

SESSION 12
10.05.26

Aesthetics and the Moodboard

How to see it, how to say it, and how to show it to a client.

Workhorse Collective

ART 418 · Fall 2026

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Meets Mon + Wed
Today Session 12 · 10.05.2026

Today.

PART	WHAT	YOU LEAVE WITH
1	Aesthetics. What the word means, where Western thought has located beauty, and the parts of a look you can name.	Words more exact than "clean" and "modern"
2	Talking to clients. What people mean when they say "make it pop."	Questions to ask in place of "do you like it?"
3	Moodboards. What they are for, in every field that makes things.	Options that each answer the brief
4	The risk. When looking at other people's work turns into copying it.	Rules for a board that stays yours
5	From the studio. Real Workhorse boards: Resume Place, Raben Group, Grubb's Pharmacy, Neurogazer.	The order: words, themes, boards
6	Work time. Build your boards.	Boards ready for Wednesday

Your brief is written. Now it has to look like something.

On Sept 28 you wrote two or three paths. A moodboard is how each path gets seen before anything is made.

The brief

What the brand is for, who it is for, and what it should make people feel. Turned in Sept 30.

The paths

Two or three ways the brand could go, each with its own idea. Written Sept 28.

The boards

One board per path, made of pictures, type, and color, so anyone can see the difference. Due Wednesday.

Aesthetics is about what the senses take in.

And how we judge it once they have.

Definition

aesthetic

aes·thet·ic | es-'the-tik

noun, adjective · plural aesthetics

One word, five jobs. It names a branch of philosophy, a point of view, a quality, a medical procedure, and a vibe. You will hear all five from clients.

NOUN

- ① A branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste and with the creation and appreciation of beauty.

Usually plural: aesthetics

- ② A particular theory or conception of beauty or art: a particular taste for or approach to what is pleasing to the senses and especially sight.

modernist aesthetics

- ③ The artistic or beautiful qualities of something: beauty.

They appreciated the aesthetics of the gemstones.

ADJECTIVE

- ④ Done or made to change and especially to enhance a person's appearance.

aesthetic plastic surgery

NEWEST, ONLINE

- ⑤ The set of artistic motifs defining a collection of things; more broadly, their aura or "vibe."

cottagecore, Y2K, dark academia

Key

Reading a word history

THE MARKS DICTIONARIES AND ETYMOLOGISTS USE, DRAWN THE SAME WAY ON EVERY WORD SLIDE TODAY

LATIN

The language a form comes from: Greek, Latin, Old English, Old French, and the rest.

*au- PIE

An asterisk and a dashed rule: a form nobody wrote down. Scholars rebuilt it from the words it left behind. PIE is Proto-Indo-European, the ancestor of most European languages.

a + b = ab

A compound word taken apart into its pieces.

FIRST SENSE

The oldest meaning we can find.

FIGURATIVE

Moved by metaphor: a tool for writing becomes a way of writing.

The form or meaning in use now.



Became, or passed into the next language.



A likely link, not a proven one. Etymologists write "perhaps."

1550s

The first time a meaning shows up in writing. Dictionaries say "attested." People probably said it earlier.

BROADENED NARROWED

The meaning covers more things, or fewer.

BY ASSOCIATION WORSENERD

Moved to something next to it (a burn, then the mark it leaves), or toward a bad sense.

SAME ROOT

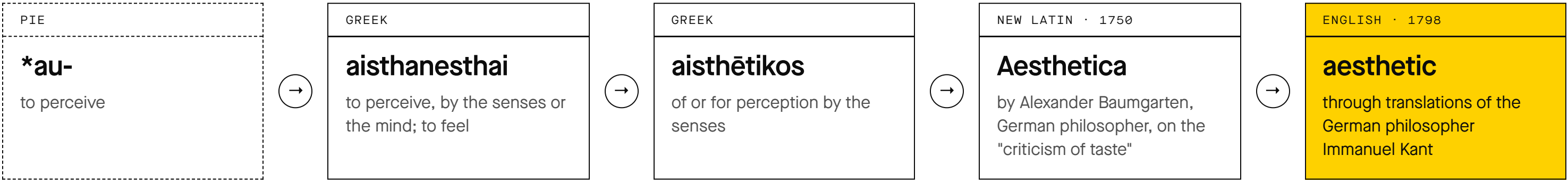
Cousins: other words from the same source.

Word history

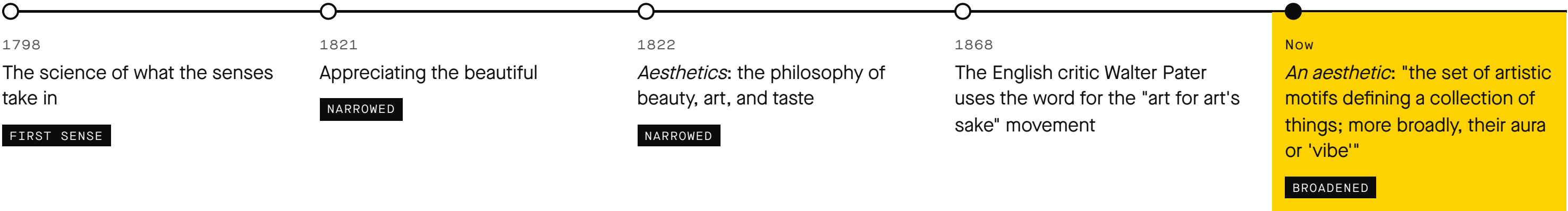
aesthetic

ENGLISH SINCE 1798 · *from Greek, by way of German*

WHERE IT CAME FROM



HOW THE MEANING MOVED



SAME ROOT

anesthetic

an- "without" + *aisthēsis* "feeling," 1846

synesthesia

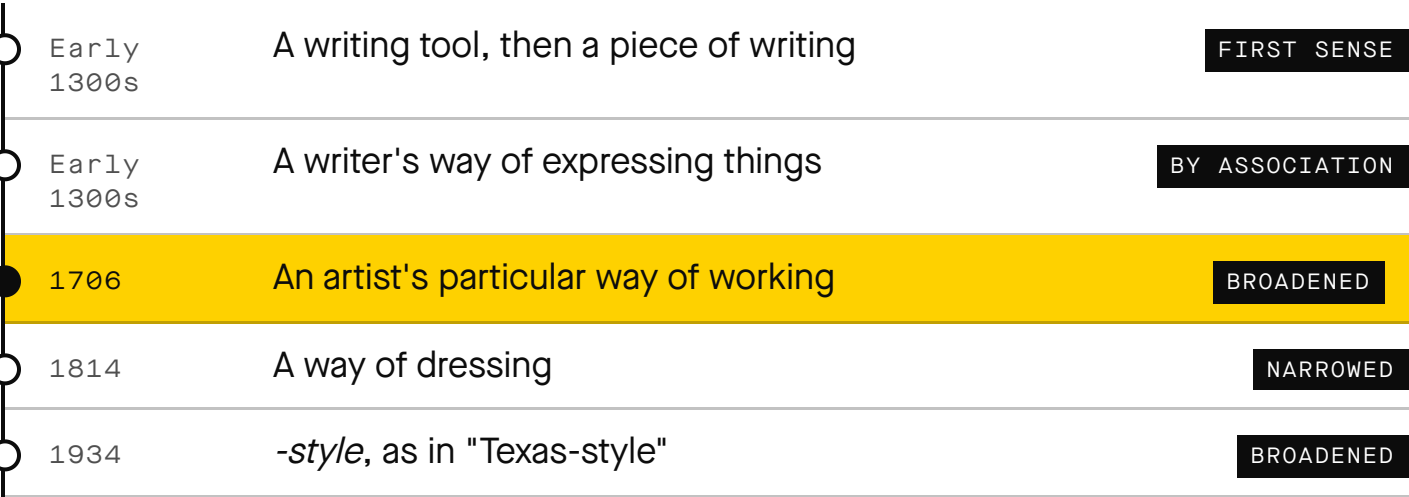
kinesthetic

Merriam-Webster also ties Greek *aīein*, "to hear," to *audible*.

Word histories · two words people use for "a look"

style

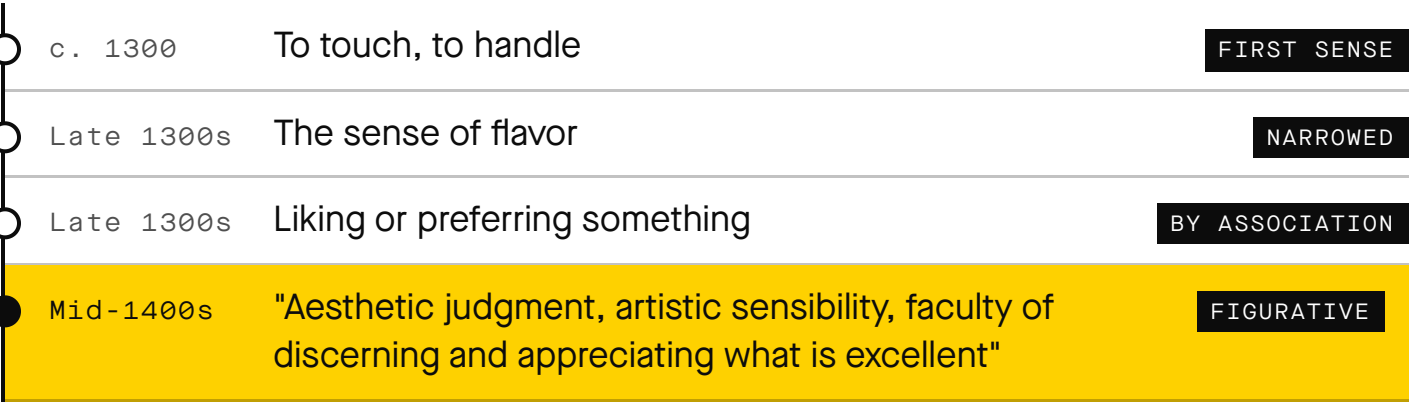
ENGLISH SINCE THE EARLY 1300S



The y is borrowed from Greek *stylos*, a pillar, probably a different word.

taste

ENGLISH SINCE ABOUT 1300



Same root as *tax*: both start with handling a thing to judge what it is worth.

Word history

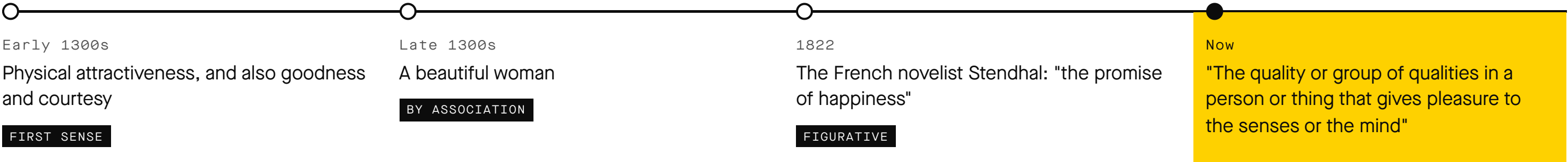
beauty

ENGLISH SINCE THE EARLY 1300S · *it replaced Old English white*

WHERE IT CAME FROM



HOW THE MEANING MOVED



SAME ROOT

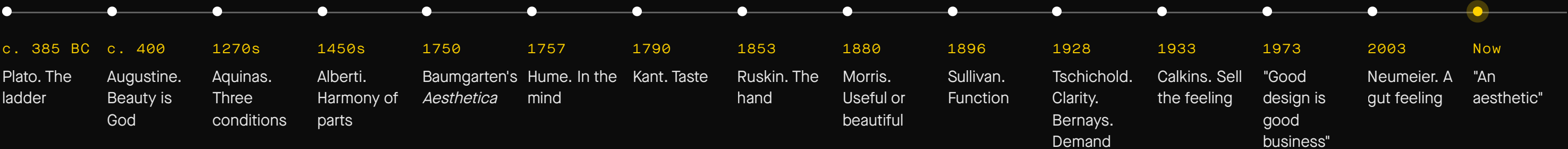
belle

beau

embellish

and perhaps, through Latin *bonus*, "good": *bonus*, *bounty*

For 2,400 years people have argued about where beauty lives: in God, in proportion, in the person looking, in the work, in the function, in the market. Each answer is still in the room when a client looks at a design.





