

ACTIVITY TITLE:

Emotions in Color: Visualizing What We Feel

Activity code: ncATRV03



	DURATION	45-60 minutes
	AGE RANGE	14-16
	TOPICS	Emotions, Culture, Psychology, Arts, Gender Representation, Visual



Description of the project

This interdisciplinary STEAM activity invites students to explore how emotions can be expressed nonverbally through color, shape, and symbolic representation. Drawing on elements of neuroscience, psychology, visual design, and cultural expression, students will design artistic posters that portray a selected emotion.

Teams will reflect on how different cultures and genders express and perceive emotions and then create a visual composition that communicates a chosen emotion without using any text or faces. The final piece will include:

- A poster or visual artwork
- A tribute connection to an artist (e.g., Frida Kahlo, Zanele Muholi)
- A short oral explanation or peer-interpretation round

By the end of the session, students will understand how creative design connects with human emotion, empathy, and cultural identity, while applying analytical reasoning and inclusive reflection.



Objectives: What will I learn?

- **Analyze how different cultures visually represent emotions** by using colors, shapes, and symbols to better understand the diversity of emotional expression.

- **Explore how gender identity and social norms influence emotional perception**, by researching and reflecting on cultural and gendered emotion expression to promote inclusive emotional understanding.
- **Construct artistic representations of complex emotions** by applying principles of visual design and neuroscience, to communicate emotions without relying on words or facial expressions.
- **Reflect on the work of women and gender-diverse artists** by integrating artistic tributes into their final designs, to promote visibility and appreciation of marginalized figures in the arts.
- **Improve their visual compositions** by using peer feedback to evaluate and revise their designs, to strengthen collaborative interpretation and creative quality.
- **Explore the professional applications of emotional design** by investigating its role in careers such as marketing, therapeutic arts, and user experience, to understand the value of emotional literacy in STEAM professions.



Materials: What do I need?

1. Provided by Teacher/Institution

- A4 or A3 art paper, scissors, markers, glue
- Printed guides on color psychology and cultural symbolism
- Biographies/images of Frida Kahlo, Zanele Muholi, etc.
- Optional digital access (Canva, Adobe Express)

2. Provided by Students

- Pencils, notebook, smartphone (optional for photo sharing)
- Access to basic internet search or digital design tools

3. Downloadable Resources

- [Emotion Poster Template](#)
- [Color/Emotion Symbolism Guide](#)
- [Team Role Cards](#)
- [Artist Connection Sheet](#)
- [Biographies/images of role models](#)
- [Mood-color symbolism chart](#)
- [Interpretation Passport](#)



Previous preparation

Print and organize materials:

- Print and prepare the following handouts for student teams: Emotion Poster Template,

Color/Emotion Symbolism Guide, Artist Connection Sheets, Team Role Cards (Designer, Researcher, Presenter), Biographies/images of role models, Interpretation Passport.

Prepare student teams:

- Form diverse, mixed-gender groups of 3 students to encourage inclusion and collaboration.
- Assign rotating team roles to promote equity and active participation:
 - *Designer*: leads sketching, layout, and visual composition
 - *Researcher*: gathers cultural symbolism and artist insights
 - *Presenter*: communicates the meaning behind the final design
- Encourage students to switch roles after feedback or halfway through, so everyone experiences different creative and analytical tasks.

Build context and connect prior knowledge:

- Post examples of emotional artwork around the class/educational space and display or distribute a mood-color symbolism chart.
- Prepare tables with poster paper, colored materials, scissors, collage cutouts, and glue.
- Begin with a short group discussion to activate emotional awareness and prior experience:
 - When was the last time you felt a strong emotion, you couldn't explain in words?
 - Are there colors or symbols you personally associate with feelings like joy, grief, or anger?
 - Have you seen cultural rituals or artwork that represent emotions in unique ways?
- Show a short introductory video (e.g., "[How Emotions Work in the Brain](#)" or artist interviews) to highlight connections between neuroscience, culture, and visual expression.



RESEARCH



Have a look at these resources

Why This Matters – Context and Relevance

Emotions are at the heart of how we connect, communicate, and navigate the world. While we often express them through words and facial expressions, many cultures rely on symbols, colors, rituals, and art to express deep emotions—especially when words fall short. Understanding how different societies visually represent emotions helps us become more empathetic, inclusive, and culturally aware.

