

In the human sciences, to speak of the “color red” is almost a redundancy. Red is the archetypal color, the first color humans mastered, fabricated, reproduced, and broke down into different shades, first in painting, later in dyeing. This has given it primacy over all other colors through the millennia. This also explains why in many languages the same word can mean “red,” “beautiful,” and “colorful” all at once. Even though blue is by far the favorite color today in the West, and even though red’s place in our daily lives has diminished—at least in comparison to the place it held in Greco-Roman antiquity and the Middle Ages—it still remains the strongest, most remarkable color, and the one richest in poetic, oneiric, and symbolic possibilities.

In the following chapters, I have attempted to trace the color’s long history in European societies, from the Paleolithic age to the present. That was no easy task, given the many areas in which red plays a role and the many questions its study raises. The historian, like the linguist, sociologist, and anthropologist, always has much more to say about red than any other color. Red is an ocean! In order not to drown in it, in order for this work to remain a reasonable size, in order for it to be comparable to the ones preceding it, I had to—regretfully—omit or condense some material, skim over certain eras, avoid certain questions, and give priority to a few leading threads (the lexicon, clothing, art, fields of

learning, symbols). These choices allowed me to find my way in a particularly rich chromatic labyrinth.

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The present book is the fourth in an ongoing series, beginning with *Blue: The History of a Color* (2001), followed by *Black: The History of a Color* (2009) and then *Green: The History of a Color* (2014), all produced by the same publisher. A fifth, devoted to yellow, should come next. As with the books that have appeared before it, this one follows a chronological plan; it is very much a history of the color red, not an encyclopedia of red, and even less a study of the color in the contemporary world alone. It is very much a history book that examines red over the long term and in all its aspects, from the lexical to the symbolic, and including everyday life, social customs, scientific knowledge, technical applications, religious moral codes, and artistic creations. Too often histories of color—the few that exist at all—are limited to the most recent time periods or to pictorial matters alone, which is very reductive. The history of painting is one thing; the history of colors is another, and much more vast.

As with the three preceding works, this one only appears to be a monograph. A color never stands alone; it only derives its meaning, it only fully “functions” from the social, artistic, or symbolic perspective, insofar as it

is combined or contrasted with one or many other colors. Hence, it is impossible to consider it in isolation. To discuss red, we must also discuss blue, yellow, green, and especially white and black.

These first four books (and the one to follow) constitute the stones of an edifice whose construction has occupied me for almost half a century: the history of colors in European societies, from Roman antiquity to the eighteenth century. Even if, as you will read in the following pages, I often look back to before that first period and ahead to beyond the last one, it is within this already quite broad chronological slice of time that my research essentially lies. Similarly, my research is limited to European societies, because for me the issues of color are first of all social issues. As a historian I am not competent to speak about the whole planet, and not inclined to compile, second- or third-hand, works done by other historians on non-European cultures. In order to avoid making foolish claims or plagiarizing or recopying the books of others, I will limit myself to what I know and what was the subject of my seminars at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* and the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* for more than thirty years.

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Constructing a history of colors, even one limited to Europe, is not easy. In fact it is a

particularly arduous task that historians, archaeologists, and art historians (including those who study painting) have refused to tackle until recently. There are multiple difficulties; that is true. Reviewing them in the introduction to this book is worthwhile, because they are fully part of its subject and can aid us in understanding the gaps in our knowledge. With regard to color, there is no real boundary between history and historiography.

These difficulties can be grouped into three categories. The first are documentary. We see the objects, images, artworks, and monuments that past centuries have bequeathed us not in their original colors but as time has made them. Sometimes the disparity between the original state and the present state is immense. What to do? Must those supposedly original colors be restored, rediscovered at any cost, or must we acknowledge that the work of time is a historical document that the historian must accept as such? Moreover we are seeing those colors in lighting conditions very different from those of the societies preceding ours. The torch, oil lamp, candle, and gaslight produce different illumination than electricity provides. That much is clear. But who among us remembers this when visiting a museum or exhibition? And what historians take it into account in their work? Furthermore, for decades, researchers were in the habit of studying objects, artworks, and monuments by means of black-and-white reproductions—first engravings, then photographs—so much

so that over the course of time their ways of thinking and perceiving seemed to have become black and white as well. Accustomed to working from documents, from books and collections of images largely dominated by black and white, historians and archaeologists considered and studied the past as a world from which color was absent.

