



David Rygiol: Science in Dialogue with Art

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<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/rygiol-science-art/>



P *peaceful Science* is oriented around the grand question of what it means to be human. We are approaching this question with ancestry and artificial intelligence in view, but also...art? David Rygiol is joining the *Peaceful Science* team as our “Creative Lead.” In this role, David is working out a dialogue between science and art, between artists and scientists.

David, you have already contributed quite a bit of “unpaid work” to Peaceful Science. You designed our logo, and much more. What draws you to Peaceful Science? What are the values you see that made your investment worthwhile?

I believe that every person has an obligation to make the world a better place for all of us to enjoy. For a visual person like myself, my contribution to “better” often means more beautiful. The aspiration for this common good drives all my best work.

As a designer I have the opportunity and privilege to shape the way our world looks, and collaborations with like-minded people in other fields is particularly exciting. Beyond the joy of creating beauty, there’s tremendous reward in creating something meaningful, and doing so in community.

Science provides artists and designers with truth about human experience, offering something real for us to respond with creative work. The opportunity to engage with the *Peaceful Science* community and to bring art into a new conversation with science is irresistible.

In the scientific world, the word “design” comes with some specific meanings which we do not always intend. Here, we use the word “art” to mean both art and design, inclusively, though they are in fact distinct. In your world, what is the difference and similarity between designers and artists? Which one are you?

That’s a great distinction to make. Art and Design are often used as synonyms, but they represent two very different ways of looking at and responding to the world. I am a designer. I went to design school where I learned about the mechanics of shape, typography, color, and above all clear communication. My education was rooted in the hyper-rational Swiss tradition that values clarity and intentionality.

On the other-hand I have many friends who are true artists. Their work, generally speaking, is more evocative than communicative. Its goal is to stir up thoughts and emotions in the viewer, and the experience of creating fine art is often more exploratory and abstract.

That said, there’s plenty of overlap between art and design. The difference is less about the form our work takes, but more about the intent we have in creating it. Was a poster made to communicate information or specific feelings, or was it made to explore an idea or place? *Peaceful Science* will gather artists and designers under the heading of “art.” As we mingle with scientists, we can also mingle with each other, learning and growing together as creators.

You are a designer, but you are also drawn to science. What attracts you personally to the dialogue between science and art? How might this exchange bring us to the question of what it means to be human?

In view of science, many might see art as superfluous, or limit it to merely a tool for data visualization or book covers. This altogether misses the common ground between these two ways of seeing the world.

In one sense, both artists and scientists are exploring the universe around us, engaging life’s biggest questions in different ways. While science approaches those questions from a systematic, methodological path, art is concerned with meaning, and can take a more abstract approach. I think the combination of both gives us the opportunity to engage questions of meaning more deeply, in more approachable, truthful, and compelling ways.

Peaceful Science is creating common ground between art and science where the artists and scientists can meet, finding new ways of playing together. The big questions about the human experience are too grand to be seen from one point of view. We should expect to see meaningful exchanges in both directions.

Peaceful Science values collaboration and partnership. You want to bring artists of many sorts together into large projects, and even launched a non-profit around one such collaboration. Would you tell us more about how this works? What motivates artists to work together? How could science be gathering ground for artists?

One of the main challenges that limit’s an artist’s work is the tendency to work in isolation and silo oneself in a comfortable, but very private, space where they create independently. People love being comfortable, but I think any artist would agree that their best work has been born out of a collaboration of some type. When we force ourselves to get uncomfortable, we open ourselves up to new ideas.

Three years ago I co-founded a large scale collaborative design project called [Type Hike](#) which brings artists and designers together to promote and protect the outdoors. Our first project was launched in the year of the National Park Service’s 100th anniversary so we did

a project celebrating the parks. We gathered 60 designers from all over the country and each created a poster for one park. Since then we've done several other series on other natural wonders from endangered animals to Mars.

Projects like these *could* be done by an individual or small group, but it would lose the amazing display of diversity that reflects many people who lead very different lives. By working with 60 individuals we get 60 views of the world and 60 different ways for other people to connect with the project in a meaningful way. There's no substitute or shortcut for collaboration, and I think art can be better when we do it together. I'm thrilled to watch the *Peaceful Science* community of artists grow over the next several years.

What specific examples of dialogue between science and art have been compelling to you?

There are several historical examples of how science and art have responded to one another to draw from.

One of my favorites examples is the work of painter Georges Seurat, responding to scientific work by Michel Eugène Chevreul on color perception. Dots of pure color, when placed next to one another, blend together in our perception to create new colors. This is how modern televisions are able to produce all the colors we see with just red, green, and blue lights. It is a non-intuitive fact of the human experience that just three colors in a computer monitor creates the



Chevreul proposed this color wheel in 1861. His work on color perception had “had a great influence on advanced art in Europe, particularly Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism and Orphism.”

perception of a vivid rainbow of colors. It is only about 150 years ago that we first learned this to be how our visual perception works.

In 1886 Seurat painted Alfalfa, St. Denis, a pointillism landscape that makes use of Chevreul's observations of how we perceive color. His work is inspired by perceptual science, and it brought a large public audience into contact with the reality that science uncovered.

***Peaceful Science* aims to bring scientists, artists and designers into collaboration with each other. To what should we look forward?**

We will be exploring the interplay between art and science the next several years, with a diverse group of contributors, experimenting with different approaches. At least in part, I see art serving the *Peaceful Science* community by creating engaging experiences that draw the public into discussion about important scientific research.

Imagine someone standing outside the scientific community; there's a very high wall of knowledge, history and vocabulary that isolates them from accessing the ideas behind the wall. Occasionally, an uncommonly communicative and relatable scientist might open doors, and help those of us outside see and understand. I want to paint the entire face of the wall, so everyone standing outside can learn and explore the ideas held within, even if they are standing at a distance.

We are forming a team and community. Expect to hear more in the coming months about projects and collaborations. If you are an artist or designer, come along with us. This is going to be fun.



Alfalfa, St. Denis, a pointillism landscape.

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