This project invites students to become emotional storytellers—combining neuroscience, color theory, and global traditions to design posters that express complex feelings without a single word. In a time of growing cultural diversity and mental health awareness, emotional literacy and nonverbal communication have become essential life skills across education, art, design, and technology.

Real World Examples

- In many Asian cultures, white symbolizes mourning, while in Western contexts, black is the color of grief, this cultural contrast affects fashion, rituals, and design.
- Zanele Muholi's photography uses monochrome contrasts to portray identity, pain, and resistance in the LGBTQ+ community in South Africa.
- Frida Kahlo painted her emotional struggles through vibrant colors and surreal symbols—her broken column and dual portraits are studied worldwide.
- In marketing, warm colors like red and orange stimulate urgency or energy, while blue and green are used to promote calm and trust.
- In tech and user experience design, emotional impact determines how we interact with interfaces—from app colors to iconography.

Guiding Questions for Research and Discussion

- What colors or symbols do you personally associate with joy, sadness, or anger? Where do these associations come from?
- How do different cultures express grief, hope, or love visually?
- Can design evoke emotions in people who don't share the same language or background?
- How are women and gender-diverse artists using visual art to express emotional experiences?
- Why do some cultures suppress emotional expression while others encourage it?
- In your own life, when have you used color, fashion, or symbols to communicate how you feel?



CREATE



Some things you need before beginning

- Studies show that 90% of human communication is non-verbal, our facial expressions, gestures, and visual symbols often speak louder than words.
- The color-emotion connection is backed by neuroscience. Warm colors (red, orange) can activate the amygdala (emotion center), increasing energy or tension; cool tones (blue, green) promote calm.
- In advertising and marketing, colors and visual elements are carefully chosen to evoke specific feelings and influence behavior, this is called visual semiotics.
- Emotional literacy, understanding and expressing emotions, is essential for mental health, empathy, and conflict resolution.
- In multicultural societies, understanding emotional symbols across cultures helps reduce miscommunication and fosters inclusion.

- By learning to visualize emotions, students develop emotional intelligence, creative confidence, and empathy.
- The skill to translate complex feelings into visual language empowers students to better express themselves when words fail.
- These tools are not only useful in art, but in public speaking, design, marketing, therapy, and cross-cultural collaboration.



Now, follow these steps

Step 1. Assign Emotion and Roles:

- Each team draws a card with one emotion (e.g., grief, serenity, jealousy)
- Team roles are assigned: Designer, Researcher, Presenter
- Briefly review responsibilities and encourage equitable collaboration.

Step 2. Artist Connection:

- Each team selects one artist from the reference sheets provided.
- Read the biography and discuss how their identity and artwork reflect emotion.
- Complete the Artist Connection Sheet by identifying themes, emotional expression techniques, and symbolic motifs.
- Discuss: How did this artist communicate emotion without relying on words?

Step 3. Cultural Exploration:

- Use the Emotion and Symbol Guide to explore how your assigned emotion is visualized across two different cultures.
- Document 2–3 visual elements associated with this emotion (mourning = white in Japan, black in Brazil).
- Discuss as a group: How do culture and gender identity influence emotional expression?

Step 4. Emotion, Color and Data Mapping:

- Each team completes a visual data task:
 - List 4 colors and describe what emotion each evokes for their team.
 - Compare results to the cultural meanings listed in the guide.
 - Plots results in a simple bar/pie chart (on paper or Canva).
 - Add their chart to the final poster or display.

Step 5. Emotional Sustainability and Symbolic Materials:

- The teacher explains: “Now that you’ve explored how emotions connect to color across cultures and your own experiences, let’s go one step further. What if we also thought about how emotions

can connect to materials, textures, or even the concept of sustainability itself? Think about it: emotions like grief, hope, or resilience often involve cycles—loss and healing, breaking down and rebuilding. In a similar way, sustainability is about regeneration, reuse, and reimagining. So, here's your next design challenge: before creating your poster, I want you to reflect on these questions:

- How can your poster reflect sustainability—not just through materials, but also through its emotional message?
- Can emotions like resilience, hope, or grief be connected to ideas like healing, regeneration, or reuse?
- Are there materials (scraps, layers, worn textures, unfinished edges) that could symbolically express that?
- Give teams 3–5 minutes to discuss these in their groups before moving into the next step.