Plato points up, Aristotle points at the world. Raphael, *The School of Athens*, 1509 to 1511, detail.

01 · IN GOD · C. 385 BC TO 400 AD

Beauty is a ladder from the things you can see to something that never changes.

"...from beautiful bodies he should proceed to beautiful minds, and the beauty of laws and institutions, until he perceives that all beauty is of one kindred."



Plato c. 428 to 348 BC
Greek philosopher. Student of Socrates, teacher of Aristotle.

SYMPOSIUM, C. 385 BC · TRANS. BENJAMIN JOWETT

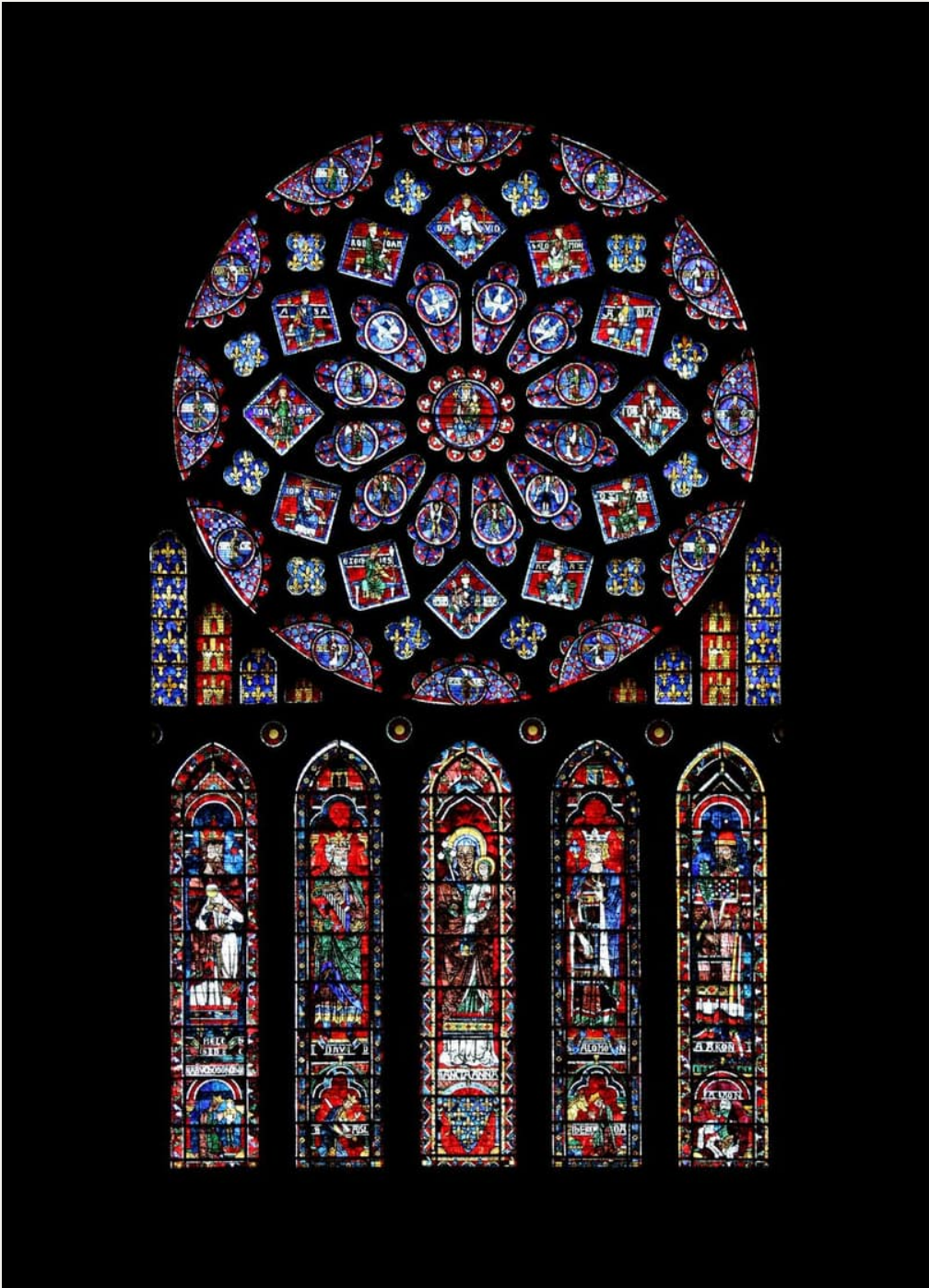
THEN

Christian writers kept the ladder and put God at the top of it.

THE BIBLE

"For by the greatness of the beauty, and of the creature, the creator of them may be seen."

Wisdom 13:5 · a book written in Greek in the 1st century BC



North rose window, Chartres Cathedral, c. 1235. Light as a sign of God.

01 · IN GOD · 1270S

Beauty has three conditions: nothing missing, parts in proportion, and clarity.

"For beauty includes three conditions, 'integrity' or 'perfection,' since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due 'proportion' or 'harmony'; and lastly, 'brightness' or 'clarity.'"



Thomas Aquinas 1225 to 1274
Italian friar who joined Aristotle's philosophy to Christian theology.

SUMMA THEOLOGIAE, I, Q. 39, A. 8 · TRANS. ENGLISH DOMINICAN PROVINCE

SAME BOOK

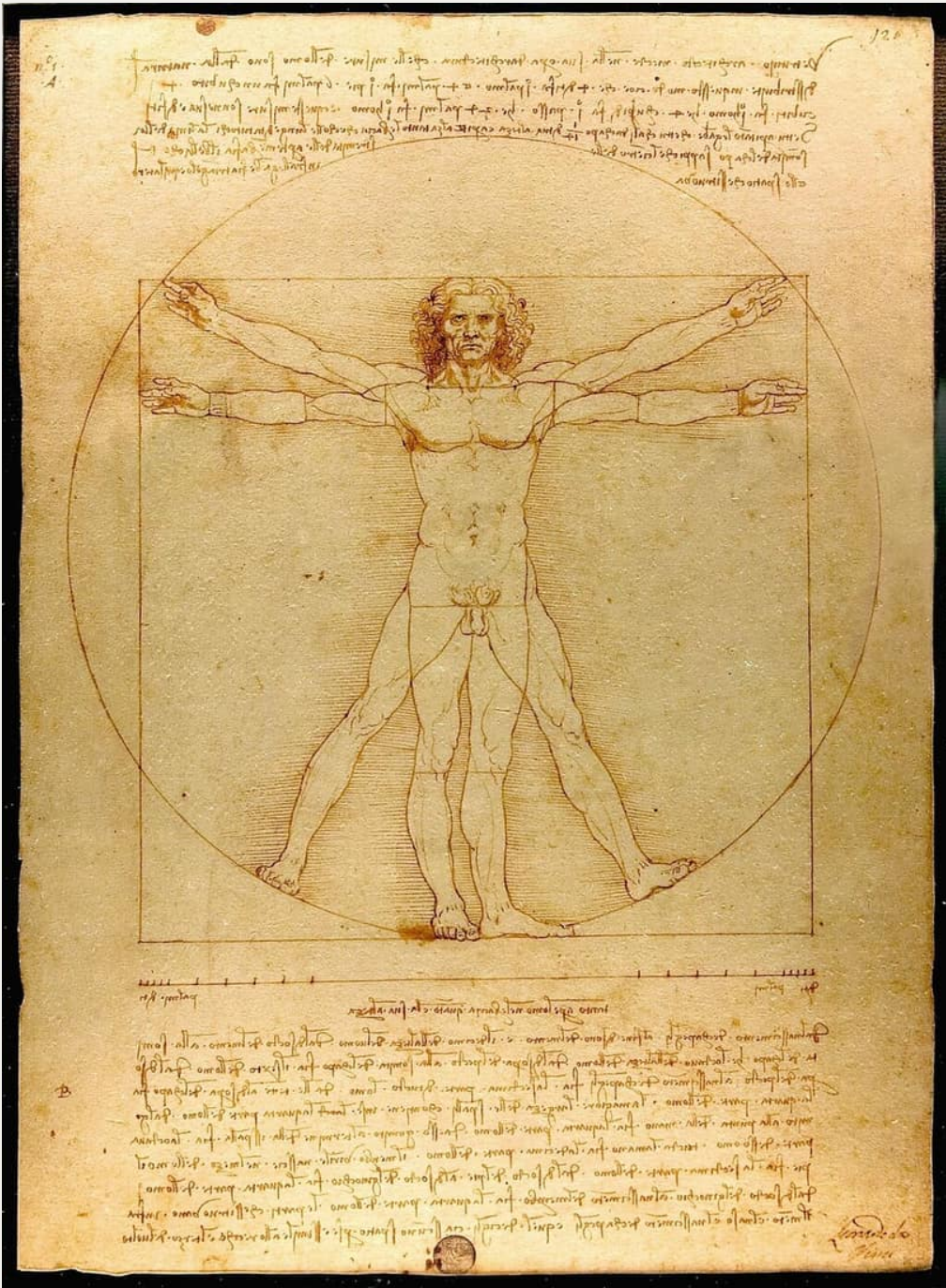
"Beautiful things are those which please when seen."

I, q. 5, a. 4 · the viewer is already in the definition

BEFORE HIM

"Too late loved I Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new!"

Augustine, 354 to 430, bishop in North Africa, speaking to God · *Confessions*, X.27



Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, c. 1490, drawn from the proportions in Vitruvius.

02 · IN PROPORTION · 1ST CENTURY BC TO 1450S

Beauty is the right relationship of parts, and it can be measured.

"Beauty, then, is the reasoned harmony (concinntitas) of all the parts, so that nothing can be either added or taken away without disturbing or destroying that harmony."



Leon Battista Alberti 1404 to 1472
Italian architect. Wrote the first Renaissance books on painting and on building.

ON THE ART OF BUILDING, 1450S · AS GIVEN BY MARK ARGETSINGER, A GRAMMAR OF TYPOGRAPHY, P. 26

VITRUVIUS

Three tests for a building, from the only book on architecture left from Rome:

Commoditie useful	Firmeries solid	Delight beautiful
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English by Henry Wotton, 1624

THE BIBLE

"...thou hast ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight."

Wisdom 11:21

"Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty."

"OF THE STANDARD OF TASTE," 1757



David Hume 1711 to 1776

Scottish philosopher and historian of the Scottish Enlightenment

Hume did not stop there. He argued some judges are better than others, and named what makes one: "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice." He is describing a trained eye.



Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, c. 1818. The viewer becomes the subject of the picture.

03 · IN THE VIEWER · 1750 TO 1790

Beauty is a pleasure you take in a thing without wanting anything from it.

"*Taste* is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*."



Immanuel Kant 1724 to 1804
German philosopher. Lived his whole life in Königsberg, Prussia.

CRITIQUE OF JUDGEMENT, 1790, §5 · TRANS. J. H. BERNARD

SAME BOOK	"<i>Beauty</i> is the form of the <i>purposiveness</i> of an object, so far as this is perceived in it <i>without any representation of a purpose</i>." §17 · purposeful-looking, with no purpose
1750	Alexander Baumgarten, a German professor, titles his book <i>Aesthetica</i>. The field takes its name from it.
DESIGN	Design always has a purpose. Davis: art is "a personal expression," design is "art with a commercial purpose."

Beauty belongs in everyday things, and it comes from the hand that made them.

"Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful."



William Morris 1834 to 1896
Designer of wallpaper and textiles. Led the Arts and Crafts movement.

"THE BEAUTY OF LIFE," 1880 · IN *HOPES AND FEARS FOR ART*



William Morris, *Strawberry Thief*, printed cotton, 1883.

RUSKIN

"...irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty."

