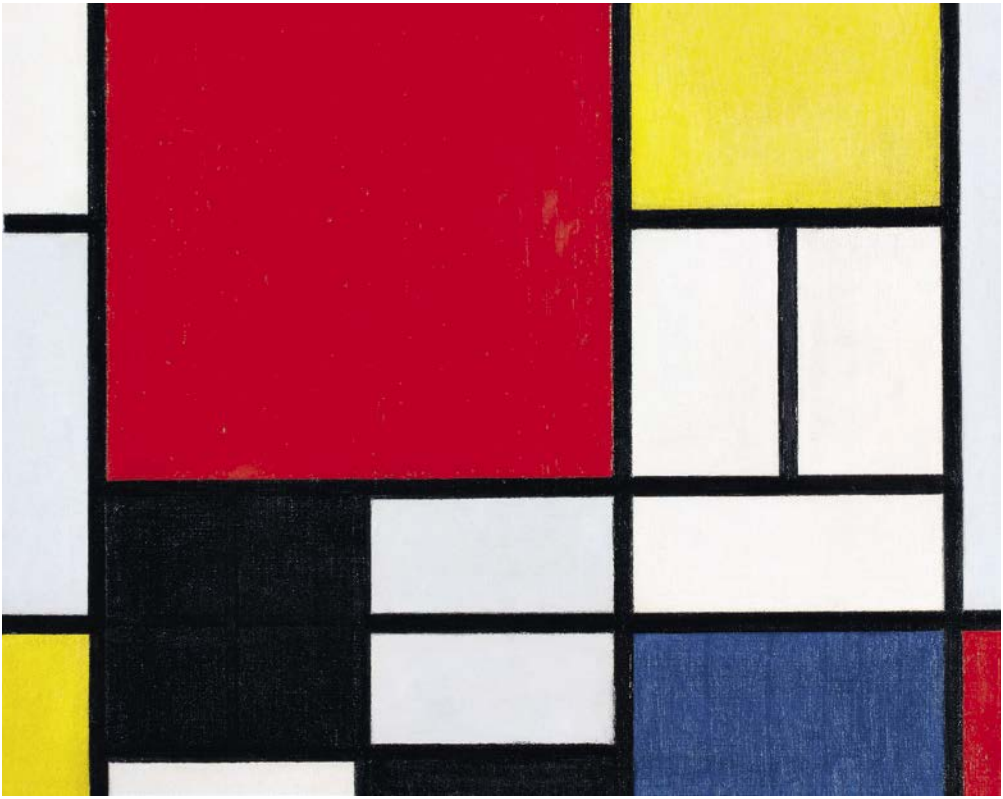
Camille
Viéville

COLOUR
A Masterclass



Art History
Symbolism
Masterpieces
Materials

Flammarion

Color
A Master Class

FLAMMARION

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Camille Viéville

Color
A Master Class

Art History · Symbolism
Masterpieces · Materials

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Introduction

"THE ACTUAL BASIS OF COLOR IS INSTABILITY. ONCE YOU ACCEPT THAT . . . YOU BEGIN TO GET A WAY OF DEALING WITH IT." **BRIDGET RILEY**

The origin of the word "color," from the Latin *celare*, which means "to conceal or dissimulate," refers to color's hiding power. Color is as evasive as it is fascinating. Writing the history of color is a complicated undertaking, and it wasn't until the 1980s that historians began to address the question, led by French medievalist Michel Pastoureau, whose work has been widely recognized in academic circles and by the general public. Color is difficult to pin down because it intersects with many disciplines, including optics, chemistry, philosophy, religious and political studies, linguistics, literature, and the arts. Pastoureau reminds us of the profoundly social nature of this history: "It is the society that 'makes' the color, that gives it its definitions and meaning, that constructs its codes and values, that organizes its customs and determines its stakes. It is not the artist or the scholar; neither is it biological apparatus or the spectacle of nature." He also points out that the way colors are perceived is also a result of history.

