

ABOUT

The Website
www.Constitutio.com

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Picture the Thought

Human beings have long sought to make pictorial images of persons, animals, things, and places. Likewise, if we could draw what we see, why not try drawing what might be possible to be seen (though not seen yet)? “Plans” for possibility. Symbols marking the invisible, or connecting to what may be merely out of view. Today, we also have available revealing graphic representations of complex sets of data — if we know how to “read” the pictures. The mapping of history and the movement of change in various phenomena. The visible modeling of interactive processes. And, among other accomplishments, real spaces in specific locations can be configured virtually so that we can pretend to move around in them, visually. Lost places can be “reconstructed” that way, too, through complex patterns of three-dimensional images that our eyes — and then our minds — are given access to. And so, we can “go” where it is not feasible to be physically. Reconstructing the past, accessing the present, and composing the future. We have only begun to realize what might be accomplished by way of *constitutive depiction*. But this was at the core of our capacity for creativity — to make things (even “whole worlds”) based on the imagination — well before the invention of technological devices that simulate it.

It makes a lot of sense to cultivate this capacity, on a regular basis, to depict systematically what can be seen by the mind’s eye. The ground and the impulse are already there. We call the product of this capacity for *imaginative constitution* an “idea.” Even in its uncultivated stage, this is a typical habit of thinking, as we “come up” with mind’s-eye sightings of thought. The meaning of the word “idea” is, after all, a *mental picture*. Still, we may have almost lost this meaning (and some of the capacity it embraces), by letting the

word come to mean little more than a casual “notion,” an unstudied “opinion,” or — more intellectually and supposedly more respectably — a “concept,” something we “made up” thoughtfully. Concepts are good to have — as human beings we need to conceive things beyond what we are given. In that regard, our *creativity* is indeed in the image of *Creation* — however that may have come about, outside our own original powers. But “concepts” pertain to organized thought, and mostly leave the picture aside (the composed visualization). Still, some of us can *think* at our best only when we also *draw* or “sketch” our thoughts, and we know what we have thought (or what we think of what we have thought, and how it thinks back to us) most roundly and firmly when we make a picture of it.

At their most powerful and constitutive, mental pictures can configure *whole* worlds. And they can embrace the *order* of those worlds *whole*. The conjunction of wholeness and order is *Constitutio*. It seems to make it possible to create worlds with words — particularly when people are willing to “live by them.” But constitutional words do their work effectively only when they make mental pictures that authoritatively pattern our lives, together and on our own. We *see ourselves* in a civic landscape that embraces people and places where purposeful life goes on. In the Worded World of the American constitutional venture, for example, the common enterprise, of a life now and in the future together, sets out six such purposes. These comprise a mission statement for the establishment of a Constitution *for* a project called the United States of America. Many Americans can remember these animating phrases of the so-called “Preamble.” But such purposes really do not mean much *as words by themselves*, only as the envisioned contours of *factual conditions* to be approached more closely in our space and time together, as a result of our dedicated endeavors as citizens and founders. Those are conditions to be *seen* not just exhorted or recited. Otherwise, this Constitution is little more than a (possibly higher) form of legal enactment — whose original authorizing source is easy to disparage. Its ratification must be in the present and the future, not in the past — a point made plain to the mind by the fact that this “Preamble” is written in the present tense. Its “People” need to *think it* and not just say its words. And for that, they need to *see* the comprehensible picture it makes of a comprehensive possibility.

In turn, a “big picture” can find its match in a great mind, filling it with expansiveness of vision and offering a virtual setting for consequential creativity. So a successful “Constitution” should cultivate in its true citizens a greater capacity to *think constitutionally* and in its on-going founders a more efficacious ability to *imagine constitutively*. They should be faithful *users* of what they can see whole in their minds, and also restive *makers* of what can come to be only when it is seen anew.

Constitutions, after all, are made by ideas — by transporting the formative imagination into the foundations and contours of communal and personal possibility. That is to say, “real” constitutions, those that actually ground the conditions and configure the dimensions of a new civic reality as a space and time for the flourishing and advancement of human beings. These are, after all, pictures in our minds organizing creationist propositions that establish “life forms” in all their variation — individual, institutional, political.

Good ideas, not just the right words, make good worlds. The negative proposition is also true.

This is how the Constitution of the United States came to be (and *comes to be*). It is what Madison and Hamilton, and others among their contemporary constitution makers, specifically understood — what the *Federalist* articulates into realistic prospect, both as positive promise and negative threat. It was not primarily about defining words on a page (“in other words”) but, strategically, about projecting a new three-dimensional order of civic life never before existing, contrasting it with an alternative future world of popular disunion and political disorder. The three-dimensional idea that is Constitutional America was (and always will be) a country depicted in the remembered imagination and anticipated memory, so that prospective citizens might try out being there in their minds before (and after) an authorized Constitution could be transformed into a practical state of affairs where they conduct their everyday lives. How do they see themselves in this world of possibility? Even after its people can view aspects of it with their eyes actually, they still look for models of its wholeness in their minds. Surely, for those who would *lead* consequential lives as actors with influence, power, and creativity in such a constituted world, this picture in the mind should be the first space where they position their roles.

