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Michel Pastoureau: Black: The History of a Color

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Introduction

Many decades ago, at the beginning of the last century, or even in the 1950s, the title of the present book might have surprised some readers unaccustomed to considering black a true color. That is certainly not the case today; it would be hard to find anyone anymore who does not grant it that distinction. *Black* has reclaimed the status it possessed for centuries, indeed even for millennia—that of a color in its own right and even a major pole in all the color systems. Like its counterpart, white, to which it has nevertheless not always been linked, black gradually lost its status as a color between the end of the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century: The advent of printing and the engraved image—black ink on white paper—gave these two colors a peculiar position, which first the Protestant Reformation and then the progress of science finally established to be outside the world of colors. When Isaac Newton discovered the spectrum in the years 1665–66, he presented a new order of colors in which henceforth there would no longer be a place for white or black. This marked a true chromatic revolution.

Thus for almost three centuries black and white were considered and experienced as “noncolors,” even seeming to form their own universe as opposed to the one of colors: “in black and white” on one side, “in color” on the other. In Europe, a dozen generations were familiar with that opposition, and even if it is not really accepted anymore it also does not really surprise us. Nevertheless, our sensibilities have changed. Beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century, artists were the first to gradually return to black and white the status of authentic colors that had been theirs until the late Middle Ages. Men of science followed, even if physicists long remained reluctant to attribute chromatic properties to black. The general public eventually joined in, so much so that today in our social codes and daily lives we have hardly any reason to oppose the world of color to the world of black and white. Here and there a few vestiges of the old distinction remain (photography, cinema, newspapers, publishing). Thus the title of this book is in no way a mistake or a provocation. Nor does it seek to echo the famous exhibition organized by the Maeght Gallery in Paris at the end of 1946, an exhibition that proclaimed with a kind of insolence that “black is a color.” It was not only a matter of attracting public and media attention with a catchy slogan, but also an affirmation of a position different from the one taught in the fine arts schools and proclaimed in academic treatises on painting. Perhaps four and a half centuries after the fact, the featured painters wanted to respond to Leonardo da Vinci, the first artist to proclaim, as early as the late fifteenth century, that black was not truly a color.

“Black is a color”: today such a claim has once again become an obvious fact, almost a platitude; the real provocation would be to affirm the opposite. But that is not the domain of the present work. Its title does not echo the 1946 exhibition or even the words of the illustrious Leonardo, but more modestly the title of a previous book, published in 2000 by the same publisher: *Blue: The History of a Color*. The good reception that it received, as much among the academic community as the general public, prompted me to devote a similar work to the color black. The furthest thing from my mind, however, is the idea of undertaking a complete series that would attempt, volume by volume, to trace the history of each of the six “basic” colors of Western culture (white, red, black, green, yellow, blue), and then the five “second rank” colors (gray, brown, purple, pink, orange). Such an enterprise, made up of parallel monographs, would have

little significance. A color never occurs alone; it only takes on meaning, only fully “functions” from the social, artistic, and symbolic perspectives, insofar as it is associated with or opposed to one or many other colors. By the same token, it is impossible to consider a color in isolation. To speak of black, as you will read in the pages that follow, is also—necessarily—to speak of white, red, brown, purple, and even of blue. Hence the repetition with regard to the work I devoted to the history of that last color. I must be excused for what could not have been otherwise. For a long time, blue, an unobtrusive and unpopular color, remained a sort of “sub-black” in the West or a black of a particular kind. Thus the histories of these two colors can hardly be separated, no more than they can be separated from the history of other colors. If, as my publisher hopes, a third volume were to follow the first two (red? green?), undoubtedly it would be constructed around the same set of problems, and its inquiries would draw from the same documentary sources.

Such studies, which appear (but only appear) to be monographs, would ideally constitute the building blocks of an edifice that I have been busy constructing for nearly four decades: the history of colors in European societies from Roman antiquity to the eighteenth century. Even if I necessarily look beyond and before these two periods, that is the chronological segment—already very large—in which my core subject is located. Likewise, I will limit my remarks to European societies because for me the issues of color are, first of all, social issues. As a historian I am not competent to speak of the entire planet and have no taste for compiling, third- or fourthhand, studies conducted by other researchers on cultures outside Europe. So as not to write nonsense and not to plagiarize the works of others, I am restricting myself to what I know and have made the subject of my teaching at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* and the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* for a quarter century.

