is added, for example, light intensity is strengthened. This is called a change in tone. By gradually darkening or lightening a given colour, one can choose between a wide range of intermediary colour tones which are more discrete than fully saturated colours.

**Examples:**



Spectral blue broken with white and black respectively.

- Place the cursor here  to watch the difference between a spectral colour and its broken equivalent.

**Exercise15:**

Account for the use of broken colours in this [fashion photo by Atul Kasbekar](#).

b. Breaking spectral colours with their complementary colours.

When primary colours are broken by means of their complementary colours (the secondary colours) a similar thing happens; the intensity is weakened in favour of a colour spectre which is very much like earth colours.



- Upper row: primary colour blue mixed with its complimentary secondary colour, orange
- Middle row: primary colour red mixed with its complimentary secondary colour, green
- Bottom row. primary colour yellow mixed with its complimentary secondary colour, purple

## COLUR RELATIONS: Mutual colour relations

In the upper sections, the different colour groups and their characteristics have been presented. This section delves deeper into **mutual relationships** between different colour groups and illustrates how they can be employed for varying purposes. This is, in short, a section on **the relativity theory of colours**.

### a. The complementary contrast



As described above, a colour broken by means of its complementary colour loses its former intensity. However, if these two complimentary colours are juxtaposed rather than mixed the opposite happens; each colour activates and emphasises its complimentary counterpart's special character.

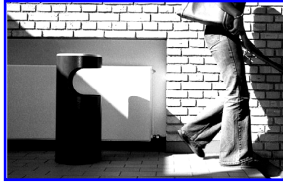
As a result, a pair of complementary colours is in itself often sufficient to create a colourful and intense visual experience.

### Examples:



Complementary colour contrasts

Place the cursor over the image below to watch a complementary colour effect



### Exercise 16:

- a. Account for complementary contrasts in an [advertisement for Evian](#) (Photographer: Atul Kasbekar)
- b. Another fashion photo by Atul Kasbekar also makes use of complimentary colours. Open it by clicking [here](#) and account for the different effects of complementary colour contrasts in the two photos.
- c. Account for the colour contrasts and their overall effect in this [Calvin Klein Swimwear ad.](#) (Model: Lisa Ratliffe)

b. Cold/warm contrast:  
temperature and colour perspective

In the colour circle the area containing the yellow, orange and red hues seems close, warm and glowing in contrast to the area of the cool and distant bluish colour hues.

These two areas are placed opposite of each other in the colour circle due to their contrasting "temperature". Working with colour temperature in visual representation is not only very common in art but also in advertising/ marketing.

It is worth noticing, however, that even if a colour in one connection seems distinctly cool, the very same colour may seem distinctly warm in another connection, which basically means that the concept of colour temperature is a relative one.

That warm colours seem close and cool colours seem distant has already been mentioned in the section on space , ["colour perspective"](#).

However, other associations are very often connected to colour temperature. For example, a warm colour

can suggest intimacy and perhaps even cosiness, whereas a cool colour may suggest freshness, professionalism or distance.

### Example:



### Exercise 17:

Account for the use of colour temperature in the images below and account for the use of colour to add certain qualities to the product.

- [Nescafe ad](#)
- [Gillette ad](#)

## F. A quick reference overview and examples on colour groups, colour contrasts and colour symbolism

Below you will find an overview of relevant concepts and keywords within colour theory

- **Spectral colours**

Colours included in the light spectre,  
(rainbow colours)



- **Primary colours**

red, yellow, blue  
(the "holy trinity" of the colour palette)



- **Secondary colours**

Are created by mixing the primary colours. Are complementary colours to the primaries.



- **Tertiary colours**

The remaining colour hues in the colour circle are less pure and intense than the primary and secondary colours.



- **Complementary colours**

These face each other in the colour circle. They create contrast and dynamism. When juxtaposed two complementary colours strengthen each other. When mixed they weaken each other.



- **Achromatic colours**

BLACK, WHITE and GREY

"Non-colours" with a very strong contrast and intense, graphic character.



