

The New Jerusalem: The Battle for Colour in Medieval Worship

Background Notes

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Notre-Dame de la Belle Verrière, Chartres Cathedral, 1180

We take delight in vision ... because light and colour have singular beauty, exceeding that of the other things that are conveyed to our senses.

Roger Bacon, *Perspectiva*, c.1263

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, several Western European scholars turned their minds to re-examining the concepts of vision, light and colour: the medieval science of *Perspectiva*. Their conclusions – arcane and esoteric at the time, and often deeply perplexing for the modern reader – would nevertheless influence the way in which ordinary people experienced Christian worship, not least the way in which colour was used to reveal and interpret God’s purposes. Colour put Humanity in contact with the Divine.

Medieval optical theories were grounded in the ideas of Plato and Aristotle, which had themselves been debated, evaluated and expanded by Arab scholars such as Avicenna (d.1037) and Alhazen (d.c.1040). One of the most fundamental questions concerned sight and how we see. Plato had proposed an extromissive theory, by which rays emerged from the eye, went out and ‘caressed’ objects in the world, and carried the information back to the viewer. Aristotle had suggested an alternative, intromissive theory, where rays generated by the objects themselves were received into the eye. In the early eleventh century, the Arab scholar Alhazen supported the Aristotelian model and when his work was translated into Latin c.1200 it established the supremacy of the intromissive theory. At about the same period, Aristotle was acclaimed as the intellectual foundation stone of the influential Paris Schools, which is where all the leading scholars of *Perspectiva* studied or taught.

The Church obviously overlaid these theories with Christian theology. The Bible is full of references to light, identifying it with the Divine and with truth and salvation. It was God’s light that shone throughout the world in order to

make His purpose visible to Mankind and draw the people to Him; God's light that illuminated the objects that were perceived by the human eye. But this light did not reveal God directly: God was surrounded by His Glory, a light far beyond earthly comprehension (no small problem, incidentally, for an earth-bound artist to represent) and reserved only for the blessed in Heaven (fig. 1). Light was therefore graded. The source of light, the pure light of God, too rich for human sight, was named 'lux'. It then diffused its lesser, safer luminosity or 'lumen' through the material world. It was this light that fell on objects and then travelled to the eye and eventually to the understanding.



Fig.1 **The Egerton Master**, 'God the Creator' (detail), from *Bible Historiale*, 1411. God's Glory emanates from His head and His robe is covered in gold sunbursts. Red seraphim surround Him and the sky consists of blue cherubim.

So what was the role of colour in this process? Humans, being simple creatures, needed to perceive material objects in palpable form and it was colour that made this possible, colour (in which are included black and white) that defined edges and shapes and forms. Colour was therefore divinely purposed as an educational aid to bring the viewer to God.

But what actually was colour? We are clearly not in the modern realms of electromagnetic waves, so was colour composed of something more tangible, of matter? The theorists were somewhat vague but one of the greatest

medieval scholars on colour, Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (c.1175-1253), observed:

... when sunlight is added to a colour which is in the diaphanous medium through which sunlight passes, for instance to the colour of glass, it necessarily incorporates itself to that colour, and it transports that colour together with itself .. and the ray turns to yellow, or green, or red, according to the colour it passes through [De Iride, before 1235].

So, colour has an existence independent of light, it is inherent in the material fabric of objects, an intrinsic property. It requires light to bring it to life and it is also capable of changing the nature of that light. And as all matter is made up of the four elements – earth, air, fire and water – it makes sense that colour is also made up of these elements, and that a predominance of one element over the others will lead to a certain hue. Fire, unsurprisingly, was associated with the colour red, water with green, air with either blue or white, and earth with a range of colours through yellow and brown to black and grey.

