

Colour in Victorian Art

Background Notes

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Figure 1: John Atkinson Grimshaw (1836-1893), *London, St James' Street, c. 1880s.* (Bonhams)

The high levels of pollution during the Victorian era, creating those notorious London smogs, have created an image that urban life was rather dreary. Painter Atkinson Grimshaw capitalised on the installation of streetlights and illuminated shop windows, his images capturing the glow of light on the gloomy cobbled streets of London and Liverpool (1). They encapsulate the image we have of Dickensian London.

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However, the era also witnessed a colour revolution. In 1848, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, led by William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, shocked the art world by daring to question long-held academic standards. Admiring Italian and Flemish quattrocento paintings, created 'before Raphael', the Brothers recreated the vibrant colours and clear outlines of both egg tempera and fresco which, to a public accustomed to the dark palette of seventeenth and eighteenth-century oils, was a visual affront.

Founded in 1824 the National Gallery was instrumental in setting standards in terms of artistic status and taste. The national collection was initiated with the purchase of the collection of the banker John Julius Angerstein which included Rembrandt's *Woman Taken in Adultery* (1644), Claude's *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* (1648) and the star attraction, Sebastiano del Piombo's *Raising of Lazarus* (1517-16), which was said to show the hand of Michaelangelo. On his first visit to the National Gallery, Hunt went in search of the "really grand paintings of the great masters." The gallery attendant pointed to the *Raising of Lazarus*: "Here he stopped to understand my paralyzed expression. 'Can't you see its beauty, sir?' 'Not much, I must confess,' I slowly stammered; 'it is as brown as my grandmother's painted teatray.'" Apparently, Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* had been deliberately darkened, being subjected to "a liberal coating of tobacco decoction" to suit the tastes of earlier dilettanti. Rather it was Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434), a so-called primitive painting, that captured Hunt's attention: 'The works of the Van Eycks showed the first achievements of perfect realisation of natural form and colour'. (Hunt, 1905, p.30) To achieve the brilliant effect of tempera and fresco, Hunt and Millais experimented with the wet-white ground **(2)**. The laborious technique entailed applying bright, transparent glazes over a wet ground. Hunt offers the best account of the method. Having prepared a smooth white surface, a fresh wet coat was applied:

Over this wet ground, the colour (transparent and semi-transparent) should be laid with light sable brushes, and the touches must be made so tenderly that the ground below shall not be worked up, yet so far enticed to blend with the superimposed tints.... Painting of this kind cannot be retouched except with an entire loss of luminosity. (1905, p.276)



Figure 2: John Everett Millais, *Isabella*, 1848–1849 (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool)

The wet-white ground facilitated Hunt's so-called "hard-edge realism". Natural forms and humble objects, the smallest details, were placed under the microscope and delineated with starting clarity whether in the foreground or background. The result was a vibrant luminosity that challenged accepted norms and provoked harsh criticism, notably from Charles Dickens who declared the Pre-Raphaelites' "great retrogressive principle" had "cancelled artistic advancement".

The use of symbolic colours, white, blue and red as seen in Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1849-50, Tate Britain), was another debt to primitive painting. Millais and Arthur Hughes both favoured purple for its complex associations (3). Tyrian purple, a rare and expensive dye derived from *Bolinus brandaris* (Murex) sea snails, signalled Imperial status and luxury while also expressing spiritual values. An attribute of the Virgin, the purple iris symbolised feminine sensitivity, compassion and higher feeling. The intensity of the colour carried a range of connotations: lighter shades (lavender, lilac and violet) represented feminine delicacy as well as melancholy and sorrow frequently being used for mourning.



Figure 3: Arthur Hughes, *April Love*, c. 1855 (Tate Britain)



Figure 4: Day Dress, c.1870-73, silk dyed purple with aniline dye. (V&A Collection)

The first aniline or synthetic dye, which transformed the production of silk and cotton textiles, was conceived as a substitute for Tyrian purple. While natural dyes, derived from plants (indigo, woad, madder, turmeric etc.), animals (shellfish purple, cochineal) and minerals (cobalt), could produce an amazing range of colours, they were inclined to run or fade. Then in 1856, William Henry Perkin, a young chemistry student, made an unexpected discovery, observing that aniline extracted from coal tar could create colours. Initially Perkin called his new colour Tyrian purple. Realising that this was rather confusing, as the name already designated a natural dye, he invented the term Perkin's Mauve or Mauveine after the mallow flower. Fortunately for Perkin, the French Empress Eugenie, undoubtedly the most fashionable woman in Europe, decided that lilacs and mauves matched her eyes perfectly thus initiating a craze for all shades of purple. The famous comic paper *Punch* declared London had been struck by an epidemic of mauve measles, a serious illness which began with "a rash of ribbons" and spread to cover the whole body in mauve. Mauveine led the way to dyes in dozens of shades, all made from aniline: Fuchsine, a rich

crimson red, also known as solferino and magenta, Bismark brown, Martius yellow, Nicholson's blue (a vivid teal blue), Bleu de Paris, and Perkins green. Coinciding with the crinoline and the bustle, which both required voluminous swathes of drapery, dressmakers created eye-popping ensembles (4).