John Ruskin, 1819 to 1900, art critic · "The Nature of Gothic," 1853

WHY THEN

Factories had made goods cheap and identical. Both answered with the hand.



Victory of Samothrace, c. 190 BC, and Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913.

The moderns stop saying "beauty." Speed, clarity and use take its place.

"...form ever follows function."



Louis Sullivan 1856 to 1924
American architect, a pioneer of the skyscraper.

"THE TALL OFFICE BUILDING ARTISTICALLY CONSIDERED," 1896

MARINETTI	"A racing car ... is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace." F. T. Marinetti, 1876 to 1944, founder of Futurism · 1909
TSCHICHOLD	"The essence of the New Typography is clarity." Jan Tschichold, 1902 to 1974, typographer · 1928
WARDE	"...capture beauty as the wise men capture happiness by aiming at something else." Beatrice Warde, 1900 to 1969, typographer · "The Crystal Goblet," 1930

In the market: beauty becomes a reason to buy

By the 1920s, advertisers and manufacturers were selling beauty on purpose: how a thing looks, and how it makes people feel.

YEAR	SAID	WHO
1928	"Manufacture is being modified to conform to the economic need to satisfy the public demand for more beauty."	Edward Bernays, <i>Propaganda</i> American, 1891 to 1995. Called the father of public relations. Freud's nephew.
1933	"Modernism offered the opportunity of expressing the inexpressible, of suggesting not so much a motor car as speed, not so much a gown as style, not so much a compact as beauty."	Earnest Elmo Calkins, "The Dividends of Beauty," <i>Advertising Arts</i> American adman, 1868 to 1964. Brought artists into advertising.
1973	"Good design is good business."	Thomas Watson Jr., quoted by Davis, ch. 1 President of IBM, 1914 to 1993. Hired Eliot Noyes, who brought in Paul Rand.
1987	"Beauty is a byproduct of needs and functions."	Paul Rand, "Good Design Is Goodwill" American designer, 1914 to 1996. The IBM, ABC and UPS logos.
2016	"Relegating creativity to the execution or the end of solving a problem is an unfortunate misstep in a world of increased emphasis on aesthetics and design process."	Douglas Davis, ch. 1

Every one of those answers is still in the room

Clients use all six without knowing where they came from. Hear which one they mean, and you know what to ask.

BEAUTY LIVES	WHAT A CLIENT SAYS	WHAT TO ASK
In God	"Timeless." "Iconic."	"What should still be true about this brand in twenty years?"
In proportion	"Balanced." "Clean."	"What feels out of place right now?"
In the viewer	"I just like it." "My wife hates green."	"Who is the customer, and what do they like?"
In the work	"Crafted." "Authentic." "Handmade."	"Where should people see the hand?"
In the function	"Simple." "Modern." "It should just work."	"What does this have to do first?"
In the market	"Will it sell?" "Make it pop."	"What should someone feel in the first second?"

Word history

brand

OLD ENGLISH · *first it meant fire*

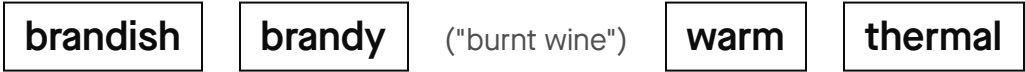
WHERE IT CAME FROM



HOW THE MEANING MOVED



SAME ROOT



A brand is a gut feeling

Neumeier, 2003. Like Hume, he puts the judgment in the person looking. Before anyone reads a word, they have felt something about the colors, type, and pictures.



"A brand is not a logo." pp. 7 to 8, after Magritte



p. 14

"A brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, service, or organization."

MARTY NEUMEIER, *THE BRAND GAP*, 2003, P. 14

"It's a PERSON'S gut feeling, because brands are defined by individuals, not companies, markets, or publics."

P. 15

"It's not what you say it is. It's what they say it is." pp. 17 to 18

A look is not a brand, and taste is not an argument

Both readings make the same point from opposite sides.

NEUMEIER, *THE BRAND GAP*, P. 137

"A living brand is a pattern of behavior, not a stylistic veneer."

An aesthetic is the clothes. The brand is the character wearing them.

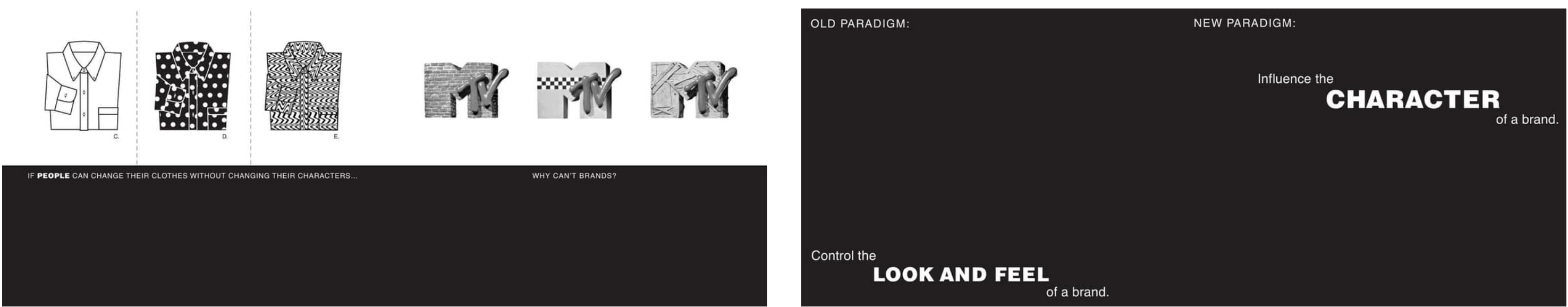
DAVIS, *CREATIVE STRATEGY AND THE BUSINESS OF DESIGN*, CH. 1

"An argument based on pure aesthetics was doomed unless it could be tied to accomplishing a business objective."

He puts the line between art, "a personal expression," and design, "art with a commercial purpose."

Neumeier: look and feel, or character

His pictures make the point faster than his words. Same person in three shirts. Same network in three logos.



"If people can change their clothes without changing their characters... why can't brands?" pp. 139 to 140

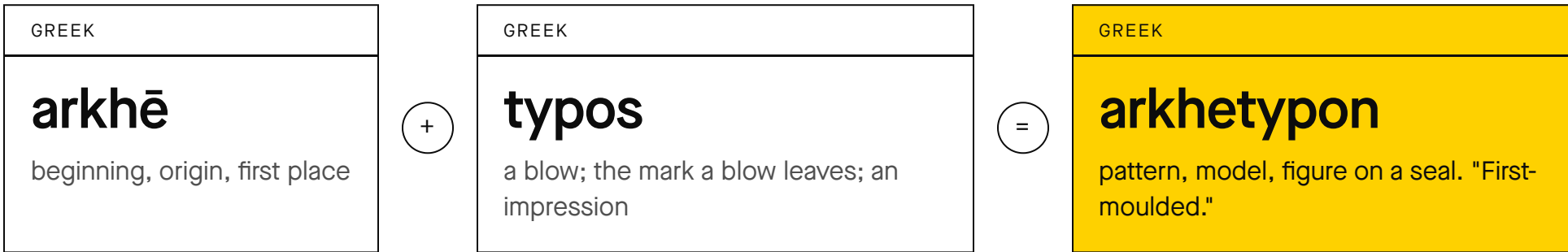
"Old paradigm: Control the look and feel of a brand." "New paradigm: Influence the character of a brand." pp. 141 to 142

Word history

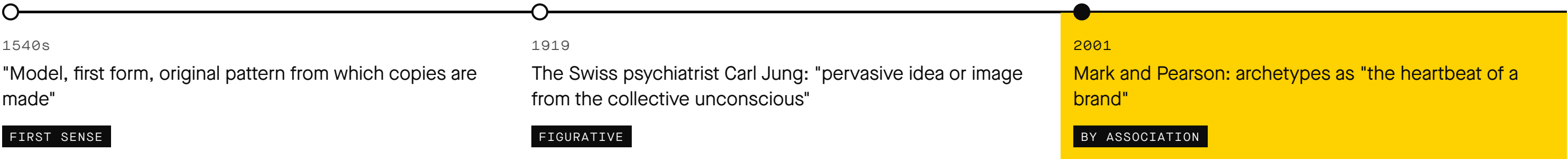
archetype

ENGLISH SINCE THE 1540S · *today's reading*

WHERE IT CAME FROM



HOW THE MEANING MOVED



SAME ROOT AS TYPOS

- type
- typography
- prototype
- stereotype

Type is a stamp too: by 1713, a metal block that presses a letter.

The Apple logo, read three ways

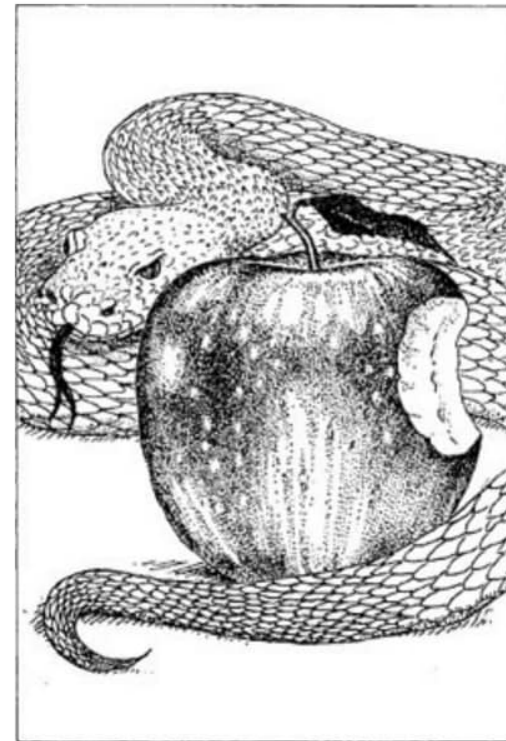
Mark and Pearson read Eden into the bite. The designer says it was there for scale. Once a mark is out in the world, both readings belong to it.



1976. Ron Wayne: Isaac Newton under the apple tree. Too detailed to print small.



1977. Rob Janoff: one apple, bitten, in stripes of color.



2001. The figure in today's reading, PDF p. 33.

"Often, the best corporate logos echo ancient symbols. Apple's logo, for instance, evokes the first act of rebellion in the Garden of Eden, a powerful distillation of the brand's iconoclastic identity."

MARK AND PEARSON, *THE HERO AND THE OUTLAW*, CH. 2

Janoff has said the bite was there for scale, so the shape would read as an apple and not a cherry.

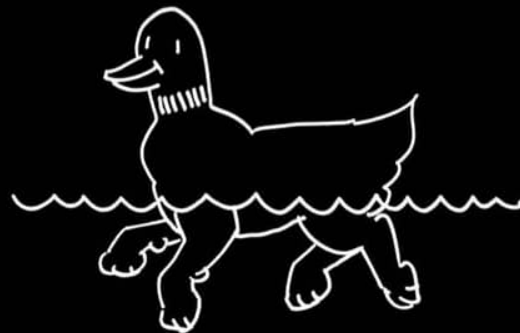
AS REPORTED BY [LOGO HISTORIES](#) · [WIKIPEDIA](#)

Neumeier, p. 18: "It's what they say it is."

One archetype, or a confused brand

Mark and Pearson's evidence that a brand should play one character, the same way, over time.

IF A BRAND LOOKS LIKE A DUCK AND SWIMS
LIKE A DOG, PEOPLE WILL DISTRUST IT.



"Archetypes defy the 'pick some characteristics from column A and some from column B' practice of creating brand identity; rather, these ancient psychic imprints are whole and complete concepts..."

MARK AND PEARSON, CH. 2, PDF P. 38

Their Young & Rubicam study: brands strongly tied to one archetype gained far more market value over six years than "confused brands." One apparel brand read as a Hero to every age group in 1997. Two years later, teenagers had stopped seeing it that way.

"The best archetypal brands are—first and foremost—archetypal products..."

