

The History of Colour

This is the longest article yet and in some ways the most concise. Colour in Art has inspired large books and doctoral dissertations. This is as short as I can be about so vast and interesting a subject. No doubt I will return in future articles to certain periods of art and individual artists.

I am not going to deeply speculate why prehistoric man started to create images. Perhaps early man thought that in painting animals he would have power over them or perhaps he just wanted to represent his own hunting exploits. Power and vanity are both strong motivators.

Cave paintings used the pigments of the earth, shades of brown, yellow, grey and red with black from burnt wood, white from chalk and reds and yellows from crushed berries. Luckily for him or her the natural colours available were also those of the animals he wanted to represent.



The ancient Egyptians used bright colours to decorate their homes, artworks and tombs. We think that they mixed their pigments with eggs to create an egg tempera or varnish over the colours. Pigments used were azurite (blue), malachite (green), cinnabar (red) and white lead (used until the discovery of Zinc White in 1830 and Titanium White in 1916. What have remained until today are the hieroglyphic papyrus scrolls and amazing flat tomb paintings. In the Far East scroll paintings mainly used black sumi ink with colour employed in textiles.

Art for art's sake seems to have started in the ancient Cretan civilisation, was developed by the Greeks and embraced by the Romans. The frescoes and

mosaics in Pompeii are breathtaking for their colour and, in the case of the brothel pictures, subject matter.



The Romans used encaustic where the pigments are mixed with hot wax rather than water, egg or animal fat. The Romans used the classical pigments plus indigo purple from the plant, Tyrian purple from whelk shells and Verdigris green from the controlled corrosion of Copper. Paintings and mosaics depict people (portraits), rural scenes, battles, sport and mythological and historical subjects.

Early Byzantine Christians produced religious art on a large scale seemingly to impress worshippers and non-believers alike with the vast majesty of God. Religious art, portraits and landscape really dominated through the Medieval period. Not all of it was dark and troubled Breughel fables though. Illuminated books like the Duc de Berry's Book of Hours of 1412 are as stunning today as they were then.



Art up until the 14th century was mostly figural (secular art for the bourgeoisie) or religious because it was only the rich and the Church who could afford to buy work and artists rarely worked on anything other than commissions. Artists used colour in more quantity, diversity and freedom than before and pictures were brighter and included greater details of daily life.

The Gothic period gave way to the Renaissance and now artists started to experiment further and in some ways cut loose. Bruneschelli and others 'discovered' perspective and suddenly pictures had depth, realism, light and shadow. Colours were used more freely and were truer to what the eye could see.



Between 1200 and 1350 new or improved pigments vastly expanded the chromatic palette available. Lead – Tin yellow, pink madder, vermilion and Ultramarine blue were introduced from China and Arab alchemists. Vermilion is still used today and only challenged by the invention of Cadmium Red in 1910. Ultramarine is extracted from lapis lazuli and explains its cost and the Medieval artist's anxiety about using it unless his patron was rich enough.

In the 17th and 18th centuries in Protestant Europe artists abandoned biblical and historical subjects in favour of landscapes, still lifes and figurative painting. Art was now available to the growing middle class merchants and they demanded 'safe' colours and subjects. Rembrandt went against the trend and lived in poverty! Prussian Blue was discovered by a dyer in 1704 and then Naples yellow in the 1750s.

Elsewhere in Europe the Baroque and Rococo periods produced vibrant art for the moneyed classes and art collecting as a hobby began. There was an explosion of colours as chemists and dyers expanded the range at cheaper prices. By the late 18th century after the French Revolution art was an academic prescribed medium. Colour was subservient to draughtsmanship and Classical realism. All spotless Arcadian extremism.

By 1860 at least ten new yellow pigments, including Chrome Yellow, had been invented. JMW Turner's palette showed his experimentation with all those yellows, greens from mixing with Prussian Blue and Viridian green (1838). In

the 1850s the first coal-tar dyes were available, the most notable being Perkin's mauve in 1856. However, a lot of the new pigments and dyes were not colour fast and contemporary artists had lost the art of mixing their own pigments.

The masters of colour were the Impressionists and art would never be the same. Turner and Constable showed glimpses of what was to come but it was Monet, Manet, Degas, Sisley et al who revolutionised the art world. The Impressionists sought to paint colour and light with no clear outlines in their subject matter. The critics and the public hated it and called them 'paint throwers'. Slowly it became accepted and thank goodness for that!



Cezanne began experimenting with the juxtaposition of colours in blocks, Seurat introduced pointillism and Gauguin led the post Impressionist charge with brilliant colours often in discordant combinations. Artists started to experiment freely with colour and new 'isms' started and finished rapidly – Fauvism, Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism and so on. Representational art gave way to abstract art and colour *became* the subject matter.

