

An Introduction to Colour and Culture in Western Art

Background Notes

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Wassily Kandinsky. *Composition VII*, 1913, oil on canvas, 200.6 cm
× 302.2 cm. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

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The first seminar in this series on colour in Western art is a general introduction to the subject through the writings and research of the great art historian, John Gage (1938-2012) **(1)**, who is widely regarded as having brought about a radical reinterpretation of the role played by colour in art and society. Gage was an open-minded man of infinite curiosity and the scope of his interests was vast. They are best represented by his magisterial book, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, which was described by the art historian, Professor Alex Potts, as “the most exhaustive historical analysis we have of understandings of colour in western art.” *Colour and Culture* ranged across the western tradition, from classical antiquity to twentieth-century abstraction, but towards the end of his career, Gage further expanded his horizons, looking at the role of colour in non-western art. When he retired from his post at Cambridge University in 2000 (where he had been the Head of the Art History Department), he moved to Australia, where he began to study indigenous Australian art. His planned monograph on the subject was left unfinished on his death in 2012.



Fig. 1 Unknown photographer. *John Gage in 2009 at the conference of the Association Internationale de la Couleur.*

Gage’s books were remarkable not just for their chronological and geographical sweep, but also for the extraordinary breadth of his approach. He was pained by the limitations of older art historical writing of the kind that was largely based on connoisseurship and which prioritized formal analysis in determining the effects of colour in an art work. He absolutely refused to accept that formal analysis of colour was the be-all and end-all. “Colour,” he argued, “must be not simply a branch – and a minor one – of formal analysis, but must be fully integrated into the history of art.” For this to happen, however, historians would have to scrutinise in detail the historical, social, geographical, scientific and cultural contexts in which colour was used.

For Gage, this would include issues of cosmology, mythology and spirituality, such as the involvement of early abstract painters like Wassily Kandinsky **(cover image)** with the esoteric doctrines of Theosophy or the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner. It would equally mean a close attention to the history of optics and to scientific colour theories of, for instance, Chevreul or Helmholtz. His approach embraced the international trade in traditional dyes and pigments, but also the modern chemical industry's role in producing the aniline dyes and standardised tube paints that replaced those older materials. Gage was well-versed in the literature on the psychology of colour perception, ancient and modern. He also insisted on the significance of institutions in any account of colour usage and he was one of very few art historians who emphasized the importance of language in the study of colour.

Much older art history assumed that colour description was stable and that the word 'purple', for example, described the same visual sensation in the modern world as it did in antiquity. Gage, however, demonstrated that its meanings had undergone considerable change: in late antiquity, rather than designating a hue, it referred to a method of extracting coloured dye from a mollusc; in tenth-century Spain, it was the name of a silk fabric, not a colour. The general agreement that purple was a hue did not come about until the mid-seventeenth century.

Gage's deep knowledge of colour and language was matched by his understanding that "the materials of the artist cannot simply be regarded as tools, for they were often repositories of values in their own right." As he pointed out in *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism*, his follow-up to *Colour and Culture*, the most salient example of this was the use of the pigment ultramarine in medieval and Renaissance art. Ultramarine was a ravishing, intense blue made from the semi-precious stone, lapis lazuli; it was imported from Afghanistan and its monetary value was greater than gold. It was used in altarpieces to honour the holiest of saints, notably the Virgin Mary, and also to advertise the generosity of the donor of an altarpiece, because contemporaries could tell not only that ultramarine was used, but even what quality of ultramarine was used: the quality and cost were often specified in artists' contracts.

A striking instance of this is Albrecht Dürer's *Adoration of the Magi* of 1504 (2), which was commissioned by Frederick the Wise for the Schlosskirche (castle church) in Wittenberg. Dürer uses the highest quality of ultramarine for the gown of the Virgin but a lesser quality ultramarine for the cloak of Balthasar, the black magus. The different pigment qualities are a sign of piety and they are essential to the meaning of the painting.