Step 6. Sketch and Plan:

- Teams brainstorm visual metaphors for their emotion using shapes, textures, color, and space.
- Draft layout using the Poster Template, considering:
 - Cultural symbols
 - Artist tribute
 - Color-emotion chart
 - Sustainable materials or textures

Step 7. Create a Final Poster:

- Use paper, collage, or digital tools (e.g., Canva) to create a visual representation of the assigned emotion.
- Design guidelines:
 - No words or facial expressions allowed
 - Incorporate at least one element from your chosen artist
 - Include one symbolic or visual element from a traditional cultural ritual (e.g., textile motif, funeral pattern)
 - Attach the emotion–color chart and sustainability note

Step 8. Peer Interpretation:

- Display the posters in a gallery-style walk.
- Each team rotates to observe others' posters and write their interpretation on sticky notes or comment cards.



COMMUNICATE

- Now it's time for each team to present their final emotion poster and explain the creative, emotional, and cultural decisions behind their design. But, before, posters will be placed like a gallery-style so other teams can interact with them. Peer teams provide feedback using the Interpretation Passport document.
- After the walkthrough, students return the passports to the original teams or share highlights in a class discussion. This allows original creators to see how their work was interpreted and gather questions or misunderstandings to address in their final presentation.
- Then, each team should present their final poster composition, including:
 - The chosen emotion, expressed without words or facial expressions
 - A color-emotion mapping chart (from Step 3.5)
 - A tribute to a featured artist (Frida Kahlo, Zanele Muholi, etc.), with an explanation of what elements were borrowed or reinterpreted
 - A cultural symbol or motif connected to emotional expression (e.g., mourning color, ritual textile, or decorative shape), including a brief explanation of its origin and meaning
 - One design choice that reflects sustainability or regeneration (e.g., symbolic material reuse, textures representing healing)



It is time to share!

Share your amazing work and inspire others!

#EmotionsInColor #STEAMbrace

- LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/steambrace-project/posts/?feedView=all>
- Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/steambrace_eu/
- X: https://www.instagram.com/steambrace_eu/



KEEP ON LEARNING



How can I make a similar project by myself?

- What new emotion would you choose to represent, and how would your design change?
- How does changing the color palette or material affect how your emotion is perceived?
- Could you represent two emotions at once—like jealousy and admiration—in the same visual artwork?
- How are emotions expressed differently in your family, heritage, or community?

- Can you find a ritual, object, or tradition that visually communicates emotion without words?
- How do cultural expectations shape how people are "allowed" to show feelings like anger or grief?
- What materials from home could you reuse to build an artwork that expresses emotion?
- How can damage, repair, or layering become part of your message?
- What does an "emotionally sustainable" artwork look like to you?
- Which artists from marginalized genders inspire you emotionally or visually?
- How might gender identity influence the way someone creates or interprets visual emotions?
- Can you create a poster that defies traditional "feminine" or "masculine" color codes?



Which are other connected projects?

- Emotion** **in** **Movement:**
 Create a short dance or body movement routine to express a specific emotion. Can others guess which emotion you're communicating without music or words?
- Textile** **Emotions:**
 Use fabrics or digital textures to design a symbolic patchwork that expresses your own emotional journey or a cultural emotional narrative (e.g., grief rituals, celebration garments).
- Photo** **Essay:** **Emotion** **Without** **Faces:**
 Take a series of 5–8 photographs that capture emotions using only body language, objects, color, and environment—**no faces or words allowed.**
- Design** **an** **Emotion-Based** **Game:**
 Create a board or card game where players guess or match emotions using abstract symbols, colors, or stories from different cultural contexts.
- Sound** **and** **Color:**
 Explore synesthesia by mapping emotions to soundscapes and color. What does sadness look and sound like? What colors match your favorite music?