PDF P. 34

"If a brand looks like a duck and swims like a dog, people will distrust it." Neumeier, p. 143

Each archetype has a look

The book describes each one in parts you can name: color, image, layout, material.

Innocent	"Colors are soft pastel. Images are simple, uncluttered, and classic. The page layout provides a refreshing amount of white space..." <i>Real Simple</i> , PDF p. 60
Explorer	"The color green reinforces the ecological, natural imagery, while the Starbucks décor, combining metal piping and wood, is reminiscent of a sailing ship." p. 76
Sage	"The dominant colors are generally gray, beige, white, and light blue." p. 95
Hero	"...anything powerful, hence strong colors and definitive lines and shapes. Hero attires and environments are functional, not lavish." p. 104
Outlaw	"Apple catalogues are rather cramped, utilizing bright colors and almost cartoon shapes ... in contrast to the more dignified IBM look with more white space and genteel print." p. 129
Lover	"The Lover archetype also awakens people's aesthetic appreciation. Suddenly beauty matters..." p. 172
Jester	"Jester ads and packaging highlight bright colors and lots of action—the more outrageous, the better." p. 188
Ruler	"...think buildings with big columns and plenty of scale. Materials are meant to last and suggest timelessness—like granite or concrete..." p. 225

To talk about a look, name its parts

Every aesthetic is made of choices you can point to. Six places to look, and how a specific description sounds.

Color

Hue, how light or dark, how strong or gray, warm or cool, how many colors and how much of each.

"Two colors: off-white and one orange, the orange used small."

Layout

Crowded or open, the grid, symmetry, how big the biggest thing is next to the smallest.

"Lots of empty space, one huge headline, small text."

Davis, ch. 4: "The identity of the brand is expressed in its logo, typography, color palette, packaging, and retail environment. The tone of the brand is expressed in the attitude of the copy, voice-over, or composition of the layout."

Type

Serif, sans, or mono. Weight, width, contrast between thick and thin, spacing, capitals or not.

"A heavy, narrow sans in capitals over a plain serif for reading."

Material

Paper, finish, texture, what it is printed or built on, how it would feel in the hand.

"Uncoated paper, one ink, nothing glossy."

Image

Photo or drawing. Light, crop, grain, color treatment, and who is in the picture.

"Real people, shot in flat daylight, cropped tight."

Voice

The words and how they sound. Short or long, formal or plain, funny or serious.

"Short sentences. No exclamation points."

An adjective covers a region. A specific thing names a point.

An example from the DESIGN.md reading, Google Labs.

WHAT PEOPLE SAY

"Modern, clean, trustworthy, premium."

Brands in every category say this. Ten designers will draw ten different things, and the client will say none of them is right.

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD

"A 1970s graduate lecture handout in the tradition of an old and established university."

Now everyone pictures the same thing: one ink, wide margins, a serif at reading size. And they can say yes or no to it.

BOTH EXAMPLES ARE FROM DESIGN.MD, [PHILOSOPHY.MD](#), GOOGLE LABS

"Authoritative." A police station, or a kindly professor?

The same word can mean opposite things to two people in the same room. A board is how you find out before you design the wrong one.

Clients do not have your words. Use theirs.

Most people who pay for design have never been taught to describe it.

Every client request is a translation job

Davis's chapter 3 is about this. A client asks for a thing. What they need is what the thing is supposed to do.

They say	"I need a website."
We hear	"They need a cool website!" That is the tactical request, and most of us were trained to answer only that.
Translate it to	What the site has to accomplish: more visits, more sales, more people signing up. That is how the client will judge it.
What goes wrong otherwise	"I like the blue logo! I like the red!" The request that got everyone into the room "is buried under the preferences in the room."

What they say, and what to ask next

The reaction is real. The words are a guess at it. Find the part they are pointing at.

THEY SAY	IT COULD MEAN	ASK
"Make it pop."	More contrast. Bigger. Brighter color. Or: I can't find the important part.	"What should someone see first?"
"Make it clean."	Fewer things on the page. More empty space. Or: it looks cheap.	"What could we take away?"
"Make it modern."	Newer than what they have. Or: not like a competitor they dislike.	"Show me a brand that feels modern to you."
"I don't like it."	It reminds them of something. Or it doesn't fit the audience they picture.	"What does it remind you of?"
"My wife hates green."	One person's taste is now in the room.	"Is she the customer? What does the customer need?"

Turn "like" and "hate" into "works" and "doesn't work"

Wednesday's reading, Davis ch. 12. Then ask which part they are reacting to.



"If your client says the words 'like' or 'hate,' replace them with 'this works' or 'this doesn't work' in your reply."

DAVIS, CH. 12, "INTERPRET THE FEEDBACK"

"If your client 'doesn't like' the layout or concept, you can then ask if it's the typeface, colors, format, imagery, headlines, or connotation that they're reacting to."

SAME PAGE

"I've seen so many great ideas die on the table because they weren't presented correctly and, therefore, had no buffer against the subjective black hole."

SIDEBAR, "WE'LL LOOK INTO IT (WINK)"

Tom Fishburne, "The 8 Types of Bad Creative Critics," marketoost.com, reprinted in Davis, ch.

"How could 'they' not see that this was the exact typeface we should be using?"

DOUGLAS DAVIS · *CREATIVE STRATEGY AND THE BUSINESS OF DESIGN* · CH. 3

"It was completely clear to me that these colors made the composition beautiful. 'They' must be blind." To the marketer the font was off strategy, to the account manager off brand, to the new-business team too small. "So depending on whose perspective we are looking at, we are 'they.'"

"This dynamic leads to a perpetually subjective scenario built on trusting individuals for trust's sake. As in, 'Just trust me!' There are no arguments based in fact; it's just throwing weight around."

DOUGLAS DAVIS · *CREATIVE STRATEGY AND THE BUSINESS OF DESIGN* · CH. 2, "THE DRAWBACKS OF CREATING WITHOUT STRATEGY"

His fix, two pages later: "People might still get emotional about what they like, but you have a way out of difficult conversations: facts." For a moodboard, the facts are the research and the brief.

Ask about the brief, not about taste

Davis: move each decision "away from an individual's preference and toward connecting the brand with the target."

Ask about the audience

"Would your customer stop for this?" in place of "Do you like it?"

Show more than one

Two or three options and no favorite, so the talk is about which one, not yes or no.

Ask about the words

"Does this feel timeless to you, or old?" Use the descriptors you agreed on.

Ask for most and least

"Which word matters most? Which least?" The ranking tells you more than the list.

Ask them to point

"Which picture is closest? Which part of it?" People point better than they describe.

Write their words down

The words a client uses are the start of the brand's voice. Keep a list.

A moodboard shows a direction before anything is made.

It is cheaper than a draft, and it tests whether the words mean the same thing to everyone.

Word history

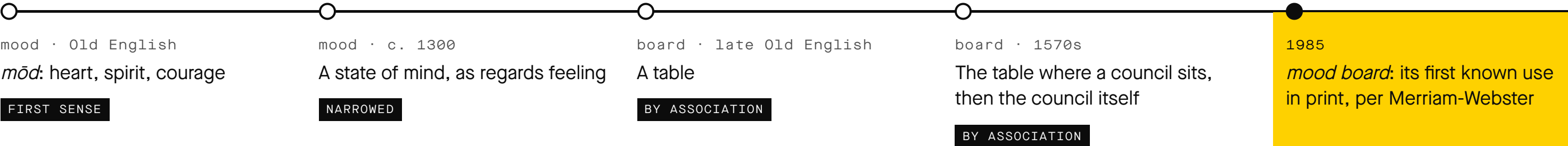
mood board

ENGLISH SINCE 1985 · two Old English words

WHERE IT CAME FROM



HOW THE MEANING MOVED



NOT RELATED

mood

of a verb ("the subjunctive mood") comes from *mode*, a different word.

Every field that makes things for other people uses some kind of board

The name and the format change. The job stays the same: agree on a look before paying to make it.

Brand studios

One board per direction, shown side by side. Some call a finished version a stylescape.

Interiors

Real samples of wood, tile, fabric and paint, so the client can touch them.

STYLE TILES: SAMANTHA WARREN, [A LIST APART](#), 2012 ·

STYLESCAPES: [THE FUTUR](#) · MOOD REELS: [FILMMAKER](#)

Film

A lookbook or mood reel: stills, color, light, wardrobe. It wins the money, then briefs the crew.

Product and UI

Screens from apps and sites people already use: how others solved the same problem.

Fashion

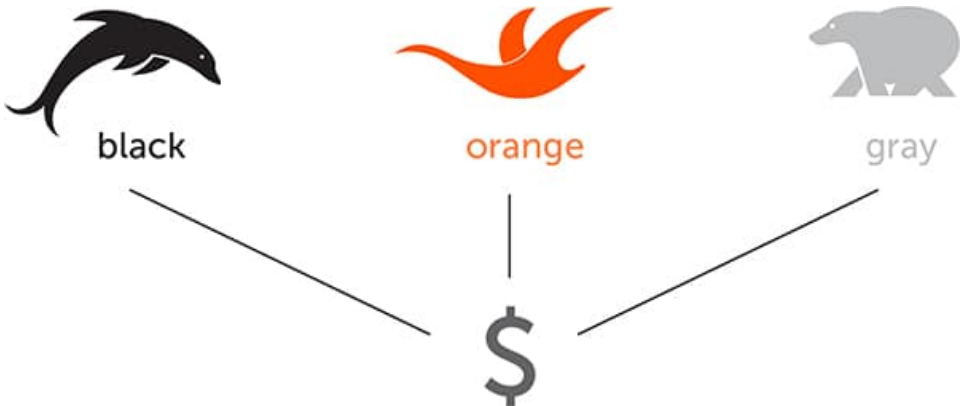
Boards for each season: fabric, color, shapes, references, pinned up before anyone sketches.

Style tiles

Real type, real colors, a button, a headline. Between a moodboard and a mockup.

Three boards should be three answers, not three colors

Davis's two diagrams from chapter 9. On the left the client can only answer with taste. On the right each option is a different bet for the business.



Tactical options. "Which one do you like better?"



Strategic options. Each one a scenario.

"There is no strategy behind the options; they're just creative choices."

DAVIS, CH. 9, "BEYOND 'MAKE IT PRETTY'"

"At best, these options are not just variations of the same thing, they are Rhinoceros, Rainbow, and Rhombus—in other words, completely different ways to solve the same problem..."

DAVIS, CH. 1, "SCENARIO ANALYSIS"

Name each option for its idea.

A board is built from other
people's finished work.

Its strength and its danger.

What a moodboard does well, and what it does badly

IT HELPS

A shared picture. Client and designer see the same thing before money is spent.

Cheap to change. Swapping a picture takes a minute. Redrawing a logo takes a week.

Finds the disagreement early. "Authoritative" turns out to mean two things.

Gives a non-designer a voice. Anyone can point at a picture.

IT HURTS

Everything looks the same. Everyone searches the same words in the same apps, so every board, and every brand, starts to match.

It starts from the finish. You collect other people's answers before you have found your own.

The client falls for a picture that belongs to another brand, and wants that exact thing.

Copying, on purpose or not. What you look at long enough comes out of your hands.

The risk · A borrowed look

"I was familiar with the rap-like delivery of the voice-over and the 'urban' graphic type-style, but in the end I felt patronized."

DOUGLAS DAVIS · ON A BURGER KING "BK4U" COMMERCIAL · CH. 4, "YOU TALKIN' TO ME?"

The ad borrowed a look meant to speak to him, and it spoke "at" him. Davis: it "assumed a homogeneous target, a stereotype even." A borrowed look can misread the audience as well as copy someone.

"Leading with aesthetic influences as opposed to meaningful connections further propels the cycle of sameness."

JESSE REED, ORDER · IN "ALL ADVERTISING LOOKS THE SAME THESE DAYS. BLAME THE MOODBOARD" · AIGA EYE ON DESIGN · 2022

The meaningful connection comes from research and the brief. Each image on a board should answer something in them.

Sameness is not new. In 2003 it was the swoosh.

