

# IMAGES AND COLOURS: THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

*Translation by Gordon Leonard Symons*

Images of every kind, (photographs, drawings, paintings, etc.) have great suggestive power especially on those who belong to the visual type. Their influence is twofold: on the one hand this is exercised by the intensity of their expressive power or by the fascination of their beauty; on the other, it depends on what they mean.

This double effect explains the enormous influence of works of art, which have inspired millions of people across all ages and have often shaped an entire period or an entire nation.

In fact, there is much more to works of art than just aesthetic value. They constitute operative forces, almost living entities, which have a stimulating and creative power. Therefore, we should not let these forces remain unused, nor should we submit to them unconsciously, but we should use them deliberately for the purposes of our and other people's psychosynthesis.

To obtain these effects, it is necessary to observe the chosen image with the utmost attention, to contemplate it in a state of quiet receptivity and for a certain time, until one becomes completely absorbed and identified with it, until one almost feels oneself to "be" the object or the image we are contemplating.

For example, if we look at the statue of Moses by Michelangelo (or a reproduction of it), we can come to feel within ourselves the energy and power that permeates it and emanates from that figure. Or, if we contemplate Fra Angelico's Risen Christ, we may come to feel that it is our being that has risen from the grave, that has broken all ties, and that is free from all limitations and manifests itself as triumphant power. To

produce the therapeutic, educational and transformative effects in ourselves and in others, we need to proceed methodically. We must collect, and have at our disposal, a series of images that express the qualities we wish to evoke and develop. Then we should carefully observe the image chosen as suitable for the specific purpose.

Sometimes in contemplating the image it is appropriate to direct and fix the attention on one of the aspects or elements that make up the image itself, depending on the effects we intend to obtain. The main elements of the images are:

1. Lines and shapes.
2. Colours.

## **1. LINES AND SHAPES**

It might be surprising that simple lines can have such a definite psychological effect; but the fact is that some people feel this effect, and many others are instead influenced without being aware of it. Straight lines, sharp angles and broken lines produce very different impressions from curved lines, from arcs and circles, and from sinuous and wavy lines. The former generally give a sense of strength and evoke virile qualities, while the curves in all their aspects instead represent feminine qualities. Therefore, the prevalence in an image of straight lines gives the impression of steadfastness, decision and active energy. The acute angles turned upwards express aspiration to elevation, they indicate high goals. This effect is produced by images of pointed mountains, and by those of pointed arches and Gothic church spires. The curves, on the other hand, suggest softness, breadth, expansion, rhythmic motion, change and plasticity.

In nature, curves prevail in the sea with its rhythmic wave motion, and in the changing clouds. The irregular, twisted and haphazardly intersecting lines - such as those seen in many modern drawings and paintings - clearly indicate the conflicting and tormented moods of those who drew them.

These general characteristics give clear indications on the use of lines to obtain the desired psychological effects.

This should be taken into account – and sometimes it is done more or less consciously – in the construction of buildings, both in their external architectural appearance and in their internal environments. Curved lines should predominate in places of rest and pleasant social activities, while rigid straight lines are more appropriate for workplaces such as factories, offices and studios.

But lines can be used for psychological purposes even in their simplest and most basic forms; they can be drawn on paper, or observed in objects of a given shape. When observed in a receptive disposition, their influence can be intense and effective for the desired purposes.

The relationship between lines and their psychological qualities is often revealed by the way one writes, by the individual handwriting. Serious graphological studies have ascertained the correspondence between certain characteristics of writing and the psychological constitution or state of mind of the writer. An educational and curative technique used in psychosynthesis is based on these correspondences: graphotherapy. It consists in modifying the writing, giving it the characteristics which express the qualities that one wants to develop. It is an exercise of will that, done consistently, is very effective.

## 2. COLOURS

Colours have intense effects that are more easily recognizable, and are often stronger than lines. It is generally accepted that each colour has its own specific psychological quality, and therefore exerts a corresponding influence. However, there are still differences of opinion regarding the specific qualities and effects of each colour, and further research and experiments are needed to shed more light on this matter; but there are some points which may be regarded as already practically established.