This volume gives readers the keys to understanding how, in a given culture, painters, sculptors, printmakers, and videographers have used color. What colors were first used by prehistoric artists? How did the Greeks classify colors? Why are colors associated with music? What is Egyptian faience? What led to the invention of oil paint? What is International Klein Blue? How is gold leaf applied? These are just some of the questions that this informative, accessible book addresses through a selection of major and sometimes little-known works in the history of art.

Art History

"ONE CAN PAINT WITH TWO COLORS. . . . THREE, OR FOUR AT MOST, HAVE FOR CENTURIES BEEN ENOUGH FOR HUMANS TO RENDER SOMETHING IMPORTANT, ESSENTIAL, AND UNIQUE, THAT WHICH OTHERWISE WOULD HAVE BEEN IGNORED." **HENRI MICHAUX**

The history of color is incredibly rich. Each era, culture, language, and artistic movement has its own conception and perception of color. Like all fields of history, that of color involves diverse natural elements and has evolved according to material, scientific, social, economic, linguistic, philosophical, theological, literary, and, of course, artistic

actualities. So the color we call "blue" today was neither identified nor viewed in the same way in ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, the medieval world, or by Pablo Picasso in 1901.

This chapter takes readers through thirty-two significant periods for color in the arts, from prehistory to the present day, in the West as well as in Japan and India. It provides tools for analyzing and understanding the historical roles that color has played and the ways in which artists have used it during different time periods and in various geographical regions. Each period features a reproduction of a work chosen to illustrate the analysis. Finally, this section retraces the evolution of social conventions related to color (primary and complementary colors, contrasts, etc.) and demonstrates the extent to which industrialization has influenced the standardization of color.

Symbolism

"I FOUND I COULD SAY THINGS WITH COLORS AND SHAPES THAT I COULDN'T SAY ANY OTHER WAY—THINGS I HAD NO WORDS FOR." **GEORGIA O'KEEFFE**

All color historians stress the fact that nothing is set in stone when it comes to the meaning of colors. These meanings are always changing and evolving, so that within the same society or the same historical period, each hue may take on contradictory, conflicting, or even opposing significations. This chapter provides a non-exhaustive exploration of the ever-shifting symbolism of colors.

Following the lead of Michel Pastoureau—a French medievalist and color specialist—we have focused on six main "basic" colors (black, white, red, yellow, green, and blue), as identified in European culture, as well as five "demi-" or "second rank" colors. The symbolic meaning of these eleven hues evolves as societies undergo ideological, economic, and political shifts. In addition to these colors, there exist innumerable shades with sometimes very poetic names but devoid of moral or spiritual significance. Gold and silver—unique tones derived from precious metals—are also addressed in this chapter. Finally, this section explores two ways of arranging different colors, each with its own particular meaning: stripes and the rainbow.

Masterpieces

"THE MOST POWERFUL ART IN LIFE IS TO TRANSFORM PAIN INTO A TALISMAN THAT HEALS. A BUTTERFLY IS REBORN IN A FESTIVAL OF COLORS!" **FRIDA KAHLO**

This chapter presents fifty-nine artworks selected for the artists' remarkable use of color. Each work has contributed to the history of art for many reasons, color being an essential aspect from both a technical and symbolic perspective. These works also demonstrate the close connection between color and art—both belong to a history of tastes and their social manifestations. The artistic production of a given period reflects the major political changes of the time. The austere colors advocated by the Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe, for instance, became characteristic of bourgeois portraits. In the centuries that followed, the bold use of color by the ruling classes evolved into the anarchist provocation of early-twentieth-century avant-garde painting. While painting has been the medium of choice for expressing color since the Renaissance, the selection in this chapter also includes sculptures, tapestries, and stained glass, as well as performances, installations, and videos from different cultures that use color to great effect.