Neumeier's page of logos from the dot-com years: everyone reached for the same mark at the same time.



"Testing might have saved some of these companies from the great swoosh epidemic." p. 133

HAS THE GLOBE BECOME THE NEW SWOOSH?

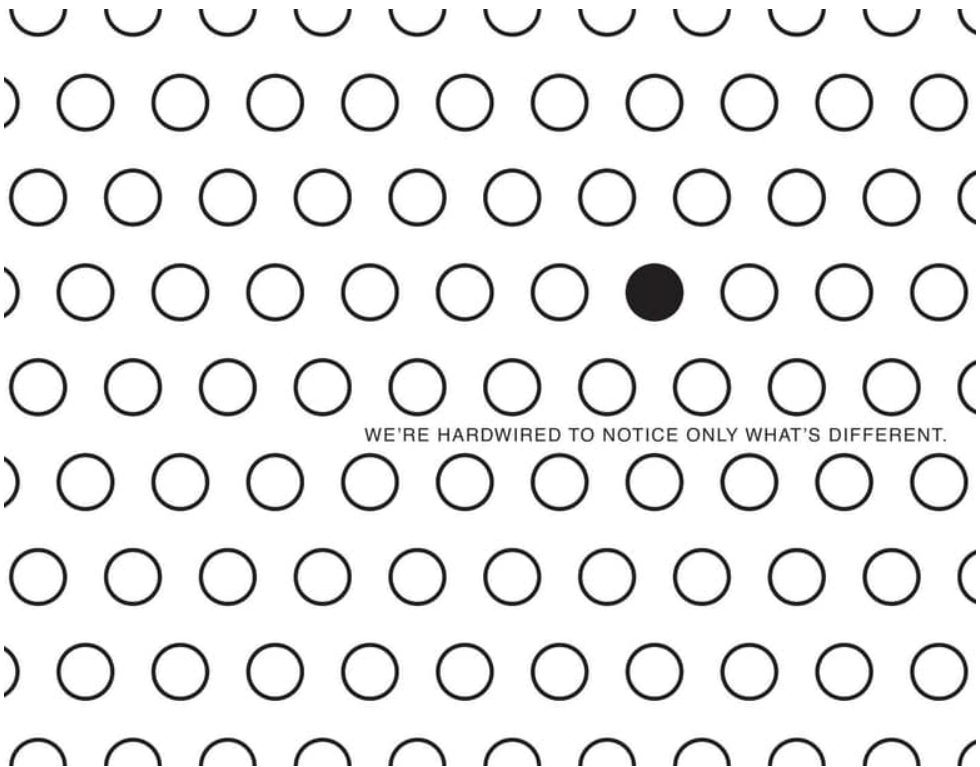


"Has the globe become the new swoosh?" p. 134

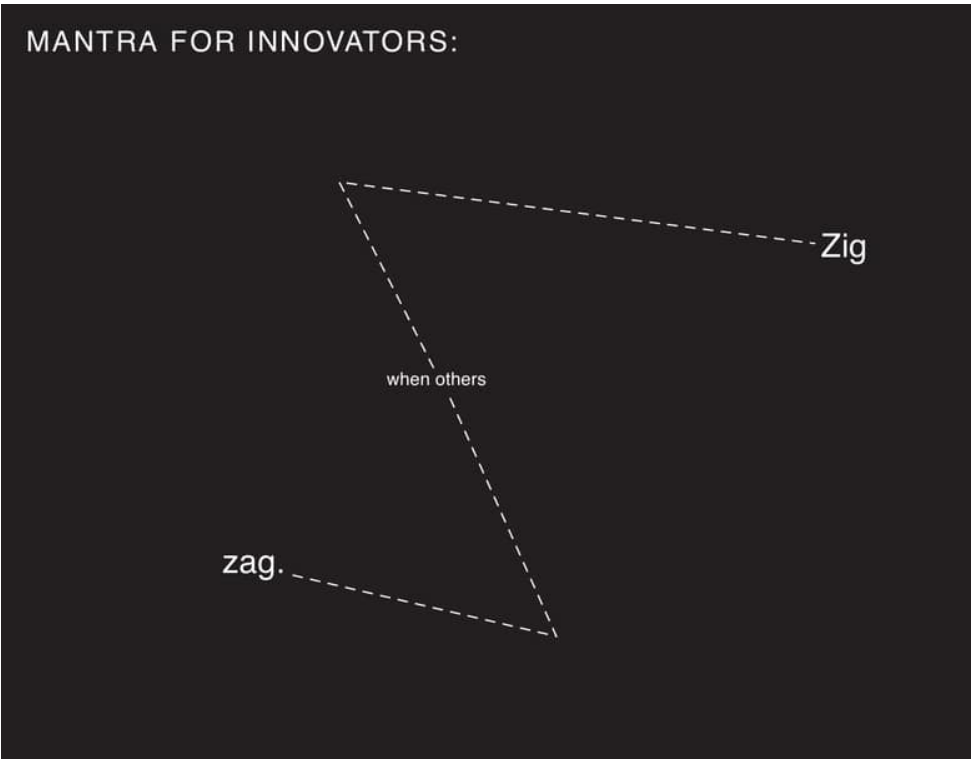
Ask: what is today's swoosh? What is on every board in your category?

We only notice what is different

Neumeier's picture of it, and Mark and Pearson's version: whole categories playing the same character the same shallow way.



"We're hardwired to notice only what's different." p. 40



"Mantra for innovators: Zig when others zag." p. 87

"...virtually every brand is not only on the same archetype, but they are all operating at the same level of the archetype—the most shallow and obvious one."

MARK AND PEARSON, CH. 16, PDF P. 253, ON ADS AIMED AT TEENAGERS

Picking a different archetype from your competitors is one way to zig. Playing the same one at a deeper level is another.

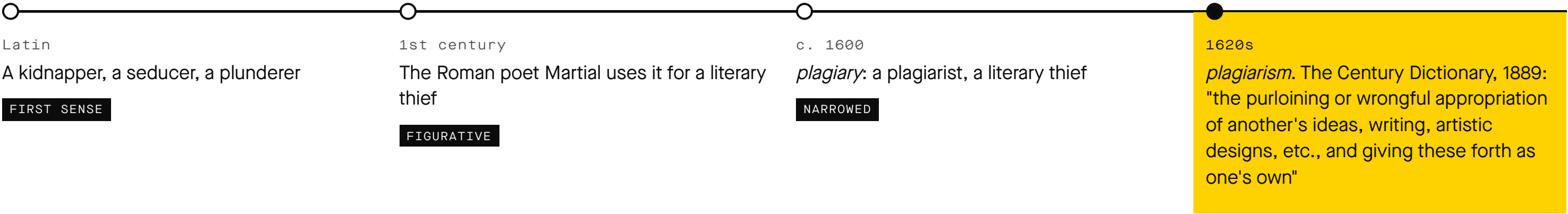
plagiarism

ENGLISH SINCE THE 1620S · *from a word for kidnapping*

WHERE IT CAME FROM



HOW THE MEANING MOVED



THE PICTURE Martial complained that a rival poet had kidnapped his verses by reciting them as his own.

"Boston," 2026: a No. 2 song with someone else's chorus in it

Listen to both choruses. Then decide: is that copying?

2026 · STELLA LEFTY

"Boston"

No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100. No. 1 on country radio.

[Chorus at 0:43 on YouTube](#)

SOURCES: [ROLLING STONE](#), SEPT 15, 2026 · [CONSEQUENCE](#), AUG 24, 2026 · [MUSICROW](#), SEPT 2026 (NO. 1)

2022 · NOAH KAHAN

"Stick Season"

Fans heard its melody in the chorus of "Boston" when Lefty posted a demo.

[Chorus at 0:50 on YouTube](#)

"I wasn't thinking about Noah Kahan"

What happened, and what is only alleged.

What she said	"When I was writing the song, I wasn't thinking about Noah Kahan."
What fans found	Old videos of her covering "Stick Season" again and again, captioned "i love noah kahan."
What happened	Kahan's team contacted hers. He got a songwriting credit on "Boston" before its official release. No lawsuit.
Then more songs	"Summer You Were Mine" now credits the writers of The Chicks' "There's Your Trouble." Her label says a streaming service had left them off. Three other comparisons are fan claims only.
Nashville's answer	"Country music has always borrowed from itself." RJ Curtis, Country Radio Broadcasters.

The risk · 1976

"His subconscious knew it already had worked in a song his conscious mind did not remember."

JUDGE RICHARD OWEN · ON GEORGE HARRISON'S "MY SWEET LORD" AND THE CHIFFONS' "HE'S SO FINE" · 1976

The court found Harrison copied without meaning to, and still awarded damages against him. Not meaning to is not a defense.

A style belongs to no one. A specific expression belongs to someone.

Courts keep drawing the line in different places. In design, the line is usually drawn by the public first.

Stairway to Heaven, 2020	No copying found. Common musical building blocks belong to everyone. Ninth Circuit
Blurred Lines, 2015	A jury found copying: \$7.4 million, later reduced. On appeal in 2018, the dissenting judge said the verdict let a family "copyright a musical style." NPR · Ninth Circuit, <i>Williams v. Gaye</i> , 2018
Tokyo 2020 Olympics logo	Withdrawn in 2015, about five weeks after launch, over its likeness to a Belgian theater's logo. Dezeen
Airbnb, 2014	Its new logo looked like another company's, launched the same year. Both called it coincidence; the other company changed its logo. The Next Web
Marimekko, 2013	A print turned out to copy a 1960s painting by Ukrainian folk artist Maria Primachenko. The designer: "I regret and am ashamed of what I did." Yle

Name your references out loud

Davis on setting up a presentation, in Wednesday's chapter: say where the work came from before you show it.

"Head off potential negative client comments like 'It looks communist' after the presentation by framing what you've done before you show the work. 'We were inspired by diagonals used in Swiss poster design, the color palette of Constructivist cinema poster designers Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, and the visual symbolism of the strong figures used in muralist Diego Rivera's work.'"

DAVIS, CH. 12, "SET THE CONTEXT TO ANTICIPATE OR AVOID NEGATIVITY"

"The visual on each slide needs supporting copy or captions associated so that the rationale for the work speaks for itself when you aren't there."

DAVIS, CH. 12, "GRAB 'N' GO"

Each reference is named for one part: diagonals from one source, a palette from another, figures from a third. It is the same habit as "say what you are taking," said out loud.

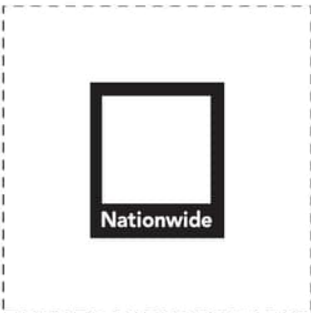
How to build a board that stays yours

The rules Workhorse works by.

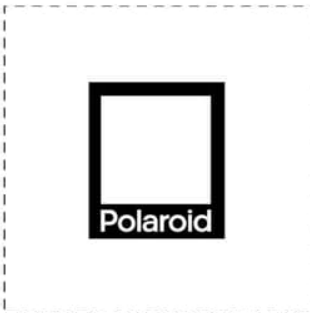
Research first	The board answers the brief. An image that answers no part of the brief is decoration.
One board per path	Two or three boards, each labeled with the words it tests, and no favorite.
Say what you are taking	Next to every image: the one thing you want from it. "The crop." "This orange." Never "all of it."
Look outside your category	At least half the images from somewhere else: a museum label, a hardware store, an old record. Not your competitors.
Link and credit everything	Maker, source, link. If you can't find who made it, you can't use it.
Name the parts	Each board ends with three to five named colors and one pair of typefaces, written down.
Run the swap test	Put a competitor's name on your board. If it still works, the board is not yours yet. (Neumeier's swap and hand tests, next slide.)
Add the audience's world	Objects and screens your audience already uses every day.

The swap test and the hand test

As Neumeier draws them: two checks that take a minute. Use them on any identity, including a moodboard.