- **Grey tones**

The grey tone scale gradually moves from pure black to pure white and can, for example, be used to break spectral colours.



- **Broken colours**

Pure colours whose intensity has been reduced (i.e. broken) by means of black and white, or by means of other colours, lose intensity and saturation.

### Exercise 18:

Account for the colour scheme in the advertisements below:

- Calvin Klein Jeans ad from Vogue, 1985
- Calvin Klein ad: Obsession (for men), from Vanity Fair, 1986  
&  
Calvin Klein men's underwear, 1996 (model: Antonio Sabato, Jr.)

- **Ambiguous colours**

(the "porn palette")

The "porn palette" is a common name for a colour expression which deliberately combines colours that do not naturally work well together in an attempt to provoke the eye by means of colouristic disharmonies.

Ambiguous colours in combination tend to create a rather psychedelic colour scheme, which - by the way - has been rather trendy the latest years.

### Example:

In itself, each of the colours shown below is perfectly "normal"!  
An example of a "porn palette" the COMBINATION

PURPLE- ORANGE- VIOLET- CYCLAMEN-GREEN

### Exercise 19:

Comment on the colour scheme in the ad below, relating it to the name of the advertised product.

Versace ad, women's wear

- **Colour temperature**

Red/orange and green/blue are warm/cold opposites, but how they work together depends on their context.

Warm colours tend to move forwards in a picture plane, whereas cool ones tend to pull themselves backwards. This is the basic principle of the colour perspective.

**Example:**



Colour perspective



Reversed colour perspective

- **Colour specific density**

The light radiation from a colour depends on its intensity and diminishes from yellow to blue in the course of the colour circle.

If colours are to be balanced in a visual design, two colours should not always occupy identical amounts of space, because they have varying specific density.

The more light a colour radiates, the less space it needs to counterbalance a darker colour with less intense light radiation. This means that in an overwhelmingly blue picture, only a very little amount of e.g. orange is needed to create an overall sense of colouristic balance and harmony.

### Example:

Place the cursor on the rollover image below to see in illustration of the principle of colour specific density at work. Click to watch an example from Maersk\_



### Exercise 20:

- In the Maersk example above, account for the use of contrast as well as for colour specific density.
- Why has the company chosen that particular colour scheme?

## G. Colour Symbolism

In the Middle Ages colours were not regarded as aesthetic elements with which the artist could work *ad libitum*.

In contrast, colour was regarded an attribute of the thing itself, signalling its divine character.

Colour was God's means of concretising the phenomenal world, making it attractive to the eyes of man.

Colour was basically nothing but fragmented white light flooding all sensuous objects, endowing them with a profound significance.

The use of intense and saturated colours in medieval art is therefore analysed as an established pictorial

convention.

However, the use of such a conventional colour symbolism has gradually dissolved. When – around 1300 – shading entered the world of art, the power of local colour (e.g. the most saturated red of a red mantle) yielded to the broken colour tones of lighted and shaded areas. In other words realism (the quest for three dimensionality) seemed to enter a formerly purely symbolic world.

Nevertheless, colour symbolism has been – and still is – used intensively in all kinds of artistic productions, but more subjectively and for more expressive reasons. Expressive art, for example, relies heavily on colour as an expression of inner sentiments.

Some conventional symbolic values of colour( or colour codes in Roland Barthes' terminology) inherited from the Middle Ages still exist, however and are heavily utilised in contemporary art and visual communication as exemplified in the examples and exercises below.

### **Colour/hue**

#### **Symbolism / connotation**

**Examples: When you move your cursor over the image, watch the effect**

Gold

Symbolic of the most pure light, the sun itself, divine radiance, holiness.

Pure gold was used in medieval and Byzantine art (icons) as background for saints as well as for their halos.



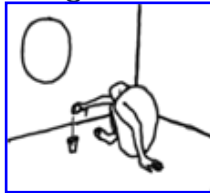
Cimabue

Yellow is very close to gold and is used when gold is not available. The colour often symbolises light, spiritual power, wisdom and the highest dignity when it is pure and WARM. However, a cold yellow often connotes deceit as exemplified below.