Materials and Techniques

"TO MAKE ART AS BRILLIANT AS CAN BE, WE MUST DISCUSS THE GRINDING OF COLORS. . . . THERE ARE AS MANY BINDERS AND WAYS OF GRINDING AS THERE ARE COLORS." **CENNINO CENNINI**

This chapter focuses on the different materials and techniques that artists may use to create colors. For centuries, the tasks entailed in producing colors fell to artists; until the nineteenth century, they ground natural pigments and added binders themselves. Other techniques were involved that had an impact on the effects of color—such as applying a primer or undercoat to the support, or using varnish—and artists were also responsible for preparing these. These practices were passed down in studios from generation to generation. Each one called for a specific mastery of raw materials; some of the ingredients were highly toxic and required serious precautions to be taken. A color's chemistry would sometimes influence the symbolic meaning it acquired.

In the nineteenth century, the development of synthetic pigments produced new, often brighter shades. In the 1840s, the invention of the paint tube made it possible to buy ready-to-use colors. In the twentieth century, artists used unconventional, industrially produced materials to inject color into their work.

How to Use This Book

This book has four distinct chapters: Art History, Symbolism, Masterpieces, and Materials and Techniques. Each can be read separately or in connection with the others. Cross-references at the bottom of each page suggest further reading in other chapters. Sidebars present major historical evolutions, principal characteristics of artworks, or highlights in the career of an artist.

12 ART HISTORY

Prehistoric Cave Art

45,000 to 10,000 years ago

IMPORTANT PLACES: EL CASTILLO CAVE (SPAIN) • COLIBOAIA CAVE (ROMANIA) • KHOIT TSENKHER CAVE (MONGOLIA) • LASCAUX CAVE (FRANCE) • CUEVA DE LAS MANOS (ARGENTINA)

Since prehistoric times, humans have used color to decorate their dwellings, embellish their linens or clothing, and enrich their artistic creations.

The first pigments to be used in European cave art were black (charcoal derived from pine trees) and red (from hematite, an iron oxide, either blown onto walls in powder form or applied as a thick paint), with the addition of white (from clay). About 36,000 years ago, these three colors were used to execute the 420-some depictions of animals, including horses, lions, bison, rhinoceros, and reindeer, and the many abstract motifs that adorn the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in France.

Ochers in shades of yellow to brown appeared later. About 19,000 years ago at Lascaux, also in France, artists used goethite, another iron oxide, to render certain elements of the cave's extraordinary bestiary, comprising more than six hundred horses, aurochs, stags, ibex, and bison, as well as an anthropomorphic figure. Green did not appear until the Bronze Age (c. 800 BCE) and the discovery of copper oxidation.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
In Europe, Paleolithic cave paintings provide the most dramatic evidence of this taste for color, although many other artifacts, some quite modest, such as Acilian pebbles painted with red markings (about 12,000 years old), also reveal a pronounced appreciation for color.

Chauvet Cave. Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, Ardèche.

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Polychromy in Ancient Egypt

c. 3150 BCE to 30 CE

IMPORTANT PLACES: AMARNA • THEBES • VALLEY OF THE KINGS • SAQQARA

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS
Ancient Egypt was a polychromatic world. And yet there is no hieroglyphic equivalent to our word "color"; in texts that have come down to us, the Egyptians appear more interested in the idea of surface and brightness.

Fresco depicting Nebamun fowling and fishing in the marshes, from the tomb of Nebamun, Eighteenth Dynasty (Egypt). British Museum, London.

Egyptian artwork displays consistent use of color, as much in sculpture in the round as in bas-relief, murals, objects, and architecture. From the end of the Early Dynastic period (c. 3000 BCE) and especially during the Old Kingdom (2815–2400 BCE), right up to the Greco-Roman period, artists primarily used flat fields of color, and shading remained rare.

The basic palette included shades of white, black, red, and green, with the addition of gold—the Egyptians had no word for yellow as we know it, although they used ocher and saffron pigments. White, brown, and red hues were obtained from iron oxides, and black from charcoal, while greens and blues were conjured from a combination of copper, sand, lime, and ashes, and constitute the first synthetic pigments in history.