Attempting to construct a history of colors, even one limited to Europe, is not an easy exercise. In fact, it is a particularly difficult task, which historians, archaeologists, and art historians (including those whose field is painting!) have refused to undertake until recently. The difficulties are myriad. It is worth mentioning them here because they are fully part of the subject and help to explain the inequalities that exist between what we know and do not know. Here more than elsewhere there is no real boundary between history and historiography. For the moment, let us stay with the history itself of the color black and consider a few of these difficulties. Despite their diversity, they can be grouped into three categories.

The first group involves documentation; on monuments, works of art, objects, and images transmitted to us from centuries past, we see colors not in their original state but as time has made them. This work of time—whether due to the chemical evolution of the colorant materials or to the actions of humans, who over the course of the centuries paint and repaint, modify, clean, varnish, or remove this or that layer of color set down by preceding generations—is in itself a historical document. That is why I am always suspicious of laboratories, now with very elaborate technical means and sometimes very flashy advertising, that offer to “restore” colors, or worse to return them to their original state. Inherent here is a scientific positivism that seems to me at once vain, dangerous, and at odds with the task of the historian. The work of time is an integral part of our research. Why renounce it, erase it, destroy it? The historical reality is not only what it

was in its original state, but also what time has made of it. Let us not forget that and let us not restore rashly.

Also we must not forget that today we see the works, images, and colors of the past in lighting conditions very different from those experienced by the societies of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the modern period. The torch, the oil lamp, the candle produce light different from what electricity provides. That is an obvious fact as well, and yet what historian takes it into account? Forgetting it sometimes leads to absurdities. Let us think, for example, of the recent restoration of the vaults of the Sistine Chapel and the considerable efforts on the part of the media as much as technicians to “rediscover the freshness and the original purity of the colors set down by Michelangelo.” Such an exercise arouses curiosity, of course, even if it is a bit aggravating, but it becomes perfectly absurd and anachronistic if the layers of color thus redeemed are lit, viewed, or studied by electrical light. Can we really see Michelangelo’s colors with our modern lighting? Is this not a greater treason than the one committed slowly by time and by humans since the sixteenth century? And it is a more disturbing one as well, when we think of the example of Lascaux or of other prehistoric sites destroyed or damaged by fateful encounters with past experiments and present curiosities.

To conclude our documentation difficulties we must recall as well that since the sixteenth century historians and archaeologists have been accustomed to working with black-and-white images, first engravings and then photographs. This will be discussed at length in the fourth and fifth chapters of the present book. But let us stress here that for nearly four centuries documentation “in black and white” was the only kind available for studying the figurative evidence from the past, including painting. By the same token, modes of thought and sensibility among historians seem themselves to have been converted into black and white. Having access largely to reproductions and books very much dominated by black and white, historians (and perhaps art historians more than others) have until recently thought about and studied the past either as a world composed of grays, blacks, and whites or as a universe from which color was totally absent.

Recent recourse to “color” photography has not really changed that situation, at least not yet. First, such habits of thought and sensibility were too firmly established to be transformed in a generation or two; and, second, access to photographic documents in color has long remained an unaffordable luxury. For a young researcher, for a student, making simple slides in a museum, a library, or exhibition was for a long time a difficult or even impossible task. Institutional obstacles arose from all sides to discourage or exact a heavy price for it. Furthermore, for financial reasons, publishers and editors of journals and scholarly publications were obliged to prohibit color plates. Within the social sciences an immense gap long remained between what state-of-the-art technology offered and the primitive work of historians still confronting numerous obstacles—financial, institutional, legal—in studying the figurative documents that the past had left to them. What is more, these obstacles have not completely disappeared, unfortunately, and now there are daunting legal hurdles in addition to the technical and financial difficulties that earlier generations experienced.

The second set of difficulties is methodological in nature. The historian almost always feels helpless when attempting to understand the status and function of color in an image, on an object, on a work of art; all the problems—material, technical, chemical, iconographical, artistic, symbolic—present themselves at the same time. How to conduct

an inquiry? Which questions to ask and in what order? No researcher, no research team has yet, to this day, proposed one or several pertinent analytical grids that could be used by the entire scholarly community. That is why, facing the abundance of questions and the multitude of parameters, every researcher—and no doubt I am especially guilty of this—has the tendency to consider only what seems suitable in relationship to the particulars of what he is in the process of demonstrating and, conversely, disregarding all else. That is obviously not a good way of working, even if it is the most common one. Moreover, the documents produced by a society, whether written or figurative, are never neutral or univocal. Each document has its own specific nature and offers its own interpretation of reality. Like all historians, the historian of color must take into account and maintain the rules of operation and encoding for each category of documentation. Texts and images, especially, employ different discourses and must be examined and used according to different methods. That is often forgotten, notably when instead of seeking information in the images themselves we project on them what we have been able to learn elsewhere, especially from texts. I confess that I sometimes envy the prehistorians who study figurative documents (the cave paintings) but who have no texts at their disposal; they are thus obliged to find their hypotheses, lines of thinking, and meanings in the internal analysis of the paintings without plastering over these images what texts may have taught them. Historians would do well to imitate prehistorians, at least in the first stages of analysis.