EXISTING TRADEMARKS



WITH NAMES SWAPPED

Existing trademarks. p. 124

With names swapped. p. 125



The hand test. p. 128

"If the names and graphics of two trademarks are better when swapped, then neither is optimal." p. 123

"If you can't tell who's talking when the trademark is covered, then the brand's voice is not distinctive." p. 127

Real moodboards, from Workhorse client work.

Four projects. Every one starts with words and themes. The pictures come last.

How Workhorse builds a moodboard

The Resume Place identity, 2022. Words first, then themes, then one board per theme, then the client's answers.

01	02	03	04	05
Research	Descriptors	Themes	Boards	Feedback
Audience, problem, competitors. The board comes after, never before.	Nine words: timeless, visionary, empowering, crafted, honest...	Three statements, starting with "Building on a legacy."	One board per look, tied to the words and themes it tests.	The client picks, ranks, and points. Then design begins.

THE RESUME PLACE

Brand Descriptors

Timeless

Visionary

Empowering

Crafted

Honest

Invigorating

Intelligent

Charismatic

Irreverent

BRAND THEMES & STATEMENTS

Brand Themes

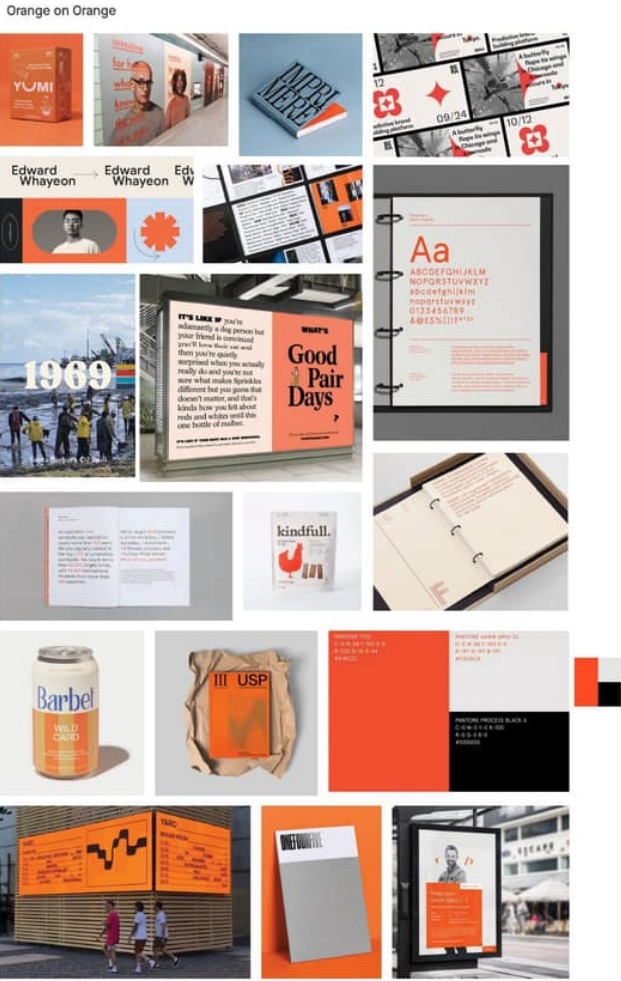
Building on a Legacy: Originators and Innovators

The New Institution: Educators and Resource Center

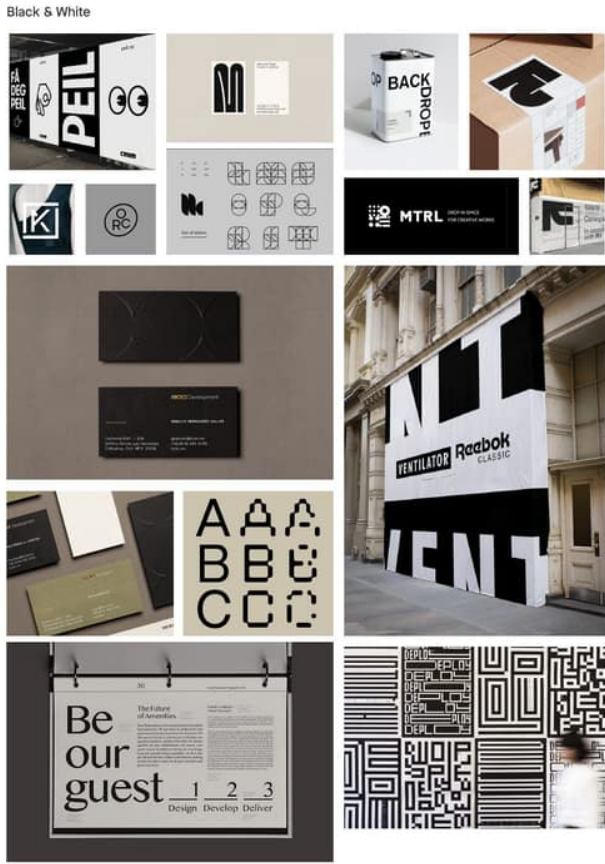
Motivating and Empowering: Advocating for candidates

Four boards, four readings of the same words

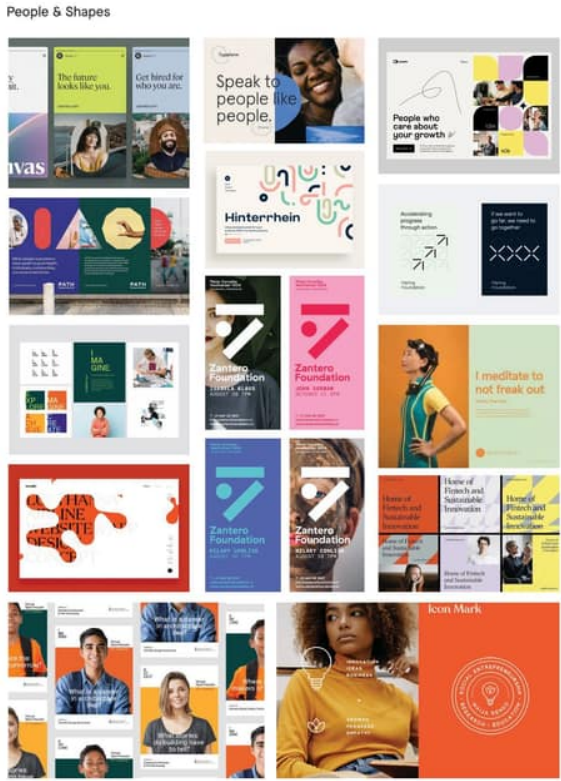
Resume Place moodboards, Workhorse, 2022. Every image on them is someone else's work, collected as reference.



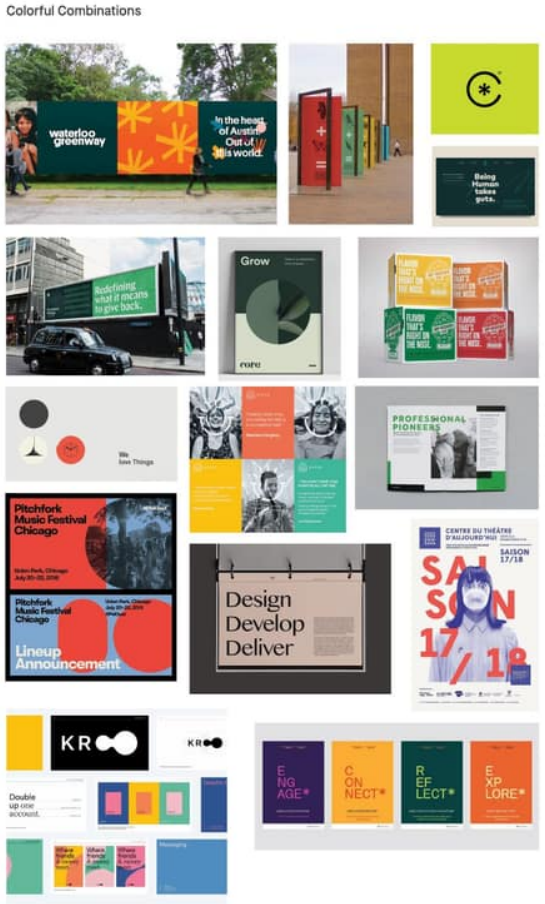
Orange on Orange



Black and White



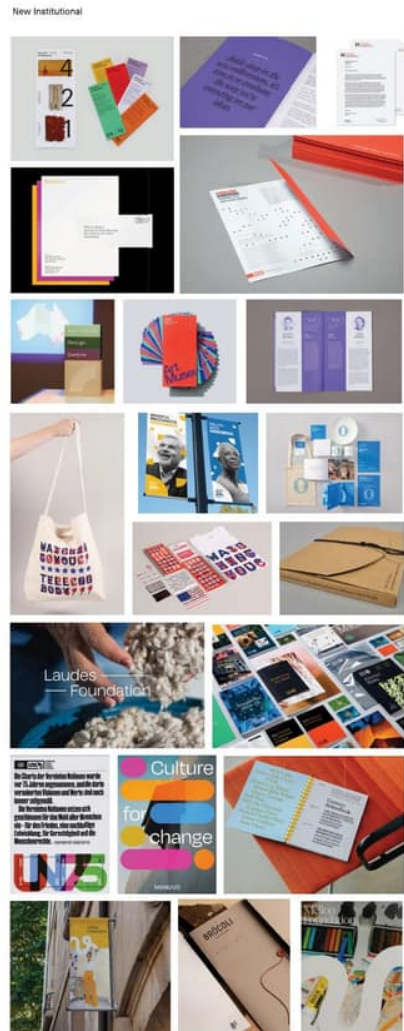
People and Shapes



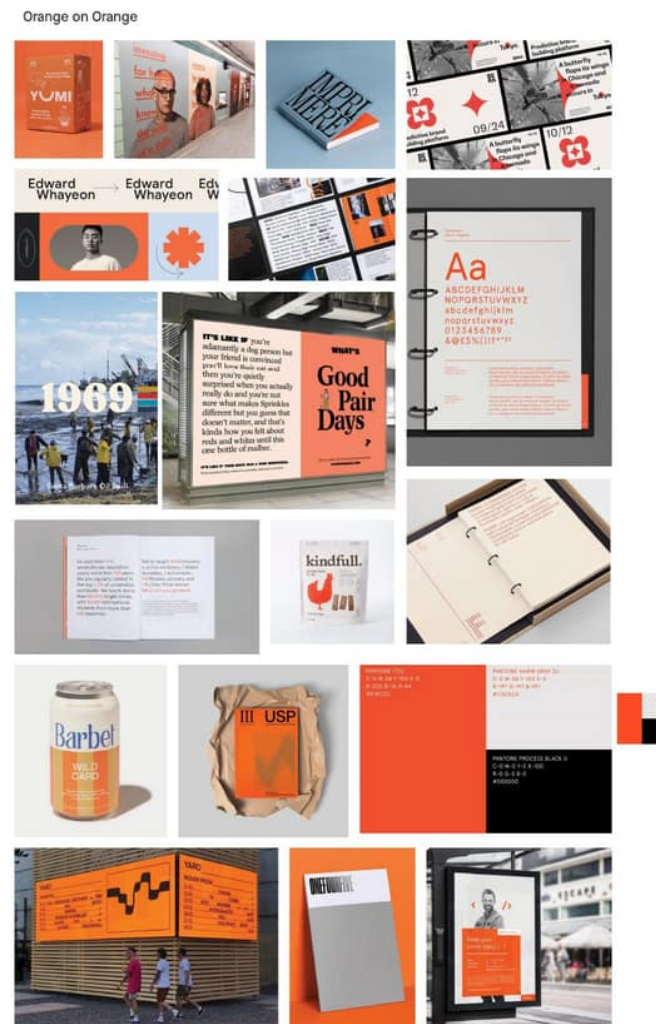
Colorful Combinations

A board is many things that agree with each other

Look at what repeats: the same few colors, the same kind of type, the same kind of picture. The repetition is the look¹-