Rubens: King Salomon's judgement: Which is the real mother?  
"Dirty" bilious yellowish/greenish

Symbolises the ill and bilious. This colour often symbolises illness, decay, deceit, betrayal, contempt or danger.



Kvium (Dirty Colours for a depraved human being)  
Green

Green is generally considered a soothing and calming and is thus often positively charged. It is used to symbolise the "earthly"/terrestrial (as opposed to the heavenly), growth, hope, initiation.

It is, by the way, no coincidence that green (and NOT yellow) is the colour of the cloth covering the examination table!



Raphael's "Small Cowper Madonna" is a very earthly and harmonious version of the Madonna-Child motif. The virgin is the terrestrial humble mother rather than the elevated saint, wearing no halo, and placed in a fairly realistic and lush green landscape. The stable triangular/pyramidal composition works well together with the colour green to signal harmony.

Raphael  
Blue

Blue is a "high status" colour, originally considered the most perfect of all colours.

Since the Middle Ages it has been used to symbolise the heavenly and spiritual sphere, but also faith and trust. It is the conventional colour of the Virgin's cloak, popularly called her "heavenly cloak".

In modern times blue has also come to symbolise sadness or melancholy as we know it from the expression "feeling blue" or "having the blues".



In Cimabue's iconic representation of the distinctly heavenly Madonna on her celestial throne, her divinity is signalled by her golden halo and background and further emphasised by his wrapping her in a blue cloak.

Cimabue



A more modern symbolism of "melancholy blues" was exploited by Picasso in his period of depression, his "blue period", in which his paintings were monochrome.

Picasso

## Purple

In antiquity, purple - which is a combination of red and blue with an overweight of red - was reserved for the emperor. Its hue is cool, and has been said to symbolise sincerity and seriousness. It has also been used often in depictions of Jesus Christ and the Virgin.

## Violet

Violet - which is a combination of blue and red with an overweight of blue - is generally considered distanced, serious and spiritual. It has often been seen a symbol of asceticism, grievance and passion.

## Red

(Crimson and Scarlet)

The warm dominating red has been said to symbolise passion, love, sexuality, aggressiveness, war and, when combined with black, even danger.

In religious imagery the prostitute Mary Magdalene is often wearing a warm spectral red cloak to signal her deep passion.

Also in profane imagery red is a colour of passion. Think, for example, about the name of the passionate female main character in "Gone with the Wind" - SCARLETT.



Ivanov  
White

In Ivanov's depiction of Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene, it is not only the use of colour that adds passion and drama to the scene. It is also the choice of compositional principle, namely the use of the diagonal.

White is considered a symbol of the highest form of light, both intellectually and religiously. Just like an established metaphor within the field of linguistics, the symbolism of white is so conventionalised (at least within western culture) that it is known to laymen.

In both art and the world of visual mass communication, white denotes purity. In religious art, the white

lily, for example, symbolises the virginity of the Mary.

White can - however - also symbolise death, the anaemic, the extinct or even mourning. In some Asian countries, for example, people in mourning wear white.



In Ivanov's painting, white is used in opposition to the passionate red in Christ's garments. This creates a strong sense of contrast between the son of god and the prostitute. However, their mutual bonding is accentuated by means of Mary Magdalene's white scarf as well as the red hues in Christ's body, hair and the shading of his drapery.

Ivanov

## Black

In western culture, black symbolises death, sin and sometimes even Hell. The devil, black magic, mourning, melancholy and danger are also common connotations of this achromatic colour.

When combined with red, black tends to signal a very high degree of danger and often, the image of the "femme fatale" (the fatally seductive woman) is dominated by red and black.



If we have any doubt as to the REAL subject of Edvard Munch's apparently intertwined couple engaged in the pleasures of love, we only need to add his colours (and read the title).

Munch

**Exercise 21:** Analyse the ads below, comparing product type/advertising company to selected colour scheme and its effect.

a. Men's fashion by Provogue. Photographer: Atul Kasbekar

b." Y" by Yves Saint Laurent. 1990 (women's fragrance).