Let's go back a bit. Once it had been established that colour was a divine teaching aid intended to reveal God's purposes and thus draw the viewer to Him, it was intellectually pleasing to assume that colour was imbued with symbolic meanings that, decoded, would reveal further truths. Abstract qualities could be applied to colours, allowing them to represent values in a Christian context, although it must be added that these attributions were quite variable and certainly not standard across time and place. So, for example, blue was associated with hope, sincerity and piety, and also had celestial overtones. White could be used to represent hope and purity but was also, as the colour of shrouds, emblematic of death. Red, with its associations with blood, became the colour for martyrs but was also identified with charity and with love for God. Green, the colour of nature, represented youth and virginity, and also life, since all life began in the

Garden of Eden. Artists could adopt these familiar colour codes to identify both figures and abstract qualities in their work. Mary Magdalene, for example, is often portrayed in red, illustrative of her love for Christ (fig. 2). The blue in which the Virgin Mary is often dressed speaks, amongst other things, of her piety and the hope she brings for Mankind. The colour coding helps the viewer first to identify the figures and then to reflect upon their qualities: colour brings understanding of Divine purpose.



Fig. 2 **Simone Martini**, 'Christ on the Cross' (detail), from *The Orsini Polyptych*, 1320-30. Mary Magdalene, in red, full of love for Christ, clutches the foot of the cross.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in the church building itself, where bright and shining colour abounded across a range of media. Whilst in reality the effect varied according to the size and wealth of the individual church, the overall intention was to surround the worshipper with evidence of God's wonders. The subject matter of images was vital but so was colour. Many theologians argued that the church was decorated to be a foreshadowing, an anticipation, of Heaven, and one biblical text was central to this: the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. The heavenly city that

John saw in his vision was built of gold and of precious stones, the gates of pearl; it was a place of lustrous colour, and it was illuminated by the Glory of God, the 'lux' that earthly eyes could not perceive (fig. 3). No actual church, even the finest cathedral or palace chapel, could replicate that exactly, but even a feeble imitation might guide the viewers' desires towards salvation.



Fig.3 **Jean Colombe**, 'The New Jerusalem', from *The Apocalypse of the Dukes of Savoy*, c.1470.

Though not everyone was persuaded by this. The Cistercian Order (formed 1098) sought a simplicity and rigour that would mark it out from the long-standing Benedictine Order. Their views on the use of art were developed and strengthened by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who famously condemned the decoration and adornment of monastic churches. Colour, alongside fantastical ornament, was a distraction, suitable only for those whose spiritual skills were undeveloped, for those who saw only with the worldly, outer eye, and had not yet learned to perceive God with the inner, spiritual eye. Churches serving lay communities might need such vanities to engage the worshippers but monastic churches should be ashamed of themselves. For a while, therefore, Cistercian art favoured simplicity, with distracting colour largely banished.

But what of the artists and their patrons? How did this surge of interest in vision and light and colour affect them? Optical theory certainly spread from academic niches into the world of the secular elite, most widely through Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (c.1245), which became a bestseller and was translated into French in 1371 and English in about 1398. Essentially a summary of all knowledge about heaven and earth, it included a synthesis of ideas about *Perspectiva*. Once the patron class, whether Church or lay, was engaged with the new thinking, what could the artists do but follow? But it is surely reasonable to assume that most did so unburdened by the weight of philosophical baggage, concerned more with practicality, with pleasing the client, and sometimes with fashion and innovation.

During the lecture, we'll look at these ideas of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in more depth and also think of the practical applications of them in the visual arts, as well as exploring the colour blue, the shining new jewel in the medieval colour palette (cover).



Fig.4 **Jean Pucelle**, 'The Betrayal of Christ', from *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, c.1324-28. Grisaille painting, the challenge of form without colour, may have been a by-product of the new exploration of colour.

Ideas for further reading:

Collins, Kristin and Nancy K. Turner (eds), *Lumen: The Art and Science of Light, 800-1600* (2024)

Eccleston, Florence, 'Light and Colour in Medieval Christianity' (2019). Brief online resource at <https://introducingmedievalchristianity.wordpress.com>

Gage, John, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (2024 and earlier editions)

Panayatova, Stella (ed.), *Colour: The Art & Science of Illuminated Manuscripts* (2016). Recommended.

Pastoureau, Michel, *Blue: The History of a Color* (2001). Also his other volumes, each with a single colour title following the format given above.

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