

The Language of Shape and Colour in Ceramic Design

3-day workshop



As a ceramicist, you create objects that are used, observed, and experienced. With every piece, you make choices about shape and colour — sometimes based on a specific concept, sometimes guided by intuition.

Shape and colour are never neutral; they determine how an object is perceived and the emotions it evokes, whether the piece is functional or sculptural.

In this workshop we explore this visual language by starting from its fundamental elements. Rather than relying on fixed symbolic meanings (red signifies love, the circle represents perfection), we focus on the perceptual qualities of shape and colour: thick or thin, angular or rounded, irregular or ordered, light or dark, warm or cool, muted or vivid. These tangible differences shape the way an object is interpreted and experienced.

Fig.1: Peter Voulkos, Little Big Horn, 1959



By examining these parameters, you will develop a deeper understanding of how shape and colour function as a visual language. You will discover how subtle variations can transform the impact of an object, while expanding your awareness of formal and chromatic possibilities. This insight will enable you to make more deliberate choices, refine your intuition, and situate your personal voice within a broader field of expression.

We draw on robust empirical research into perception and emotional responses. But above all, the workshop is grounded in experimentation: **we learn by doing**. Through a series of exercises, you will gain practical insight into how shape and colour influence perception, allowing you to integrate this knowledge directly into your ceramic practice.

Fig.2: Tashima Etsuko, Cornucopia, 2008

Outcomes:

1. Perceptual acuity

A refined sensitivity to nuances of shape and colour.

2. Methodical mastery

The ability to analyse emotional impact systematically and design with intention.

3. Personal integration

A clearer understanding of your own creative voice within a shared framework of meaning.



PROGRAMME

Day 1 – Perception, Space and Emotion

§1 Thinking in opposites

§2 Spatial meaning

§3 Order and regularity in shape, colour temperature

Day 2 – Power and Dynamics

§4 Volume of shape, lightness of colour

§5 Roundness of shape, saturation of colour

Day 3 – Variation, Intuition and Integration

§6 Experimenting with variations in shape and colour

§7 Colour as an intuitive starting point

§8 Discussion and analysis of participants' current work-in-progress

Fig.3: SUZUKI GORŌ - Yashichida tokkuri, 2021

DAY 1 – PERCEPTION, SPACE AND EMOTION

The first day of the workshop lays the foundations for consciously learning to observe, identify, and direct meaning through shape and colour. Participants develop their perceptual sensitivity and are introduced to a systematic method for analysing and designing emotional impact.

§1 THINKING IN OPPOSITIONS

The initial exercises are based on contrasts in meaning.

Contrast of shape and colour

Participants analyse the differences between colours and shapes, and learn to articulate them verbally.

Classifying according to pairs of meaning

Hard/soft, heavy/light, warm/cold, passive/active, ... Colours and shapes are classified on the basis of sensory interpretation.

These exercises show that people very often make similar associations, and that shape and colour possess parallel expressive forces. In this way, participants establish an initial bridge between perception and meaning.



§2 SPATIAL MEANING

Here, meaning is linked to the experience of space.

Spatial orientation through the body

Front/back, above/below, and left/right are first experienced bodily and then translated metaphorically into meaning.

Orientation within colour space

Using the NCS colour atlas, participants learn to position colours according to the three dimensions of colour: hue, lightness, and chroma.

Three perceptual parameters of shape

Participants explore three fundamental parameters of shape through drawing: structure, volume, and roundness.

Three dimensions of emotion

Participants are then introduced to the *Self-Assessment Manikin* (SAM), developed by Margaret M. Bradley and Peter J. Lang. This instrument enables emotions to be mapped along three dimensions: pleasure, dominance, and arousal. Using ceramic objects, participants analyse their emotional responses and explore how variations in shape and colour can influence and direct this impact. Design is thus understood in relation to identifiable emotional parameters.

§3 ORDER AND REGULARITY OF SHAPE, COLOUR TEMPERATURE

Experiencing colour: temperature and social distance

Colours are arranged along a spectrum from icy to burning, and from distant to intimate. The relationship between colour temperature and the perception of spatial depth is explored.

Experiencing shape: order and mental distance

By manipulating only the parameter of order (from disorder to perfect symmetry), participants explore how formal structure influences social distance (repulsion/attraction, unknown/known) and cognitive depth (difficult versus easy).

Designing emotion – depth

Working in clay, participants create contrasting shapes embodying opposing extremes: withdrawal versus approach, difficult versus easy. Cold and warm colours, as well as disordered and ordered shapes, are used deliberately to make these emotional qualities tangible.

DAY 2 – POWER AND DYNAMICS

On the second day, participants deepen their understanding of the relationship between perceptual parameters and emotional meaning. While the first day focuses on order in shape and on colour temperature, the second day explores volume and roundness of shape as well as colour lightness and saturation. Parameters of shape and colour are once again examined in isolation and systematically related to specific emotional experience.