Symbolically, colors were intertwined with spirituality and religion. Black reminded the Egyptians of the silt from the Nile that fertilized crops; red evoked both Seth, god of storms and disorder, and Osiris, god of rebirth and fertility; green, which could encompass blue, was associated with nature (both stretches of water and sky, and plants). However, there was no equivalent to our blue: lapis lazuli was considered a shade of black and turquoise a shade of green.

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Principal dates

Important artists or locations

Main characteristics

Cross-references to colors, masterpieces, and techniques or materials

Artist, technique, dimensions, and location

Date of creation

100 MASTERPIECES

Impression, Sunrise

1872

CLAUDE MONET • OIL ON CANVAS • 19 × 24¾ IN. (48 × 63 CM) • MUSÉE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS

Claude Monet painted *Impression, Sunrise* in 1872. At the first exhibition of the Société Anonyme des Artistes Peintres, Sculpteurs et Graveurs, the title inspired one derisive journalist, Louis Leroy, to coin the term "impressionist" in an article published in *Le Charivari* on April 25, 1847: "Impression—I was certain of it. I was just telling myself that, since I was impressed, there had to be some impression in it . . . and what freedom, what ease of workmanship! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape." Paradoxically, the word stuck as a label for one of the most innovative movements in modern art, which would go on to become one of the most popular styles with the general public.

The painting depicts a small boat at dawn in the old outer harbor of Le Havre; in the background, ships' masts, port cranes, and smoking chimneys are barely visible through the enveloping fog. Monet's contemporaries were perplexed by the work's unusual style. Using loose brushstrokes, the painter employed a bold new color palette to express, in painting, a fleeting sunrise. The sky illuminated by the reflections of the orange sun, and the way the colors of the atmosphere and the mauve sea peppered with green blend together, prophesied the wealth of color experiments that the impressionists would undertake in the 1870s and 1880s. Despite his innovation, Monet also drew inspiration from certain historical works, including Turner's extraordinary hazy and colorful seascapes, painted around 1830.

Other important works
Poppy Field, 1873. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.
Bridge over a Pond of Water Lilies, 1899. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.
The Houses of Parliament, Sunset, 1903. National Gallery, London.

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CLAUDE MONET (1840–1926)
Considered the leader of the impressionists, Monet was one of the first artists to give precedence to his subjective vision by privileging the effects of light and color, enhanced by his energetic painting style. Monet favored plein air painting, which gave him many opportunities to translate the seasonal and atmospheric variations of light into unmixed colors squeezed straight from the tube.

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Key information about the artist

Other works by the same artist

Cross-references to movements, themes, and techniques

Art History

Prehistoric Cave Art

45,000 – 12,000 years ago

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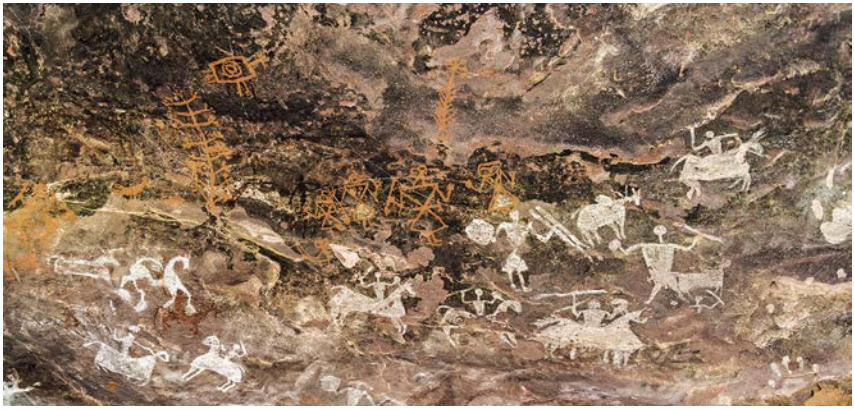

Chauvet Cave. Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, Ardèche.

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Polychromy in Ancient Egypt

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Aristotle's Theory of Color

c. 800 – 31 BCE

IMPORTANT PLACES: ATHENS • OLYMPIA • EPHESUS

Mural depicting a banquet scene, from the tomb of Agios Athanasios, 325–300 BCE. Near Thessaloniki.