The best-known aniline shades are extremely bright and vivid. They were cheaper, and often more effective than their natural alternatives. However, inevitably castigated as vulgar and brash, a reaction occurred in the 1870s with William Morris lauding the merits of natural dyes such as indigo blue, red from cochineal or the madder plant, and yellow weld, such sources dating back to Medieval times. Morris revived the indigo blue discharge technique for block printing textiles:

“The cloth is first dyed all over in an indigo vat to a uniform depth of blue and is then printed with a bleaching reagent which either reduces or removes the colour as required by the design. Mordants are next printed on the bleached parts and others where red is wanted, and the whole length of the material is then immersed in madder vat calculated to give the proper tint. This process is repeated for the yellow, the three colours being superimposed on each other to give green, purple and orange. All loose colouring matter is then cleared away and the colours are set by passing the fabric through soap at almost boiling point. The final treatment in the process is to lay the cloth flat on the grass, with its printed face to the light, so that the whites in the designs may be completely purified, and all fugitive colour removed in nature's own way.”



Figure 5: William Morris, *Strawberry Thief*, 1883, (V&A Collection)

Strawberry Thief (1883) used three separate dyes: indigo, red & yellow. Taking a number of days to produce, it was one of the firm's most expensive cottons (5).

Morris's art fabrics became central to the concept of the House Beautiful, which endowed homeowners with creative agency. Transformed into carefully composed works of art, domestic interiors were to reflect individual tastes. A culture war ensued, with the Aesthetes, led by Oscar Wilde, weaponising taste as a marker of superiority. Claiming their highly attuned sensibilities were easily jarred by anything discordant, particularly colours derived from synthetic dyes, Aesthetes favoured unusual tertiary hues, such as olive, willow, sage and sea greens. Darwinian theorist Grant Allen claimed that only those with evolved colour sense appreciated green. Evidently colour perception developed from the bold and vulgar to the delicate and refined. Hence, green only appealed to the rarified; as "gentle and modest", restful and reparative. Allen reasoned that "it naturally ranks highest of any colour in the hierarchy of the aesthetically cultivated" (1879, p.233). Lampooned in the comic opera *Patience* (1881) as "Greenery-yallery", pale green became the preferred background, with "Blue china", Japanese fans, peacock feathers and sunflowers providing accents of colour (6).



Figure 6: Billiard Room with *Pimpernel* wallpaper, c. 1876 and *Bird* woven curtains, c. 1878, Wightwick Manor, near Wolverhampton, (National Trust)

However, by the 1890s green and yellow had become associated with decadence and decay. Wilde was lampooned in Robert Hichens's *The Green Carnation* (1894), which hinted at homosexuality. The striking colour of *The*

Yellow Book, launched in April 1894, immediately associated the periodical with illicit French novels and lent its name to the "Yellow Nineties" (7).

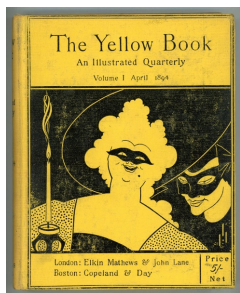


Figure 7: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Yellow Book*, Vol. 1, April 1894. London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane. (Private collection)

Ironically, in 1908, the suffragettes, supporters of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), adopted their iconic colours, violet, white and green (8). Like a regiment's colours, the suffragette tricolour was used for sashes, badges, flags, and the banners needed for public marches, a new type of political canvassing. Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, treasurer of the WSPU, imbued the colours with meaning: purple (i.e. violet) stood for dignity, white for purity, and green for hope, these colours allegedly becoming a cipher for "Give (green) Women (white) Votes (violet)."

Throughout the Victorian era colour was inflected with complex meanings, engendering associations and emotions.



Figure 8: "Spy" (Leslie Ward), "Women's Suffrage" (Miss Christobel Pankhurst), *Vanity Fair*, 15 June 1910, (National Portrait Gallery)

Suggested Books

Allen, Grant. *The Colour-Sense, Its Origin and Development: An Essay in Comparative Psychology*. London: Kegan Paul, 1879.

Anderson, Anne. *Beyond the Brotherhood The Pre-Raphaelite Legacy*. Exhibition Catalogue. Chippenham: Sansom & Co., 2019.

___ “Suffrage Identity: Declaring One’s Colours”, Christopher Wiley and Lucy Ella Rose (eds), *Women’s Suffrage in Word, Image, Music and Drama*, London and New York: Routledge, 2021: 85-108.

Barringer, Tim, Jason Rosenfeld, and Alison Smith. *The Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde*. London: Tate Britain, 2012.

Garfield, Simon. *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Colour that Changed the World*. London: Faber and Faber Limited. 2000.

Gere, Charlotte with Lesley Hoskins, *The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior*, London: Lund Humphries, 2000.

Hunt, William Holman. *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. Vol. 1., London: Macmillan, 1905.

MacCarthy, Fiona. *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, London: Faber & Faber, 2010.

Osbourne, Roy. *Renaissance Colour Symbolism*. North Carolina: Lulu, 2019.

The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement, 1860–1900, edited by Stephen Calloway and Lynn Federle Orr. Exhibition Catalogue. London: V&A, 2011.

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