So how do we draw a picture so big, or imagine such a world as whole? Why is knowing by *seeing* different from understanding by *saying*, or *hearing*? How deep does it go? And how does it make up for the partiality of a natural point of view? Or make the pattern of its connections more evident? When we “think up” something new or profound, do we draw a picture of it? How, then, do we *look at* it? And what do we *see* in the diagram or image? More than we put in, for sure.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, however, a thousand words surely has to be worth a picture. We build and grasp worlds also with words. These are peculiar words, however, in that they project mental pictures as much as they institute narrative or require definition in other words. They do far more than convey content or express feeling. And, by composing a constitutional model or a constitutive story, the right words rightly

arranged may call forth a comprehensive new creation even more powerfully than an image or a design on its own. But this deployment of language for deliberate world-making and -maintaining still requires visual thinking or graphic imaging — the reverse of our experience of needing to talk about a picture before it can reveal its full meaning. It is the necessary shift to mental envisioning that conveys this power to maker’s words. As Madison had learned in college and set down in his copybook, an “idea” is a picture in the mind’s eye (*apprehended* as fact, *remembered* as experience, or *imagined* as possibility — all of these, later to be dimensions of a constitutional enterprise).

And so, arguments about the nature of constitutionalism can productively be presented dually — in text and graphics. This is not only because the ideas may thereby appeal to perceptive persons who think more profoundly with one side of their brains or the other, but because the conceptual material and constructive vision in this supremely important field of human endeavor fittingly belong in both of these formats. They are parallel. Overlapping and intercommunicating. For some, an image might be composed in the mind’s eye, and then they *put words to it*, with proper adjustments back to the diagram. For others, the text or its equivalent might be crafted, with its implications then *drawn out*, with refinements back to the language. Back and forth, both ways. As the only way human beings can make anything durably or know anything reliably, “*constitution*” (noun and gerund — “*how is it made?*” and “*how does it work, based on the way it is made?*”) requires the convergence of these two strategies.

Constitutional thinking, therefore, can take place through pictures — where it has always (naturally) belonged, in the first instance — as well as with words, which may be (literally) more artificial, though valuably so. A written Constitution is literally a “word picture” of a constitutional world. The (so far, mostly missing) match to this would be a “pictorial language” where constitutionalists would learn to reason and communicate in graphic forms. And so, we might just as productively advance constitutive thought by “commenting on the design of the picture” as by “drawing out the meaning of the words.” The query, “What is your *idea* of America?” — evoking a depiction of an articulated mental image of the country — is as useful a test for one’s constitutional understanding as an elaboration of the Preamble. Linking the two more than doubles the value. Combining them can yield compelling responses to the question, so well epitomized by the *Federalist*: “What would the world *look like* if your language is adopted?” or “...if your interpretation of the text were accepted?”

And if there is to be a “pictorial language” for constitutional thinking, there will need to be **colors** as well as **forms** — the typical constituent factors of visual artistry, shifted to the constitutional enterprise of theorizing (seeing) and modeling (making).

Constitutional Thinking...in Phases of Color

Readers of this text on the Website will have noticed by now that its author makes no apology for being serious about ambitious theorizing in public — and asking (honestly here, probably pleading for) the visitors to this virtual constitutional place to engage it earnestly as well. I have made a career of rejecting “portion control” when it comes to teaching, and “dumbing down” when it comes to constitutionalism. When he was president of Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson argued that education for real leaders in a constitutional order should aspire to cultivating “surplus of mind.” And, as many who have worked with me will recall, I have made that my motto. We should always know more than it might take to carry out a particular task. How else to rethink it or control its terms? In the “loft space” of our minds, scattered with ideas that we have come across or dreamed up, we “remember” the deeper things that need to be taken care of and “imagine” those that need to be made new. But that “surplus” loft space needs to be not only filled with potentially useful things but also structured in a way different from where we do our routine work.

And so, here goes.

For many of those who have thought about “constitutions” generally, it will not come as a surprise that this Website is designed so that its structure reflects the principles of its materials. In this case, the aim is for the overlay of form and content to be literally present and visible. At its best, if it were to achieve this aim, the Homepage itself could be seen as a stratiform picture of the theory of constitutionalism, building up from the most fundamental (even, perhaps, “pre-fundamental”) and moving to the most experience-able — as long as, when the experience happens, you insist on *thinking about it* in constitutional terms.

Gradually, in this process of building up, Colors and Forms are added. And their composition, reflecting the hues of the full spectrum (Wholeness) and the frames of good proportionality (Order), is offered as a template for thinking ever more practically in close and conscious reference back to the fundamentals that sustain creative thought as anything more than random hunches or impulsive tinkering. The theory-model of the Colors & Forms depicts a “thinking system” (in all the meanings of that phrase).