New Institutional



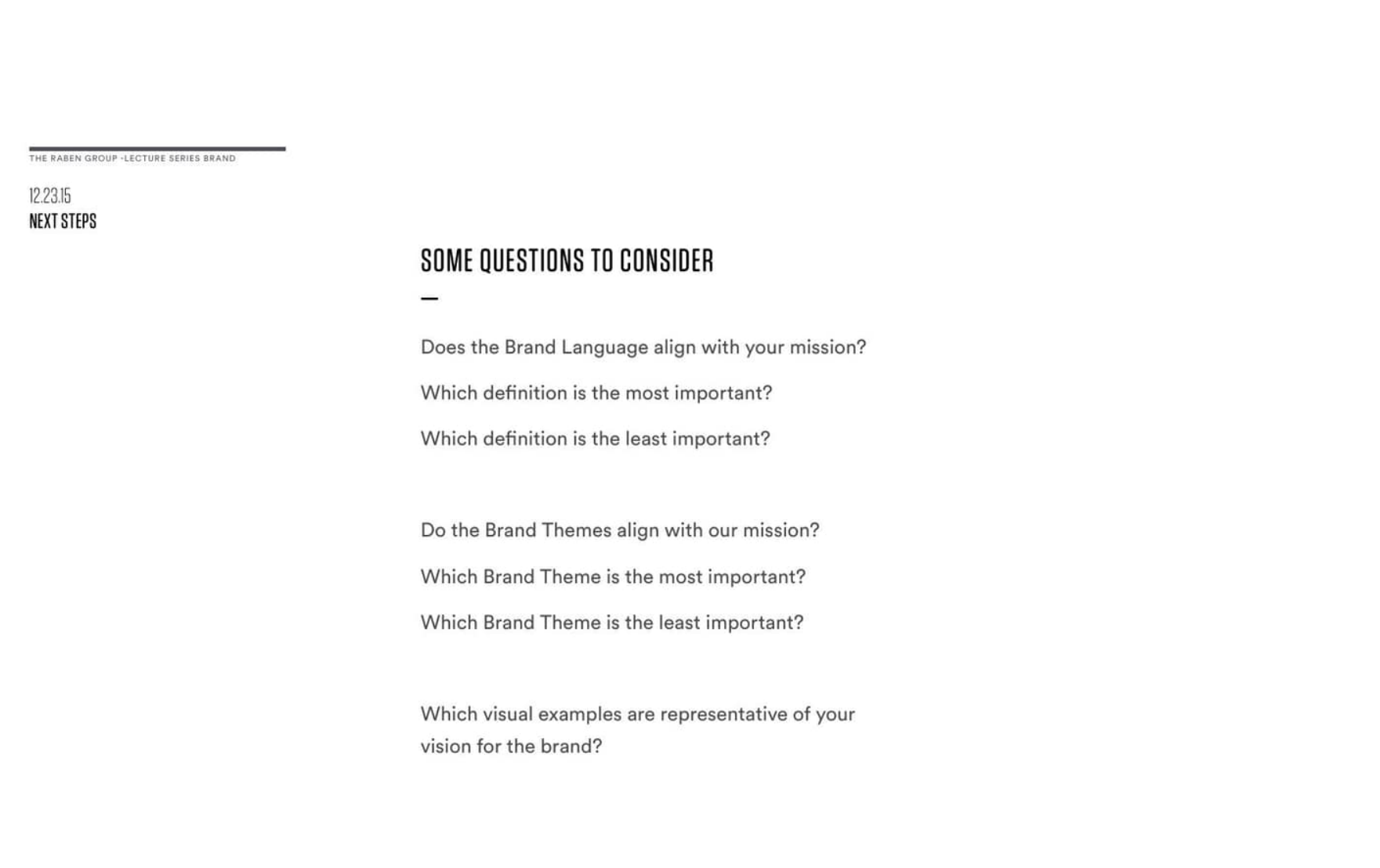
Orange on Orange, again

On the middle board: one orange used big, cream paper, black type, serif headlines, objects shown flat and straight on.

Ask of any board: what three things does every picture on it share? If you can't answer, it is a pile of pictures.

The last page asks questions, not "approve?"

The same deck's next steps. The client answers these before any design starts.



Does the language fit your mission? Which word matters most, and least? Which theme? Which pictures look like your vision?

Someone who has never designed anything can answer every one.

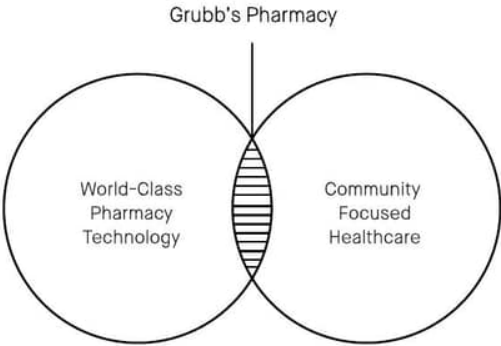
Grubb's Pharmacy: brand language, then four themes

Workhorse for Grubb's Pharmacy, a neighborhood pharmacy on Capitol Hill, Washington, DC. November 2020.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Grubb’s Pharmacy

Grubb's is	Without being
Modern	Manufactured
Established	Stodgy
Traditional	Rigid
Knowledgable	Unapproachable
Caring	Overstepping



HISTORICAL RESEARCH

BRAND THEMES & STATEMENTS

Brand Themes

- A History of Community Care
- Traditionally Modern
- Custom Crafted
- Redefining "Local"

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Grubb’s Pharmacy

Brand language. "Grubb's is" / "Without being"

Four themes, each a direction the brand could take

Each theme gets one sentence and two pictures

The sentence is in the client's voice. The pictures only have to show the feeling of it.

A History of Community Care

We know the city, we know the people, and, most importantly, we know how to care for them.



DESIGN DIRECTIONS

Grubb's Pharmacy

A History of Community Care

Custom Crafted

Our products are not all manufactured. They are made with care, concern, and connection to our customers.



DESIGN DIRECTIONS

Grubb's Pharmacy

Custom Crafted

Traditionally Modern

We combine knowledge, respect for history, and modern tools to create a unique pharmacy experience and product.



DESIGN DIRECTIONS

Grubb's Pharmacy

Traditionally Modern

Redefining "Local"

We are a DC institution and it's reflected in how we think about being "local." We are connected to local residents, transplants, and the world that visits our capital city.



DESIGN DIRECTIONS

Grubb's Pharmacy

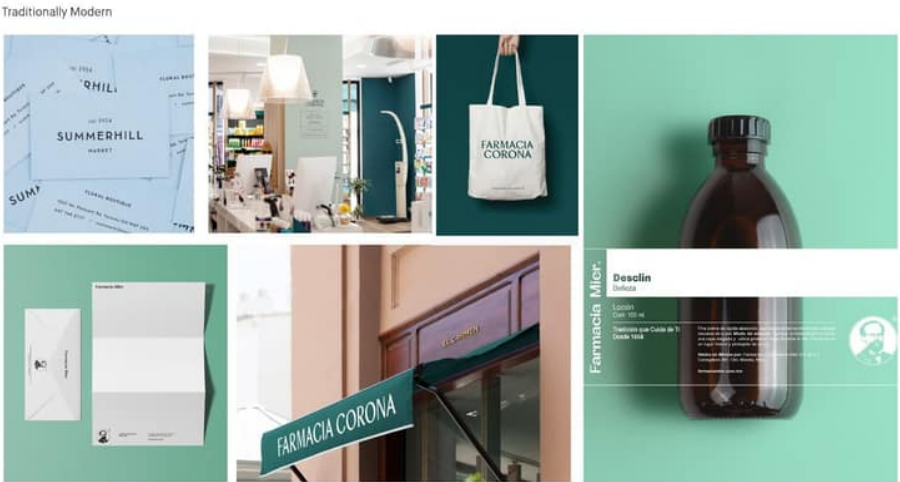
Redefining "Local"

Then a board for each theme

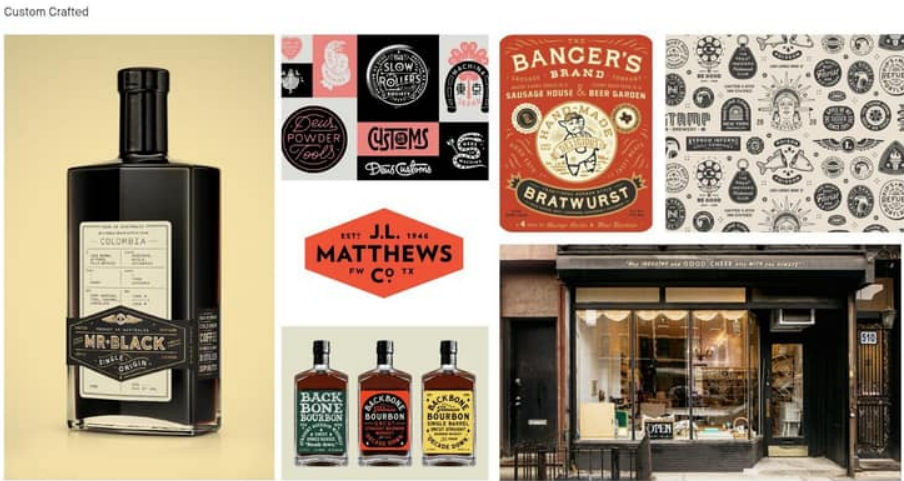
Four boards, four different pharmacies. The client chooses a direction.



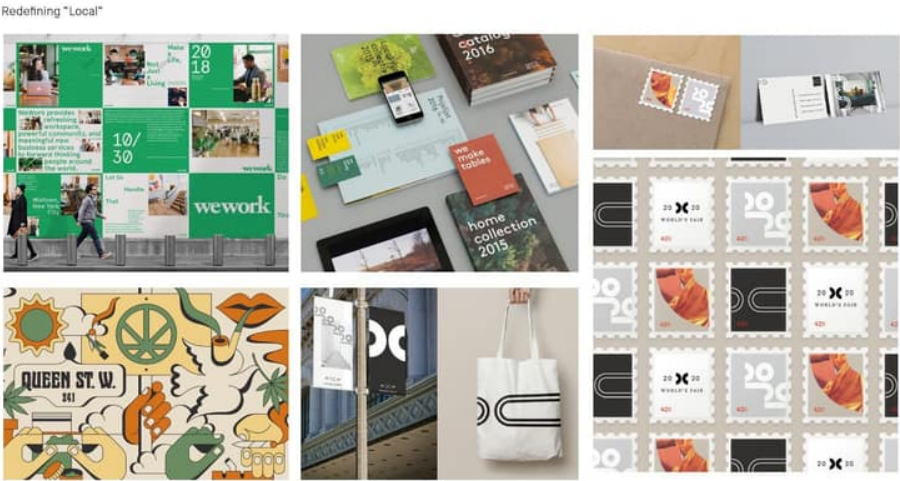
A History of Community Care



Traditionally Modern



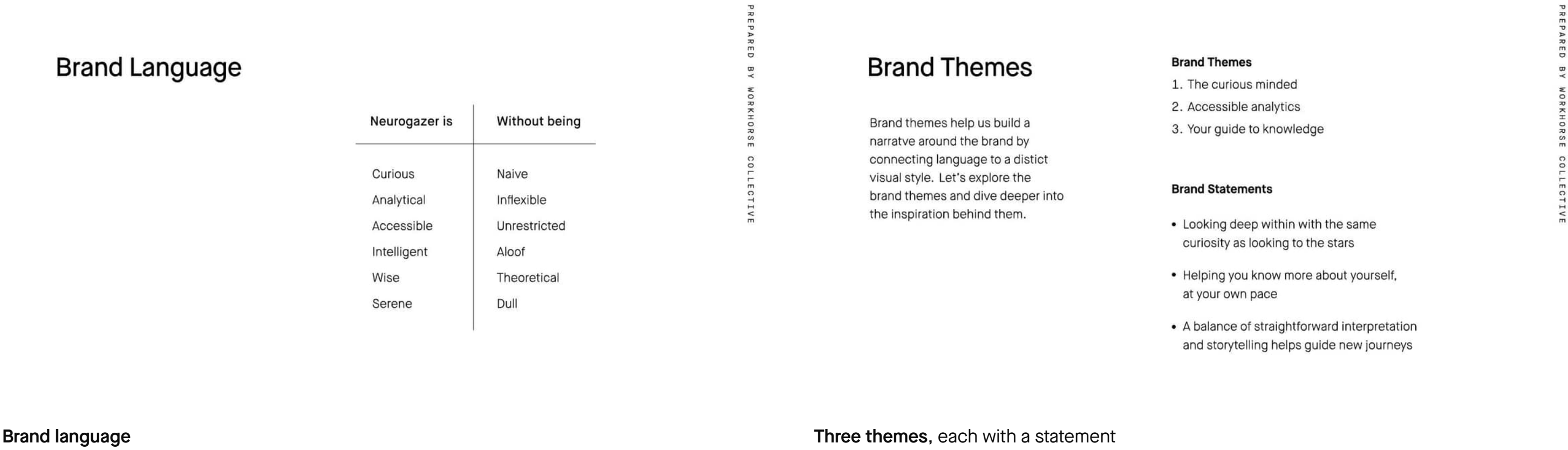
Custom Crafted



Redefining "Local"

