

Introduction

COLOR IS NOT BLACK AND WHITE

Color is a natural phenomenon, of course, but it is also a complex cultural construct that resists generalization and, indeed, analysis itself. It raises numerous and difficult questions. No doubt this is why serious works devoted to color are rare, and rarer still are those that aim to study it in historical context. Many authors search for the universal or archetypal truths they imagine reside in color, but for

the historian, such truths do not exist. Color is first and foremost a social phenomenon. There is no transcultural truth to color perception, despite what many books based on poorly grasped neurobiology or—even worse—on pseudoesoteric pop psychology would have us believe. Such books unfortunately clutter the bibliography on the subject, and even do it harm.

1. Sapphire

Sapphire is a truly celestial stone. Its blue, often compared to that of the sky, is said to have healing powers. Throughout the Orient it is believed to protect against bad luck. Ancient and medieval texts sometimes confuse sapphire and lapis lazuli, attributing to the latter the powers of the former.

Historians are largely to blame for this situation because they have spoken about color only rarely. Their silence is the result of different factors that themselves attest to historical trends. The main difficulty for historians has been to conceive of color as a subject separate from other historical phenomena. Three sets of problems stand in the way of such a conception.

The first set of problems concerns documentation and preservation. We see the colors transmitted to us by the past as time has altered them and not as they were originally. Moreover, we see them under light conditions that often are entirely different from those known by past societies. And finally, over the decades we have developed the habit of looking at objects from the past in black-and-white photographs and, despite the current diffusion of color photography, our ways of thinking about and reacting to these objects seem to have remained more or less black and white.

The second set of problems concerns methodology. As soon as the historian seeks to study color, he must grapple with a host of factors all at once: physics, chemistry, materials,

and techniques of production, as well as iconography, ideology, and the symbolic meanings that colors convey. How to organize all of these elements? Which questions should come first? How can one establish an analytical model facilitating the study of images and colored objects? No researcher, no research team, no method has yet been able to resolve these problems, because among the numerous facts pertaining to color, a researcher tends to select those facts that support his study and to ignore those that contradict it. This is clearly a poor way to conduct research. And it is made worse by the temptation to apply to the objects and images of a given historical period information found in contemporaneous texts. The proper method—at least in the first phase of analysis—is to proceed as do paleontologists (who must study cave paintings without the aid of texts): by extrapolating from the images and the objects themselves a logic and a system based on various concrete factors such as the rate of occurrence of particular objects and motifs, their distribution and disposition, the relationships between upper and lower registers, between left and right, back

and front, center and periphery. In short, one undertakes the internal structural analysis with which any study of an image or colored object should begin (this does not mean that the study should end there).

The third set of problems is epistemological: it is wrong to project our own conceptions and definitions of color onto the images, objects, and monuments of past centuries. Our judgments and values are not those of previous societies (and no doubt they will change again in the future). The historian risks anachronistic analysis with every step he takes—and the art historian particularly so. When it is a question of the definition and taxonomy of color, the danger of anachronism is even more pronounced. For example, for centuries black and white were considered to be completely separate from the other colors; the spectrum with its natural order of colors was unknown before the seventeenth century; the notion of primary and secondary colors emerged only gradually during the seventeenth century and did not become common until the nineteenth century; and the contrast between warm and cool colors is a matter of convention and functions

differently according to the period and society in question (in the Middle Ages, for example, blue was a warm color). The spectrum, the color wheel, the notion of primary colors, the law of simultaneous contrasts, the distinction between retinal rods and cones—these are not eternal notions but stages in the ever-changing history of knowledge. The historian should employ these terms with prudence.

I have reflected at greater length on these problems of epistemology, methodology, and documentation in my previous work, and so will not spend more time on them here.¹ This book does address certain of these issues, but for the most part it is devoted to other topics. Nor is it concerned only with what images and artworks can teach us about the history of color, since this history still has many gaps to be filled. Rather, the aim of this book is to examine all kinds of objects in order to consider the different facets of the history of color and to show how far beyond the artistic sphere this history reaches. The history of painting is one thing; that of color is another, much larger, question. Most studies devoted to the history of color err in considering only the pictorial,

artistic, or scientific realms.² But the lessons to be learned from color and its real interest lie elsewhere.

Any history of color is, above all, a social history. Indeed, for the historian—as for the sociologist and the anthropologist—color is a social phenomenon. It is society that “makes” color, defines it, gives it its meaning, constructs its codes and values, establishes its uses, and determines whether it is acceptable or not. The artist, the intellectual, human biology, and even nature are ultimately irrelevant to this process of ascribing meaning to color. The issues surrounding color are above all social issues because human beings live in society and not in solitude. Without recognizing this, it is easy to fall into a reductionist neurobiological analysis or to employ a pseudoscientific approach, which renders futile any attempt to establish the history of color.

The historian must approach this history from two directions. On the one hand, he must try to define the chromatic sphere as it existed for past cultures, by taking into account all the elements that made up this sphere: names and definitions of colors, the chemistry of pigments

and dyeing techniques, manners of dress and the social codes they express, color’s place in daily life and material culture, rules and regulations pertaining to color, and the meanings given to it by the church, scientific theories, and art. The potential areas for research and reflection are numerous and pose a great many questions. On the other hand, the historian should also employ a diachronic perspective focused on a single culture, permitting him to study specific practices, codes, and systems of color as well as the losses, mutations, innovations, and combinations that affect the observable aspects of color’s history.

This two-pronged approach requires that all available objects be examined: the study of color is essentially a multimedia and interdisciplinary field. But certain fields of research, such as the color lexicon, are more productive than others. Here, as elsewhere, the history of words greatly enriches our knowledge of the past and reminds us that in all cultures, color’s primary function is to classify, mark, announce, connect, or divide. This is also the case for the dyeing of fabric and clothing, in which we see the close links between chemistry, production

techniques, materials, professional codes, and the social, ideological, and symbolic problems they accompany. For the medievalist, for example, dyed fabrics and clothing offer physical documentation of color that is often more solid, extensive, and relevant than stained-glass windows, frescoes, panel paintings, or miniatures (though the former are often closely related to the latter).

This book is not limited to a study of the Middle Ages, but it is also not meant as a complete history of color in Western culture. Its goal is to examine a few key points in that history. To simplify this project, the history of the color blue from the Neolithic period to the twentieth century has been chosen as the principal theme. Blue presents a real historical conundrum. It was little valued by the cultures of antiquity; for the Romans, in fact, it was the color of the barbarians and thus had negative connotations. Today, however, blue is by far the favorite color of Europeans, its popularity greatly surpassing that of green and red. Over the course of the centuries, then, there has been a complete reversal of values. This book

focuses on the evolution of this change in perception. First it discusses the lack of interest in blue among ancient and medieval societies; then it follows the rise in blue's fortunes as evidenced by clothing and daily use beginning in the twelfth century. Emphasis is placed on the social, moral, artistic, and religious issues raised by this color up to the Romantic period. The last section focuses on blue's triumph in modern times, giving a detailed account of its present uses and meanings and reflecting on its future.

A single color, however, can never be viewed on its own. Its function can be grasped and its meanings understood only when it is compared or contrasted to one or many other colors. To study the color blue, then, requires the consideration of other colors as well, and these are not absent from the following pages. Far from it—we will also observe green and black, blue's close counterparts at many points in history; white and yellow, with which it was frequently paired; and above all red, blue's opposite, partner, and rival in all the Western color systems throughout the ages.