Throughout ancient Greece, theories of color and its associated meaning held many contradictions, so much so that modern readers may find them difficult to grasp. In his treatise *On Colors,* Aristotle (384–322 BCE) helped to clarify and structure the color system by organizing unmixed colors—red, violet, blue, and gray or yellow—on a scale from dark to light, or from black to white, for a total of seven hues, most likely modeled after the music scale.

Greek art made broad use of color: in painted murals, marble or wood statues, and mosaics, as well as ceramics, which were often dominated by black and red. Color was an integral part of the creative process and there was nothing incidental about it. In the private sphere, color provided clues to an individual's persona (the subject's sex or social status, for example); in religious contexts, it emphasized the piety of the patron who commissioned the divine statue or donated to the temple; in politics, it magnified power (palace decor). Rome maintained and enriched the tradition of polychromy, notably through the use of new pigments sourced from conquered lands.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

For the Greeks, the word "color" referred primarily to a colored surface. Aristotle's color system, which classifies pure colors from darkest to lightest, dominated European thinking until Isaac Newton's discoveries in the seventeenth century.

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India's Holi Festival

4th century to the present

IMPORTANT CITIES: BARSANA • MATHURA • NANDGAON • VRINDAVAN

Each year in India, the Hindu festival of color, Holi (first cited in fourth-century texts), celebrates fertility and the arrival of spring. On the evening of the first day, a fire is lit to commemorate Vishnu's burning of the demoness Holika, and by the same occasion the triumph of good over evil. The next day, men and women of all ages and castes, dressed in white, throw pigments and tinted water at everyone they encounter.

Traditionally, dried and ground flowers of *Butea monosperma*, a sacred bush nicknamed "flame-of-the-forest," were mixed with water to form a yellow liquid; orangey curcuma and powdered red sandalwood were also used. The colors obtained symbolized faith (yellow); optimism (orange); and joy and love (red). The palette has since expanded to include blue (vitality) and green (harmony). In northern India, the Holi festival is associated with the god Radha-Krishna, a dual divinity of eternal love. It is said that Krishna, fearing that Radha would reject him because of his dark complexion, asked the young woman to blow colored powder on his face—after which they fell in love.

KEY ARTWORK
In this eighteenth-century watercolor, Krishna and Radha, surrounded by *gopis*—the milkmaids with whom Krishna spent his adolescence—and young cowherds, use bamboo canes to blow powder and tinted water.

Unknown artist, *Krishna and Radha*, c. 1775–80. Watercolor. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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Colors and Heraldry

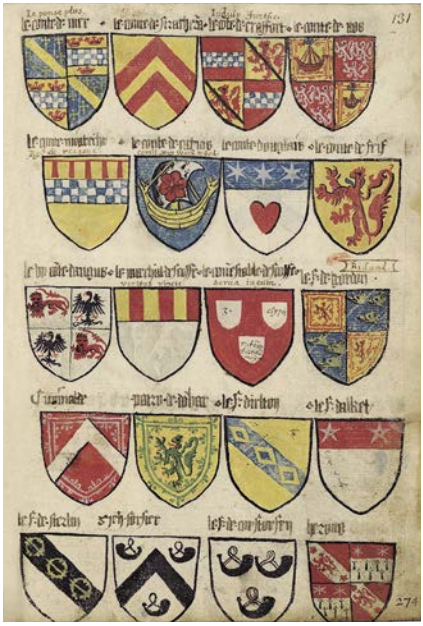
12th century to the present

PRINCIPAL MANUSCRIPTS: THE GREAT EQUESTRIAN ARMORIAL OF THE GOLDEN FLEECE (FRANCE) • CONRAD GRÜNENBERG'S ARMORIAL (GERMANY) • DERING ROLL (ENGLAND) • THE GELRE ARMORIAL (BELGIUM)

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS

The use of heraldic arms throughout Europe began in the twelfth century. This code, which grew out of knighthood, was used by families, institutions, and communities as a mark of identity. Knights were the first to paint a coat of arms on their shields, then on their tunic or their horse's caparison, to make themselves easy to identify during battles or tournaments.