Architecture of the *Constitutio* Website

There are Four Levels to the *Constitutio* Homepage. These may be detectable by an

assessment of the design, the sorts of type fonts used, and the relative degrees of formality, along with the combination of orthogonal and diagonal logics subsumed in the layout. Ultimately, though, all four (or more, if those exist, beyond my intention) are all present at the same time, and on the same surface (however much the use of design tactics might be calculated to make some layers recede and others come forward, visually).

Level A: The Deep Background of the Layout

The Homepage begins with a neutral **Gray** foundation. Sometimes today, this is called “brain gray,” as a shade between white and black not so much as the color of brain matter but to indicate a quality of color-valuelessness. I use it because this is as close as I can reach neutrality at the start, and because it frees up **White** and **Black** as choices with equal potential signification (in contrast to the conventional starting with a **White** background, implying that it is not a commitment to meaning). On this foundation of neutrality is placed the project logo, “**Constitutio**,” in **Dark Gray**, its 45°-diagonal slant, signifying a reach from the Lower-Left corner up and across the page.

Then, to give the page a quality of place and focus from the center (instead of relying on the changeable borders of a computer screen), dotted lines are set out, capturing the points of the compass: East-West (in **Deep Red**), North-South (in **Pure Black**), Northwest/Southeast and Northeast/Southwest (in **White**). Orthogonal and Diagonal layout values, using the most ancient color value-schemes for signifying contrast. In addition, the ghost of a larger circle, comprising the **Gray-Scale Frames**, shows lighter against the neutral **Gray**.

On this backdrop are placed, in opposite corners (Upper Left and Lower Right) a symbol of the horizontal, in **Deep Red** and **White**; and a symbol of the vertical, in **Pure Black** and **White** — establishing the representation of what I will call the two Deep Background Polarities, using the two “ur” hues that denote positive-negative. Dividing the entire plane diagonally (in accordance with the slant of “**Constitutio**”) provides a domain of **WHOLENESS** in the Upper Left corner and **Order** in the Lower Right. (These will be reflected in the framework design and diagonal balance of the Basic Picture of “Colors & Forms,” which is the “main event” of the Website.)

As early instantiations of **WHOLENESS** and **Order**, **WORLD** and **Word** arise, almost as if they were the authored creations of the Deep Background Polarities. These two are symbolized as a **Deep Red** circle and a **Pure Black** square, and they often appear in their respective corners in other drawings to remind us of the orienting standards. A circle, as a natural representation of wholeness, and a square as a classic representation of

order. Overlaying them, traditionally, has marked a state of complex unity.

And so, the page is set with a presiding anchor in the Lower Left, the diagonally opposed corners on Upper Left and Lower Right marked as borders, a centered focus, and its Upper Right corner open to further possibility.

Level B: The Gray-Scale Frames

The design of the seven **Gray-Scale Frames** is set out as the visual center of the Homepage to serve as the navigational device for the Website. It is patterned precisely on the full-color model of the seven “Colors & Forms,” the Basic Picture of “The *constitution* CODE — *FrameWord* System.” At this level, though, the function is to present layers of inquiry and reflection as an active pursuit for constitutional understanding and practice:

**MAKING,
THINKING,
READING,
DISCUSSING,
WRITING,
IMAGINING,
and PERFORMING**

These are not merely labels for the allocation of content. Together, they make a framework for considering creation and creativity, culminating in a constitutional order in which one as an active and possessive place. At the exhibited level of simple Frames, this design could suggest a sequence of windows, a concentrically formatted newspaper’s front page, or a stage set of sequenced flat proscenium arches — ready for looking, inquiring, and acting.

The seven Frames make a design for the prospective reach of the Website sequenced and layered. These layers of navigation will be activated progressively as the Website develops in the future.

Level C: The Colored Boxes

When color comes to this scheme of the Homepage, it shows up in the seven hues of the title at the top, “**The Constitutional Theory of Colored Boxes**,” the colloquial term for my theory of constitutional thinking in color. Clicking this label takes one to the Basic Picture of “**COLORS & Forms**” and to the essay describing it. Later on, this page will become a secondary navigational tool, just like the Homepage Frames, with contents relating to each of the colored zones.

Color will also appear at the center-point of the Homepage, with the eventual addition of a rotating carousel of 13 “months” in a Constitutional Calendar of possible worlds.

Level D: The Circles and Squares

Think of the **Deep-Red-and-White** circles and the **Pure-Black-and-White** squares in the Upper Left and Lower Right corners as a final, almost casual overlay on a very carefully structured layout — the way one might scribble additional comments or attach stick-on notes on a formal design.

This level, evoking the initial values and shapes of the very abstract first level, shifts them to practical use as part of the Homepage, not as extraneous, mechanical additions to the side or top or bottom.

Although updated or modified material and new contents will be added on a continuing basis so that visitors can dig in more deeply to the other components of the Website, these administrative or ad-hoc points of connection and comment laid graphically on the surface of the Homepage will extend outward to the visitor.

— *Will Harris*
July 4, 2014