Fig. 2 Albrecht Dürer, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1504, oil on panel, 100 × 114 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence

In his discussion of the Renaissance, Gage also devotes considerable attention to the sixteenth-century paragone (or sustained debate) concerning the relative importance of colour (*colore*) and drawing/design (*disegno*) in art. It began not just as a matter of aesthetic preference, but also of intense civic rivalry: *disegno* was espoused particularly in Florence and Central Italy, whereas *colore* was strongly associated with Venice, a city rich in the effects of reflected or diffused light. The Venetian love affair with colour is clearly expressed at San Marco with the glittering gold mosaics of its interior and, on the exterior, its rich marble inlays. It finds its ultimate expression, however, in oil paintings by Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione and Titian. As a water-borne city, Venice was ill-suited to the great fresco cycles that were so important in Florence and Rome. The Venetians embraced oil painting in the 1470s, long before the Florentines, because it was a durable, flexible medium that was little affected by the humid climate of the lagoon city. It also permitted artists like the Venetian painter, Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1556) to create sumptuous

colours, strong *chiaroscuro* (light and dark) and highly convincing effects of light in his huge altarpiece of 1542 depicting *The Alms of Saint Anthony* (3) in the prestigious basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Venice.



Fig. 3 Lorenzo Lotto (c.1480-1556), *The Alms of Saint Anthony*, 1542, oil on panel, 332 × 235 cm. Basilica dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Venice

Venetian painters often began work directly on the canvas without preliminary drawings but in Florence good draughtsmanship was seen as the essential prerequisite for good painting; colour was regarded as secondary to clarity of form and line. In Florence, it was believed that drawing was essential to the composition of a painting and to the expression of the artist's thinking. For this reason, drawing was viewed as the intellectual, rational element of painting, whereas colour was all to do with the senses. This sensual aspect of colour was associated with passion and the imagination rather than reason; as such, it was unpredictable and viewed with mistrust by the partisans of drawing, a phenomenon that became known as *chromophobia*.

Gage traced the way in which the debate would resonate down the centuries. It was rekindled at the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture (Royal Academy) in Paris in 1671, after disparaging remarks made about Rubens's colourism by the painter Philippe de Champaigne. Thereafter, French painters were classified as Poussinistes – the heirs of the *disegno* tradition influenced by the stark, linear classicism of Nicolas Poussin, or Rubenistes – who looked to Rubens and to the Venetian tradition of *colore* and shimmering, painterly

compositions. It thereafter found its way into the teachings of all the European academies, including the Royal Academy in London, where students were strongly advised by its first President, Sir Joshua Reynolds, to follow the example of the central Italians, Raphael and Michelangelo, rather than the seductive colourism of Titian. This had much to do with the fact that drawing, as the intellectual/rational part of painting, was seen as teachable, whereas the unpredictability of colour meant that it was beyond pedagogy. The Royal Academy's suspicious attitude towards colour may also explain why Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) was appointed its Professor of Painting in 1799. In spite of the fact that he, in his own words "courted colour all his life like an errant mistress", his paintings, such as *Percival Delivering Belisane from the Enchantment of Urma* (4) of 1783, often look, to quote the late Professor Michael Kitson, "as if they were painted with gravy."



Fig. 4 Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), *Percival Delivering Belisane from the Enchantment of Urma*, 1783, oil on canvas, 99 x 125.7 cm. Tate, London

That said, in a brilliant essay titled *Magilphs and Mysteries*, Gage revealed the guilty fascination that Venetian colour still held for certain senior Royal Academicians, seven of whom were duped into paying ten guineas each in 1797 to a young student, Mary Ann Provis, who fraudulently claimed to have discovered the secret of Venetian colour. The episode, and the discomfiture of the Royal Academy, was gleefully satirised by James Gillray in his print *Titianus redivivus; -or- the seven-wise-men consulting the new Venetian oracle* (5).



Fig. 5 James Gillray (1796-1815), *Titianus redivivus; -or- the seven-wise-men consulting the new Venetian oracle, - a Scene in ye Academic Grove – No.1*, 1797, hand-coloured etching and aquatint on paper, 50.4 x 40.8 cm. British Museum, London

The colour/drawing antinomy re-emerges in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the divergent attitudes of Neoclassical painters such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) on the one hand, for whom drawing was the soul of painting, and Romantics, most notably Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), whose vibrant colour was described by the poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) as the very essence of the modern in painting. Finally, recent postcolonial scholarship has shown how the western suspicions about colour about which Gage had written, also come into play in British colonial dealings with India. Strong, vibrant colour has always been an essential part of the sensory world of South Asia, but for some colonial apologists it was a visual cacophony that signified a chaotic and disordered cast of mind, which supported their case for British imperial rule.

Bibliography

The bibliography that follows contains the key works by John Gage on colour. Most of the books by other authors that are listed here owe a debt to aspects of Gage's output.

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