

## Polemic

# Colour and Spirit

Spike Bucklow, current winner of the ACE/Mercers' Book Award, gives us a flavour of his book's thesis and an insight into his new book *Red, the Art and Science of a Colour*

Today, consumers can choose from a variety of colour-ways when buying otherwise identical items like cars. Such everyday treatment of colour, as a superficial and merely cosmetic feature, both reflects and reinforces the adage 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. Colours are generally subject to whim and fashion unless, like red-and-green traffic lights, they are governed by conventions which are generally assumed to have arbitrary or utilitarian origins. It is therefore only to be expected that current appreciation of colour in art, like the Virgin's blue-and-gold robe, should be influenced by such wider cultural attitudes. Artists may have produced detailed expositions about colour but, since colour is a rich phenomenon and multiple interpretations are valid, any one exposition, such as Kandinsky's, can be dismissed as subjective or idiosyncratic. These circumstances encourage the assumption that the use of colour in art might be either arbitrary, conventional or simply pre-determined by that which is represented in figurative art.

But, is the star-strewn night-sky really blue-and-gold? Most stars are either colourless or multicoloured yet they might be perceived, or conceived, as golden due to the legacy of artistic representations, because of gold's hue (a luminous yellow) and its dynamic variability (punched gold leaf twinkles when viewed in candle-light). Consciously or otherwise, the use of colour in western art draws upon, or responds to, the traditions of Latin Christendom. It is a commonplace that, in turn, the traditions of Latin Christendom drew upon Platonic sources for their appreciation of light. Through St Thomas Aquinas, they also drew upon Aristotelian sources for their appreciation of colour. In parallel with these well-documented textual lineages, there is the less well-documented influence of Hermetic traditions, as evidenced by the technicalities of art-production, channelled through the craft guilds. All these foundations for the use of

colour rested upon a very different adage; 'beauty is the splendour of the true'.

Within such a mindset, the colours of the created world were neither arbitrary nor merely utilitarian. Through the Doctrine of Signatures, colours could be significant cues to help interpret the Book of Nature. And through the correspondence between the macrocosm and microcosm, what was relevant to the state of the outside world was also relevant for the individual's inner state. So, whilst colour might indeed be cosmetic, it pertained to the profound implicit ordering of the cosmos and our place in the cosmos. Through combinations of shared qualities (hot, cold, wet and dry), colours could correspond equally to the elements (earth, water, air and fire) and to the humours (melancholic, phlegmatic, sanguine and choleric). Colours could therefore hold meanings in many, mutually reinforcing, domains. For example, on the first step of the Stairway to Heaven, the mineral realm, the rust of iron was red and the rust of copper was green. These rusts were used by painters as pigments and they were also widely known since they were available at the apothecary as ingredients for everyday medicines. On the second step of the Stairway to Heaven, the vegetable realm, in the temperate climes of Latin Christendom, the leaves on trees in the spring-time were green, in response to the cold-and-wet, watery, winter, whilst autumnal leaves were red, in response to the hot-and-dry, fiery, summer.

As popular literature like Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* said, the metals were earthly reflections of the planets, and iron's red was therefore associated with Mars whilst copper's green was associated with Venus. So, the combination of red-and-green could carry associations of War and Love, or male and female, and the colours were explicitly used to evoke these associations in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, for example. And in deciduous land-

scapes, red-and-green followed the seasons and suggested cycling between opposite states, like spring-and-autumn or summer-and-winter. Red-and-green were juxtaposed in secular painting, for example in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, where the colours are very obviously gendered with the husband in red and the wife in green. They were also very strictly juxtaposed in the decoration of church furniture in manners that were consistent with their occurrence in the wider world. One interpretation of red-and-green's combination, on the frame of an altarpiece, was explored in detail in the final chapter of the author's *The Riddle of the Image*, winner of the ACE-Mercer International Book Award, 2015.

In the late-19th Century the theologically-informed Vincent van Gogh, a painter who we might usually associate with the heavenly combination of blue-and-gold, juxtaposed earthly red-and-green in his interior scene, *The Night Café*. In a letter to his brother Theo, written in September 1888, he said 'I've tried to express the terrible human passions with the red and the green.' The same colour combination was used repeatedly by J K Rowling throughout the whole *Harry Potter* series and it has been suggested that, in that context, the colours played the same role and indicated the significance of personal choice. Thanks to the 19th-century Gothic Revival, the medieval colour-scheme gained a new lease of life in popular culture. Red-and-green has now become the unofficial colour-scheme of Christmas, as exemplified by nostalgic adverts for Coke and special edition M&M's. These last two uses of the colour combination ride on the back of a long tradition but they do not contribute particular significance to that tradition. Instead, unlike Vincent van Gogh and Rowling, they contribute to the impression that, if not utilitarian, colour choices are arbitrary.

Within colour paradigms informed by Plato, Aristotle and Hermes, red

and green are equivalent in some respects but opposite in other respects. For example, both are mid-way on the colour-scale between white (full light) and black (the absence of light). But, whilst equal in terms of the degree of diminution of light, they are opposite in that red is 'active' whilst green is 'receptive'. Taking advantage of green's receptivity, the desk coverings in medieval scriptoria were dyed green to provide a sea of calm repose for eyes that could become strained by writing and reading. So, whilst there could be a widespread consensus about a particular colour combination, consensus could also form around the significance of individual colours.

*Red, the Art and Science of a Colour* explores the cultural significance of materials that have provided the colour red for more than 30,000 years. The book's survey starts with the use of red earth in Palaeolithic burial practices and ends with the creation of imagery on mobile phones. The book also explores the cultural significance of reds in the natural world, including the apparently immaterial red of the sky, considered in the final chapter. Red skies play a part in Northern European weather-lore, their significance depending upon the time at which they appear – a warning in the morning, a delight at night. But red skies

(along with red moons and more) also have biblical significance, again connected with the timing of their appearance. Whenever it appears however, the red is usually concentrated along the horizon, the ever-present yet ever-elusive physical analogue of the boundary between heaven and earth.

Traditional theories about the genesis of red are entirely consistent with the way in which the colour is, according to modern science, actually generated in the sky. Aristotelian ideas about the origin of red involved the passing of light through smoke and, in the nineteenth century, Lord Rayleigh provided a mathematical description of how light was scattered by air-borne particles. Given the biblical significance of red skies, the interaction between light and matter in the atmosphere makes a rich footnote in the Book of Nature.

Since light is synonymous with the spirit, colour arises from the interaction between matter and spirit. Colour partakes of both this world and the other world. In the case of the red sky, that colour arises through scattering, which is synonymous with suffering. It is therefore completely appropriate that the Passion, through Christ's blood, has associations with the colour red. We cannot directly see the matter in the sky that causes light's scattering

but its effects are a physical analogue, or symbol, of passion. And our inability to see the invisible veil of matter does not mean that it has no personal relevance to us. The air-borne particles that scatter light in the sky constitute part of the reservoir of matter that is constantly being recycled through, amongst other things, our own bodies. It is highly significant that the name 'Adam', shares its root with the Hebrew words for earth, blood and red. We are made from 'the dust of the earth ... spread abroad to the west and to the east' and, given the cyclic nature of life on earth, 'dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return'. The awesome and beautiful red sky is one of nature's *memento mori*, since both it and we can say 'I was once as you now are, you will be as I now am'.

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Copies of *The Riddle of the Image* by Spike Bucklow are available from ACE at £25, (normal rrp £29; includes UK p&p). Please send a cheque made payable to ACE Trust via the office or email us for bank details. Offer lasts until end of June.

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