LINKS FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

- **Frida Kahlo Foundation** – Explore the life and work of one of the most iconic emotional visual storytellers in art history. <https://www.fridakahlo.org/>
- **Color Matters** – Dive into the science and psychology of color perception and symbolism. <https://www.colormatters.com/>
- **YouTube: The Science of Emotions** – Engaging video content explaining the neuroscience behind emotional responses. <https://youtu.be/f0oG1J2escU>

Emotions in Color – Tools & Downloadable Resources

Printable Guide: Color Psychology & Cultural Symbolism

Color Psychology Overview

Color	General Emotional Association	Psychological Effect
Red	Passion, Anger, Energy	Stimulates excitement, urgency
Blue	Calm, Sadness, Trust	Encourages peace, reflection
Yellow	Joy, Anxiety, Creativity	Stimulates mental activity, energy
Green	Growth, Envy, Calmness	Balances and relaxes emotions
Purple	Mystery, Nobility, Grief	Evokes introspection and depth
Black	Power, Mourning, Elegance	Creates contrast, authority
White	Purity, Peace, Emptiness	Neutral tone, clarity
Orange	Confidence, Vitality, Aggression	Energizes, attracts attention
Pink	Compassion, Vulnerability	Nurtures warmth, gentleness

Cultural Symbolism Examples

Emotion	Culture A	Culture B	Common Symbolism
Mourning	White (Japan)	Black (Western)	Flower garlands, veils
Happiness	Red (China)	Yellow (India)	Confetti, light bursts
Passion	Red	Orange	Flames, hearts
Serenity	Blue (Europe)	Green (Islamic cultures)	Water, open space
Anger	Black/Red	Red	Sharp lines, spikes
Hope	Green	Yellow	Seeds, sunrise

■ Artist Biographies & Portrait Sheets

• Frida Kahlo (1907–1954)

- **Known for:** Expressive self-portraits exploring pain, identity, and culture.
- **Visual style:** Bold colors, surreal symbolism, indigenous Mexican elements.
- **Suggested tribute:** Incorporate floral crown, broken column, monkeys, or split background.

• Zanele Muholi (b. 1972)

- **Known for:** Visual activism documenting Black LGBTQ+ identity in South Africa.
- **Visual style:** Monochrome portraiture, contrast lighting, reclaimed materials.
- **Suggested tribute:** Use contrasting textures, dark silhouettes, or Afro-futurist symbolism.

■ Emotion Poster Template Layout Zones

|-----|
| Title Zone (Emotion - optional) |
| [for interpretation] |
| |

| Cultural Symbol Zone |
| (Add pattern, color, motif) |
| |

| Artist Tribute Zone |
| (Incorporate visual style cue) |
| |

| Color Mapping Chart Area |
| (Attach small pie/bar graph) |
| |

| Main Composition Area |
(Your abstract expression!)

Note: No words or faces allowed.

■ Color/Emotion Symbolism Guide

Color	Common Global Meanings	Suggested Uses in Poster
Red	Love, danger, war	Sharp lines, background intensity
Blue	Peace, sadness, trust	Soft transitions, dominant fill
Yellow	Energy, joy, anxiety	Central objects, movement effects
Green	Nature, envy, life	Borders, balance visuals
Purple	Royalty, grief, imagination	Gradient effects, emotional conflict
Black	Mourning, power, mystery	Contrast background, shadow
White	Purity, emptiness, peace	Negative space, light anchors

Team Role Cards

Designer

- In charge of layout, sketching, colors, and symbolic arrangement.
- Ensures use of visual principles like balance, contrast, and rhythm.

Researcher

- Investigates cultural symbolism and artist biography.
- Leads work on color mapping, symbolism comparisons.

Presenter

- Shares team's concept and interpretation in final gallery walk.
- Summarizes design choices, artist inspiration, and cultural symbols.

■ Artist Connection Sheet

| Team Name: _____ |

| Selected Artist: _____ |

| Emotion: _____ |

1. What themes does this artist explore?

2. Which visual elements (color, texture, symbols) stand out?

3. How can your team honor or integrate these elements?

4. What message or emotion do you think the artist conveyed?

5. In what ways will your poster reflect similar emotions or ideas?

All tools are classroom-ready, printable, and align with the STEAM and gender-inclusive framework described.

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