Colored armorial depicting the coats of arms of various princes and lords of France, Germany, Flanders, England, Spain, Italy, etc., fifteenth century. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.



Heraldry and its colors played a decisive role in medieval society. As historian Michel Pastoureau points out, the nobility was not the only group to adopt coats of arms: they were soon being used by high-ranking clergy, the bourgeoisie, craftsmen, and even peasants.

A coat of arms consists of figures and colors arranged according to a pre-established set of rules designed to be easily read. Figures included animal, plant, and geometric motifs. Colors, initially devoid of symbolism, were given names unique to heraldry: gold (yellow), silver (white), gules (red), sable (black), azure (blue), sinople (green), and purpure (violet). They were divided into two groups: gold and silver in the first, and the other five shades in the second. It was forbidden to combine two colors from the same group.

Gradually, these coats of arms came to represent family descent. As they spread, they began to be recorded by heralds in illuminated manuscripts known as heraldic manuals. These officers, who were tasked with announcing the heraldic feats and emblems of knights to the spectators at tournaments, began to specialize in codifying these crests in the fourteen and fifteenth centuries.

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Divine Color

12th – 15th centuries

IMPORTANT ARTISTS: CIMABUE • GIOTTO • FRA ANGELICO

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Christian God became a divinity of light, a shield against darkness, and an uplifter of souls. Around 1130, Abbot Suger (1081–1151) oversaw the reconstruction of the Basilica of Saint-Denis (an abbey church at that time), located north of Paris, where he designed a sacred space bathed in color through the generous use of stained glass. Blue, henceforth associated with divine light, dominated his creation, although gold—a rival color inherited from Byzantine art—was still in use during this period.

In the early fourteenth century, the Florentine painter Giotto (c. 1266–1337), who developed the foundations of Renaissance painting by introducing more realism into his work, still used gold as a ground in his works, including his altarpiece *Saint Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata* (c. 1300–1325).

A century later, in his work *On Painting* (1435–36), the theorist and writer Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472)—a humanist who championed painting as a liberal art—deplored the excessive use of gold, which produced effects he considered too simplistic and insufficiently naturalistic.

Giotto, *Saint Francis of Assisi Receiving the Stigmata*, c. 1300–1325. Tempera and gold on wood. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

KEY ARTWORK

In this work by Giotto, Saint Francis of Assisi, down on one knee, receives the stigmata from Christ, who is depicted as a seraphim. The background and the halos of the two figures are painted in gold— a brighter, more dazzling, and more blinding color than blue. The artist creates an illusion of depth by depicting a mountain rising behind Francis and incorporating architectural elements.

BLUE **p. 48** GOLD **p. 56** STAINED GLASS IN THE BASILICA OF SAINT-DENIS **p. 68**
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The Invention of Oil Paint

15th century

IMPORTANT ARTISTS: JAN VAN EYCK • ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN • ANTONELLO DA MESSINA

Jan Van Eyck, *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*, c. 1434–35. Oil on wood. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

KEY ARTIST

Jan Van Eyck contributed to the development of oil painting, applying color in a series of transparent films to create a glaze: light seems to enter the painting through the transparent layers of oil. Henceforth, great pains were taken to render textures, effects of shadow or reflections, and volumes naturalistically. The color palette expanded to include countless shades.

Prior to the early decades of the fifteenth century, painters mainly worked in tempera (a mixture of pigments, water, and glue or egg yolk) and fresco (pigments applied to wet or dry lime plaster): two techniques with a very opaque finish. In the fifteenth century, an innovative way to paint with oil—which until that time had been used primarily as a varnish—was developed; by mixing pigments with cooked oil and a thinner (water and egg, and later turpentine oil, artists were able to obtain new color effects that were far more delicate, fluid, and translucent.

According to the legend popularized by Italian art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), Jan Van Eyck (c. 1390–1441) invented oil painting in the sixteenth century. In reality, the artist contributed to perfecting the technique.