For example, it is generally admitted that the so-called “cold” and soft colours produce a calming, but sometimes also depressing effect; while the “warm”, vivid and brilliant colours have a stimulating and exciting influence. Certain shades of blue have a calming and harmonizing effect; green light is restful; vivid red and yellow are usually stimulating.

The colours women choose for their clothes have a considerable effect on them, and often the choice corresponds (consciously or not) to their psychological needs or tendencies. But perhaps the largest field of influence of colours is in the home. Soft colours are more suitable for places of rest and relaxation, while bright and lively colours are preferable for private and public dining rooms, light and strong tones for workplaces, etc. These are only general indications, and the choices must be adapted and varied according to the particular conditions and individual needs. Sunny rooms require different shades of color than those located in the North, and, on a larger scale, the colour tones needed in southern climates differ from those best suited to cold Nordic climates.

The influence of color as a therapeutic agent has been and is increasingly recognized, and its applications have great possibilities, but scientific studies in this field are so far scarce, and even difficult to perform.

The psychological effect of various colours (apart from the general distinction between “cold” and “warm” colours mentioned above) has been described in different and conflicting ways. Among the effects on which there is greater consensus – given that some colours are connected with various aspects of nature – there are:

- Light blue or dark blue, associated with sky and deep water, often gives a sense of joy, widening and expanding consciousness
- Red, the color of blood and fire, arouses passion, aggression and violence.
- Yellow-gold gives a sense of vitality, and also stimulates mental activity.
- Green, which predominates in plant nature, produces a sense of calm and harmony, and has been regarded as the color of hope.
- Deep purple and purple (a mixture of red and purple), used in ritual religious clothing and vestments, can evoke a sense of grandeur and solemnity.

According to Schultz, with some exercises done in the higher cycle of autogenic training one can arrive

at what he calls “the discovery of one’s own colour”, which according to him would be the “concord between the physical experience of the colour and the inclined affective tonality in a general sense”.

In my opinion, this is questionable for several reasons. First of all, because of the fundamental multiplicity of the human soul, that is, due to the existence of contrasting elements and sub-personalities, each of which has its own tone or emotional “colour”. Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account the various alternations - during different moments, or more or less long periods - of the different emotional tones.

The effects of a color can also be strongly influenced or determined by the particular impressions the subject had in the past, often dating back to childhood, and sometimes forgotten, and which therefore should be discovered by appropriate analytical techniques.

Finally, there would be much to say about the various relationships between the personalities of painters or draftsmen and their works, but this would require a broad discussion that would go beyond the limits of this paper. I will only say that some painters have expressed the best part of themselves in their paintings, excluding the morbid, even serious, sides of their personality (a typical example is Van Gogh); while others have given free expression to the shapeless or deformed contents of their unconscious and have thus freed themselves from it, with a cathartic effect on themselves... but not on others.

All this should be taken into account in the use of the psychological influences of colors for therapeutic and educational purposes, and in individual psychosynthesis. But without waiting for the results of future systematic research, everyone can observe and experiment on themselves and on others the effects of the visual means I mentioned: images, lines and colours.

This method constitutes a good training in the use of attention and self-observation techniques and can, in its simplicity, make useful contributions to the implementation of psychosynthesis.

## Notes

- There are numerous publications on the meaning and psychological effects of colours. A number of them are listed in the book by J.H. Schultz *Autogenic training*, Vol. II (Milan, Feltrinelli). Therefore, I limit myself to a few other indications.
- Dr. R. Gerard did accurate experimental research which he exposed in his writings: *Differential effects of coloured lights on psychophysiological functions* (Los Angeles, University of California, 1958) and *Color and emotional arousal* (*American Psychologist*, XIII, 340).
- An important series of conferences on the world of colours was held in Ascona (Switzerland) from 23 to 30 August 1972 promoted by the Erasmus Foundation. The lectures will probably be published in a volume of the *Eranos Jahrbuch*.
- Among the writings of Italian authors, I will mention: G. Ovio, *Science of colours. Vision of colors* (Milan, Hoepli) and A. Ricciardi, *The theater of colour* (Milan, Facchi, 1919).