

Introduction

Do you like green? To this simple question, responses today are divided. In Europe, one out of six people names green as their favorite color, but almost ten percent do not like it or think that it does not become them. Green seems to be an ambivalent, if not an ambiguous, color: a symbol of life, luck, and hope on the one hand, an attribute of disorder, poison, the devil and all his creatures on the other.

In the following chapters I have attempted to recount the long social, cultural, and symbolic history of green in European societies, from Greek antiquity to the present. Long difficult to produce and even more difficult to fix, green is not only the color of vegetation, it is also and most importantly the color of destiny. Chemically unstable, as much in painting as in dyeing, through the centuries it has been associated with all that was changing, changeable, and fleeting: childhood, love, hope, luck, play, chance, money. It was only in the Romantic period that it definitively became the color of nature and thus of freedom, health, hygiene, sports, and ecology. Its history in the West is, in part, one of a reversal of values. Long unnoticed, disliked, or rejected, now it is entrusted with the impossible mission of saving the planet.

The present book is not unique but the third in an ongoing series. Two works preceded it: *Blue: The History*

of a Color (2001) and *Black: The History of a Color* (2009), published by the same press. Two other volumes are to follow, one devoted to red and one to yellow. As with the preceding volumes, the framework of this one is deliberately chronological; it is very much a history of green, not an encyclopedia of the color, and even less a study of its place only in the contemporary world. It is a history book that examines green over the long term and from all angles. Too often histories of color—what few there are—are limited to the most recent periods and to artistic matters, which is very reductive. The history of painting is one thing, the history of colors is another—and altogether more vast.

As with the two preceding works, this one only appears to be a monograph. A color does not occur alone; from a social, artistic, and symbolic perspective it only takes its meaning, it only fully “functions” insofar as it is combined with or opposed to one or many other colors. By the same token, it is impossible to view it in isolation. To speak of green is necessarily to speak of blue, yellow, red, and even black and white.

These first three works—and the two forthcoming—constitute the building blocks of an edifice I have been constructing for almost half a century: the history of colors in European societies from classical antiquity to the nineteenth century. Even if it is necessary for me

to look beyond and before those two periods, as you will read in the following pages, the essence of my research is located within that slice of time. Similarly, my research is limited to European societies because, for me, the issues of color are first of all issues of society. As a historian I am not competent to speak of the entire planet and not interested in compiling third- or fourth-hand research conducted by others on non-European cultures. In order to avoid making foolish claims or plagiarizing or recopying others' books, I am limiting myself to what I know and what was the subject of my seminars for over thirty years at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* and the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*.

Attempting to construct a history of colors, even limited to Europe, is not an easy exercise. In fact, it is a particularly arduous task that historians, archeologists, and art historians (including those who study painting!) have refused to tackle until recently. It is true that the difficulties were—and remain—numerous. Reviewing them in the introduction to this present book is worthwhile because they are fully part of its subject and help us to understand the reasons for the gaps in our knowledge. Here more than elsewhere there is no real boundary between history and historiography.

These difficulties can be grouped into three categories. The first are documentary in nature. We see the objects, images, artworks, and monuments that past centuries have left to us not in their original colors but as time has made them. The disparity between their original state and their present state is sometimes immense. What should be done? Recapture and restore the original colors at any cost? Or should we acknowledge that the work of time is a document of history? Furthermore, we see these colors in lighting conditions very different from those of the societies preceding ours. The torch, oil lamp, candle, and gaslight produce

different illumination than electricity provides. That is obvious. But who among us remembers it when visiting a museum or exhibition? And how many historians take it into account in their work? And finally, for decade upon decade, researchers were in the habit of studying objects, artworks, and monuments through the means of black-and-white reproductions—first engravings, then photographs—to the point that over time their ways of thinking and perceiving seemed to have become “black and white” as well. Accustomed to working from documents, from books and collections of images largely dominated by black and white, they considered and studied the past as a world from which color was absent.

The difficulties in the second category are methodological. Historians are often stymied when they try to understand the status or the function of a color in an image or artwork. All the problems—material, technical, chemical, iconographical, ideological, symbolic—present themselves at the same time. How to organize them? How to conduct an analysis? What questions should be asked and in what order? To this day, no researcher, no research team has yet proposed relevant methods for helping the entire scholarly community better study the issues of color. That is why, facing the proliferation of inquiries and the multitude of vested interests, all researchers—and me first among them, no doubt—tend to retain only what suits them in relation to whatever they are in the process of demonstrating and, inversely, overlooking whatever does not suit them. That is clearly a bad way of working.

The difficulties in the third category are epistemological in nature: we cannot thoughtlessly project our present-day definitions, classifications, and conceptions of color, just as they are, onto the past. They are not those of the societies preceding ours (and will not

be those of the societies following ours). All the more so because what is true of knowledge is also true of perception: the antique or medieval eye, for example, did not perceive colors or contrasts as the twenty-first-century eye does. Whatever the historical period, perception is always cultural. By the same token, for the historian, the danger of anachronism seems to lurk behind every document's corner, especially when it is a matter of the spectrum (unknown before the late seventeenth century), the theory of primary and complementary colors, the distinction between warm and cool colors, the law of simultaneous contrast, or the alleged physiological or psychological effects of colors. Our knowledge, our sensibility, our present-day "truths" were not those of yesterday and will not be those of tomorrow.

All these difficulties together underscore the strictly cultural nature of the questions concerning color. For the historian—as for the sociologist or the anthropologist—color is defined first as a social phenomenon, not as matter or fragment of light, still less as sensation. It is the society that "makes" the color, that gives it its definitions and meaning, that constructs its codes and values, that organizes its uses and determines its stakes. That is why any history of color must first be a social history. Unless we acknowledge that, we could lapse into reductive pseudo-neurobiology or dangerous scientism.

In attempting to construct such a history, the researcher's work is twofold. The first task is trying to define what the universe of colors could have been for societies of the past, taking into account all the components of that universe: the lexicon and phenomena of language, the chemistry of pigments, techniques of dyeing, dress systems and their accompanying codes, color's place in everyday life, rules handed down by

authorities, moral standards of the church, scientific speculations and artistic creations. The areas of inquiry and reflection are multifold and present the historian with multiform questions. After defining a given cultural area, the second task in a diachronic study is to examine the changes, losses, innovations, and mergers that affect all historically observable aspects of the color in question.

In that dual process all documents must be examined. Color is essentially an interdocumentary and interdisciplinary area. But certain areas have proven to be more fruitful than others. The lexicon is an example; the history of words provides much information relevant to our knowledge of the past. With regard to colors, it underscores how their primary function in all societies is to classify, mark, associate, and oppose. Another example is the area of dyeing, fabrics, and clothing. That is probably where the issues of chemistry and technique merge most closely with the issues of ideology and symbolism.

Lexicons, fabrics, dyes: in matters of color, the poets and dyers have at least as much to teach us as the painters, chemists, and physicists. The history of the color green in European societies is a case in point.