§4 VOLUME OF SHAPE, LIGHTNESS OF COLOUR

Colour : lightness and weight

The focus is on lightness (dark/light). Participants arrange colours from darkest to lightest and relate them to a sense of weight, from very heavy to very light. They discover that lightness is not merely a visual property, but also evokes weight and influences perceptions of power, dominance or soft support.

Shape : volume and power

The parameter of volume (thick-robust/thin-delicate) is isolated. By exploring these extremes, participants observe that voluminous shapes appear heavier and radiate more power, while thinner shapes seem lighter and more yielding. This reveals how physical proportions directly influence emotional interpretation.

Designing emotion – dominance and control

In a sculptural exercise, participants give form to the opposition between hard and soft power, between dominance and submission, through contrasting propositions. By experimenting with different combinations of volume of shape and lightness of colour, they come to understand how strength and dominance can be evoked in experience. It becomes clear how colour lightness and volume of shape can express either firm, powerful authority or a more refined and subtle form of presence.

§5 ROUNDNESS OF SHAPE, SATURATION OF COLOUR

Colour : chroma and dynamics

The third colour parameter, saturation (chroma), is central. Colours are arranged from neutral grey to intense, vivid hues and linked to varying degrees of activity, from stillness to explosive energy. Participants experience how saturation generates visual pulsation, emotional tension and dynamism.

Shape: roundness and movement

The parameter of roundness (angular versus rounded) is isolated. Angular shapes tend to appear more static and rational, while rounded shapes are perceived as more dynamic and emotional. Through subtle variations, participants discover how roundness can enhance the sense of movement or excitation.

Designing emotion – dynamics and emotionality

In this design exercise, participants express the contrast between rational stillness and emotional intensity through extreme propositions. By exploring a range of variations and combinations of roundness of shape and saturation of colour, they develop an understanding of how passivity or activation, rationality or emotion, can be intentionally shaped and designed.

DAY 3 – VARIATION, INTUITION AND INTEGRATION

The third and final day is devoted to personal integration and creation. Participants apply the knowledge and experience they have gained regarding the creation of meaning in design to their own personal voice.

Small adjustments in hue, lightness, saturation or shape parameters can profoundly alter the message of a design, while personal interpretation allows participants to express themselves in a unique and individual way.

§6 EXPERIMENTING WITH VARIATIONS IN SHAPE AND COLOUR

Colour: applying structures of meaning

Participants organise variations within a single colour family according to the three dimensions of meaning. They explore how temperature, lightness and saturation, within the same hue, generate different emotional qualities. This exercise serves as a synthesis of the previous days and refines the ability to recognise and consciously direct subtle nuances.

Shape: applying structures of meaning

In a similar way, variations in shape are organised according to the same three-dimensional structure of meaning. By altering only order, volume or roundness within a group of related shapes, participants observe how minimal interventions can produce clear shifts in expression.



§7 COLOUR AS AN INTUITIVE STARTING POINT

Designing from colour

In this integrative exercise, the usual direction of the design process is reversed. Rather than shape, colour becomes the starting point.

Each participant intuitively selects a colour and allows it to resonate before sculpting the shape. The shape then emerges from the perceived character of the colour.

Here, intuition and personal voice are connected to the knowledge acquired: colour acts as the emotional driver, shape as its material expression. The exercise demonstrates how individual interpretation can develop within shared structures of meaning.

§8 DISCUSSION OF PARTICIPANTS' CURRENT WORK-IN-PROGRESS

The workshop concludes with a collective analysis of the participants' current work.

Through focused questions, the discussion examines:

- how choices of shape and colour convey meaning,
- where tensions or inconsistencies arise,
- how emotional intention can be articulated with greater precision.

In this way, the discussion brings together theory, experience and individual practice.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Duration

Three days, 6.5 hours per day

Included

Teaching materials, shape and colour samples on paper, clay and engobes

Language

English – French – Dutch

Target audience

Professional ceramicists, students and amateurs interested in the language of shape and colour in their practice

What participants should bring

Sketch paper, drawing materials, sculpting tools and brushes, small mixing containers, apron, towel or paper towels, camera

Use of the studio

Glaze samples



Fig.4: Student working on a shape exercise in the Colour and Semantic Design course at ENSAV La Cambre, academic year 2023–2024.

LECTURER



Inez Michiels has taught colour and semantic design at ENSAV La Cambre in Brussels and has been a visiting professor at various universities and higher education institutions, including MICA (Baltimore), LASALLE (Singapore) and the University of Antwerp.

Her research on non-verbal communication has supported design agencies and multinational companies. She is the author of *Symbolen Constructies*, the *Design Semantics Knowledge Graph*, and co-founder and board member of CITY OF 8 and the Interdisciplinary Colour Association Belgium (ICA-Belgium). She is also a visual artist with a background in ceramics.

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Fig.5: Graphic design students sorting colours in the Semantic Design workshop at MICA, Baltimore, November 2019.