The difficulties in the second group are methodological. Historians are often stymied when they try to understand the status or the function of a color in an image or artwork. All the problems—material, technical, chemical, iconographical, ideological, symbolic—present themselves at the same time. How to organize them? How to conduct an analysis? What questions should be asked and in what order? To this day, no researcher and no research team has yet proposed relevant methods for helping the entire scholarly community better study the issues of color. That is why, facing the proliferation of inquiries and the multitude of vested interests, all researchers—and me first among them, no doubt—tend to retain only what suits them in relation to whatever they are in the process of demonstrating and, inversely, to overlook whatever does not suit them. That is clearly a faulty way of working.

The difficulties in the third group are epistemological: we cannot thoughtlessly project our present-day definitions, classifications, and conceptions of color, just as they are, onto the past. They are not those of the societies preceding ours (and will not be those of the

societies following ours). This is all the more so because what is true of knowledge is also true of perception: the antique or medieval eye, for example, did not perceive colors or contrasts as the twenty-first-century eye does. Whatever the historical period, perception is always cultural. Therefore, for the historian, the danger of anachronism seems to lurk behind the corner of every document, especially when it is a matter of the spectrum (unknown before the late seventeenth century), the theory of primary and complementary colors (of no concern in the human sciences), the distinction between warm and cool colors (pure convention), the principal of simultaneous contrast, or the alleged physiological or psychological effects of colors. Our knowledge, our sensibility, our present-day “truths” are not those of yesterday and will not be those of tomorrow.

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All these difficulties together underscore the strictly cultural nature of the questions that color poses. For the historian, color is defined first as a social phenomenon, not as a material or a component of light, still less as a sensation. It is the society that makes the color, that gives it its vocabulary and its definitions, that constructs its codes and values, that organizes its uses and determines its stakes. That is why any history of color must first be a social history. Unless we acknowledge that, we could

lapse into reductive pseudo-neurobiology or fruitless scientism.

To construct this history, the researcher's work is twofold. The first task is defining what the universe of colors could have been for the societies of the past, taking into account all the components of that universe: the lexica and phenomena of language, the chemistry of pigments, dyeing techniques, systems of dress and the codes that accompanied them, the place of color in everyday life, rules handed down by authorities, church moral codes, scientific speculation, and artistic creation. The areas of inquiry and reflection are endless and present the historian with complex questions. After defining a given cultural area, the second task in a diachronic study is to examine the changes, losses, innovations, and mergers that affect all historically observable aspects of the color in question.

In that dual process all available documents must be examined. Color is essentially an interdocumentary and interdisciplinary area. But certain areas prove to be more fruitful than others, vocabulary first of all: the history of words always provides our knowledge of the past with much original and relevant information. With regard to color, that history underscores how much color's primary function in any society is taxonomic: to classify, associate, oppose, hierarchize. Second of all is the area of fabric, dyes, clothing, and appearances. This is probably where chemical and technical issues merge most closely with

economic, social, and symbolic ones. Dress constitutes the first color code established by social life.

Lexica, fabrics, clothing: in matters of color, the poets and dyers have at least as much to teach us as the painters, chemists, and physicists. The long history of the color red in Western societies is exemplary in this regard.

Red Is Not Alone

A color never appears in isolation. It takes on its whole meaning only when it is combined or contrasted with one or several other colors. Red is no exception to this rule, despite its preeminence among the colors. An anonymous author from the late fifteenth century, proposing styles for livery and assigning them symbolic meaning, maintained that "red with gray is a sign of high expectations."

Serge Poliakoff,
*Composition in Gray
and Red*, 1964.
Montpellier, France,
Musée Fabre.