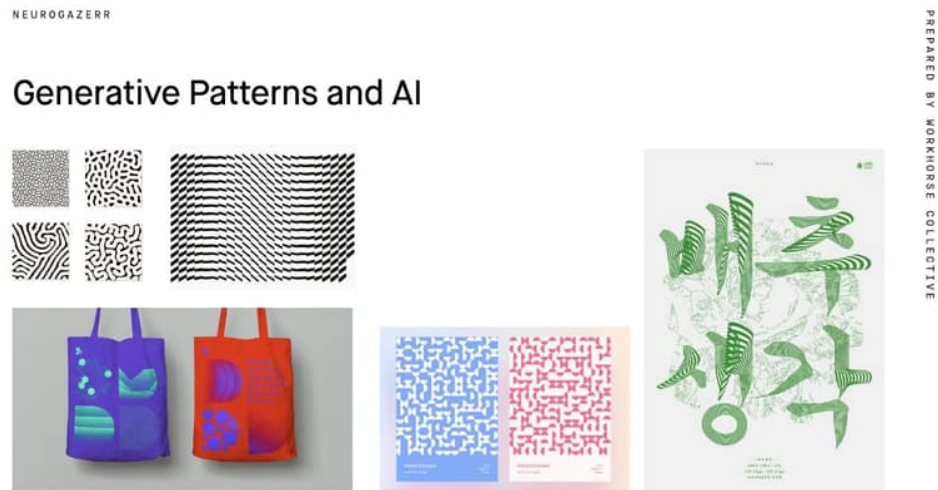
Neurogazer: the same order for a digital product

Workhorse for Neurogazer, a new neuroscience company, for parents and the neuroscience community. April 2021.

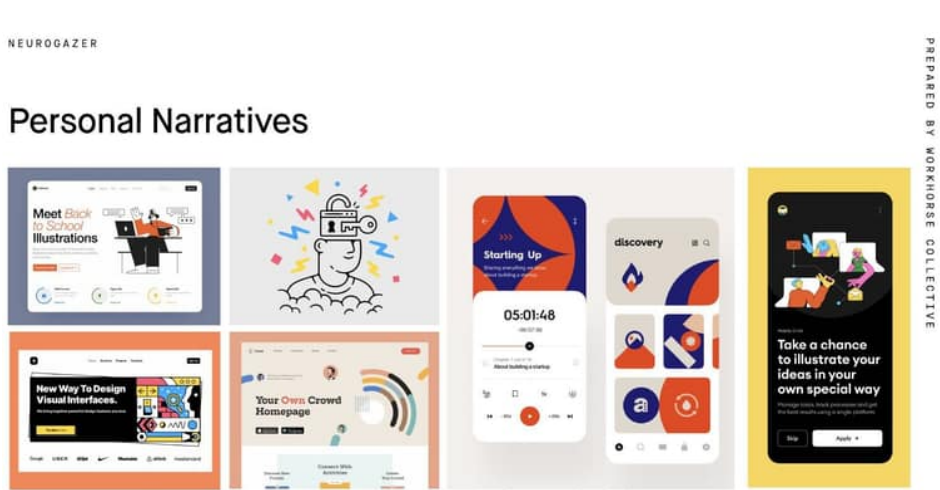


Boards named for what they look like

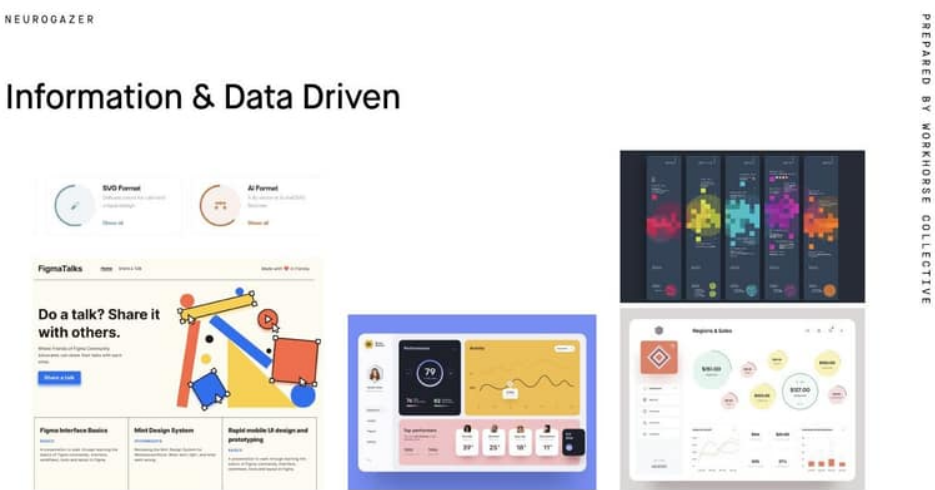
A client can repeat every one of these names in a meeting.



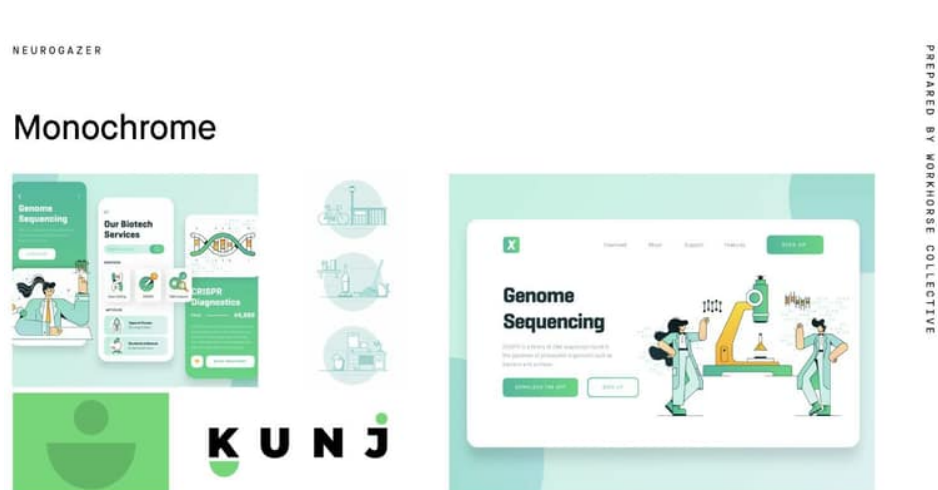
Generative Patterns and AI



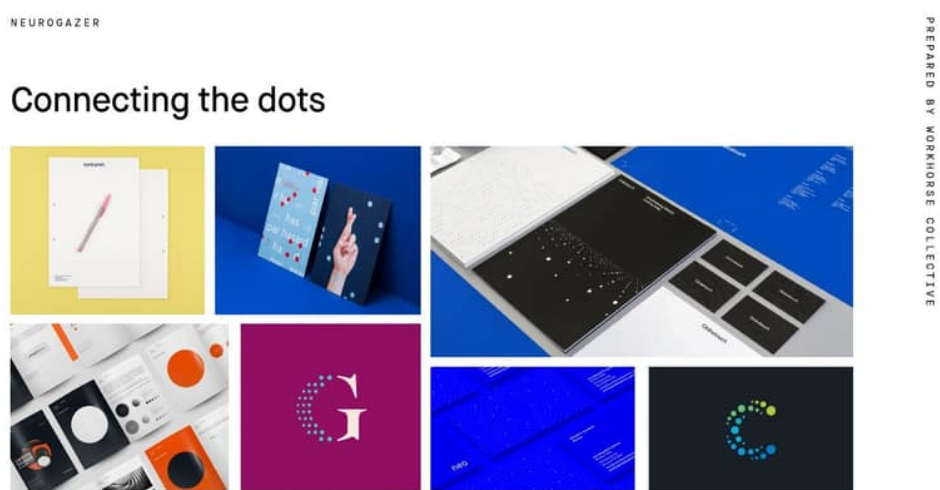
Personal Narratives



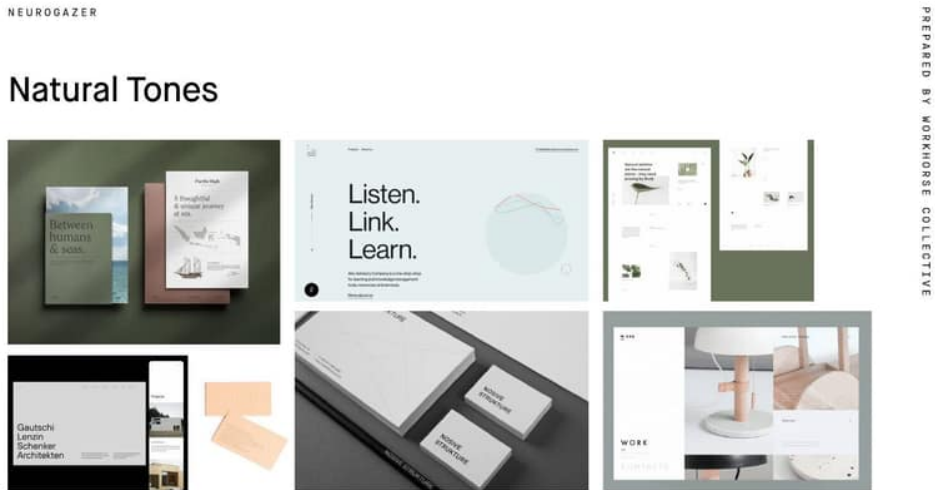
Information & Data Driven



Monochrome



Connecting the dots



Natural Tones

Add screens from the apps and sites your audience already uses

Your brand will live on a phone. Collect how other products look and behave there, and say what you take from each.

What to collect

Six to ten screens: a home screen, a menu, a sign-up, a list, a detail page, an empty state.

Where to look

Your own phone first: screenshot what your audience opens every day. Then [Mobbin](#) or [Refero](#), both with free tiers.

What to write

Under each: what it does well, and the one thing you would take. "How the menu hides." "One button per screen."

Build your boards

- 1 Write three descriptors, each with "without being." Put them at the top of your board.
- 2 One board per path, labeled with the words it tests and the archetype it plays. Four to eight images, each with what you are taking from it.
- 3 Add six to ten app or site screens your audience already uses.

Before Wednesday.

FILE	WHAT GOES IN IT	DUE
03-explorations/moodboard.md	Descriptors with "without being," then every image linked, credited, tied to a brief section, with what you are taking from it	Oct 7
03-explorations/themes.md	Two or three paths, each with its board	Oct 7
03-explorations/language.md	The words the brand might use, and the ones it never would	Oct 7
LOG.md	Two lines for today	Every session
Reading	Davis, chapter 12, "Sell Without Selling," 14 pp.	Oct 7

Close

**Aim at the brief.
Name what you borrow.**

"...you will be able to capture beauty as the wise men capture happiness by aiming at something else." Beatrice Warde, "The Crystal Goblet," 1930.