In the sixteenth century, the oil painting revolution coincided with other artistic breakthroughs, such as illusionism, with the introduction of perspective; the development of chiaroscuro; and the use of canvas, which was lighter and easier to transport in rolls than wood panels, especially useful for large-format paintings.

MADONNA OF CHANCELLOR ROLIN **p. 70** TEMPERA **p. 200** FRESCO **p. 201** OIL PAINT **p. 203**

The Color Renaissance

15th – 16th centuries

IMPORTANT ARTISTS: LORENZO LOTTO • TITIAN • PAOLO VERONESE • TINTORETTO

The Renaissance was characterized by significant evolutions in philosophy and the arts. Unlike medieval thinking, humanist culture, steeped in ancient Greek and Roman knowledge, placed humanity at the center of the world. Writing against this backdrop in 1435–36, Florentine theorist and writer Leon Battista Alberti explains in his treatise for artists that a painting consists of three elements: composition, contour (line), and light (color). He describes black and white as regulating elements that allow painters to adjust values and chiaroscuro, and he pairs each of the four elements with a "pure" color: red for fire, blue for air, green for water, and gray (a mix of black and white, notes Alberti) for earth. There is no mention of yellow, which was considered a derivative of green at that time.

Alberti recommended using a rich palette, breaking with medieval sobriety. This appreciation for color reached its height in the sixteenth century in Venice—the nerve center of luxury trade from all over the Mediterranean. Venetians, who encountered difficulties with fresco because of high humidity levels in their city, eagerly adopted a new technique: oil painting. Merchants specializing in the sale of pigments offered high-quality colors; in the rest of Italy, apothecaries supplied artists.

KEY ARTIST
Venetian painters like Titian (c. 1488–1576) and Paolo Veronese (1528–1588) excelled in the art of color—to the detriment of line and form, according to the art historian Giorgio Vasari.

Titian, *Venus and the Lute Player*, c. 1565–70. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

WHITE **p. 45** RED **p. 46** BLUE **p. 48** GREEN **p. 49** GRAY **p. 54** *LUCRETIA* **p. 76**
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Line and Form Versus Color

16th – 19th centuries

IMPORTANT ARTISTS: LEONARDO DA VINCI • MICHELANGELO • TITIAN • NICOLAS POUSSIN • PETER PAUL RUBENS

KEY ARTIST
Around 1508, in his *A Treatise on Painting*, the polymath Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) recommended that painters use a reduced and muted palette (with tones subdued by the addition of white or black) to compose paintings, notably through the use of shadow.

In the second edition of *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568), the art historian Giorgio Vasari mentions two traditions in sixteenth-century painting: one, originating in Tuscany, that privileged line and form, and which Michelangelo (1475–1564) would come to embody; and another, from Venice, that venerated color, led by Titian (c. 1488–1576).

Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of a Lady from the Court of Milan*, also known as *La Belle Ferronnière*, c. 1490–97. Oil on wood. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

While this quarrel between line and color was often exaggerated, it nevertheless spread to seventeenth-century France where, within the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, acolytes of Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), recognized for his majestic draftsmanship, disputed with followers of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), who was famous for his skillful use of color. A fervent advocate of literary, even rhetorical painting, Charles Le Brun (1619–1690), the first court painter under King Louis XIV (1638–1715), maintained that line and form satisfied the spirit while color pleased only the eyes.

In the following century, the intense palette and loose brushstrokes of Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), admitted into the Academy in 1717, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806), admitted in 1765, seemed to spell victory for colorists. Yet artistic debate revived the argument and continued it into the late nineteenth century, pitting, for example, the fine, precise draftsmanship of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) against the sensuous use of color by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863).

BLACK **p. 44** WHITE **p. 45** *PORTRAIT OF A LADY FROM THE COURT OF MILAN* **p. 74** *THE DEATH OF SARDANAPALUS* **p. 86**

Artists' Credits

Colour has been unleashed—no longer an element used to describe a subject, it now has a life of its own. It becomes the subject.

Sonia Delaunay

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