In any case, historians must abandon the search for some “realistic” meaning for colors in images and works of art. The figurative document, whether it is ancient, medieval, or modern, never “photographs” reality. It is not meant to do that, with regard to either form or color. To believe, for example, that a black door appearing in a thirteenth-century miniature or a seventeenth-century painting represents an actual door that really was black is both naive and anachronistic. Such thinking represents an error in method. In any image, a black door is black first of all because it appears in opposition to another door, or a window, or even another object, which is white, red, or some other black. That door or window may be found within that same image, or another image echoing or opposing the first. No image, no work of art reproduces reality with scrupulous exactitude with regard to color. That is just as true for ancient documents as for the most contemporary photograph. Let us think here of the historian of color who in two or three centuries seeks to study our chromatic environment of the year 2008. Beginning with the evidence of photography, fashion magazines, or cinema, the historian will probably observe a riot of vivid colors unrelated to the reality of color as we experience it today, at least in western Europe. Moreover, the phenomena of luminosity, brilliance, and saturation will be accentuated, while the play of grays and monochromes that ordinarily organize our everyday space will be obscured if not absent.

What is true of images is also true of texts. Any written document gives a specific and unfaithful testimony of reality. If a chronicler of the Middle Ages tells us that the mantle of this or that king was black, it is not because that mantle was actually black. This is not to say that the mantle was not black, but that is not where the problems lie. Any description, any notation of color is cultural and ideological, even when it is a matter of the most insignificant inventory or the most stereotypical notarized document. The very fact of mentioning or not mentioning the color of an object was quite a significant choice reflecting the economic, political, social, or symbolic stakes relevant to a specific context.

Equally significant is the choice of the word that, rather than some other word, serves to express the nature, quality, and function of that color. Sometimes the disparity between the actual color and the named color can be considerable or even simply constitute a label; thus we constantly say and have said for a long time “white wine” to characterize a liquid that has absolutely nothing to do with the color white.

The third set of difficulties is epistemological; it is impossible to project our present-day definitions, conceptions, and classifications of color onto the monuments, artworks, images, and objects produced by past centuries. They do not belong to the societies of the past (and no doubt will not belong to the societies of the future). The danger of anachronism awaits the historian at every documentary turn. But when it is a matter of color and of its definitions and classifications that danger seems even greater. Let us recall once again that for centuries black and white were considered colors in their own right; that the spectrum and the spectral order of colors were unknown before the seventeenth century; that the distinction between primary and complementary colors emerged slowly over the course of that same century and did not become firmly established until the nineteenth century; that the opposition between warm and cool colors is purely a matter of convention and is experienced differently according to the time period and the society. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, for example, blue was considered a warm color in Europe, sometimes even the warmest of all the colors. That is why the historian of painting who wants to study the relation of warm colors to cool colors in a painting by Raphael or Titian and who naively believes that blue was a cool color in the sixteenth century, as it is today, will be completely misled. The notions of warm and cool colors and primary and complementary colors, the classifications of the spectrum and the chromatic circle, the laws of perception and simultaneous contrast are not eternal truths but only stages in the fluid history of knowledge. Let us not wield them unthinkingly; let us not apply them heedlessly to societies of the past.

Consider a single example drawn from the spectrum. For us, following Newton’s experiments and the spectral classification of colors, it is indisputable that green is located somewhere between yellow and blue. Many social customs, scientific calculations, “natural” proofs (the rainbow, for example), and everyday practices of all kinds are constantly present to remind or convince us of this. Now, for men of antiquity or the Middle Ages, that idea hardly made sense. In no ancient or medieval color system is green located between yellow and blue. The latter two colors are not present in the same ranges or along the same axes; thus they cannot have an intermediary stage, a “middle” that would be green. Green maintains direct relations with blue but has no relationship with yellow. Moreover, with regard to painting and dyeing, no recipe before the fifteenth century taught us that it was necessary to mix yellow and blue to obtain green. Painters and dyers knew how to make the color green, but they did not mix these two colors to create it. Neither did they mix blue and red to obtain purple; they mixed blue and black. Ancient and medieval purple is a demi-black, a sub-black, and it remained so for a long time in the Catholic liturgy and in the dress practices for mourning.

Thus the historian must distrust all anachronistic reasoning. Not only must he not project onto the past his own knowledge of the physics and chemistry of colors, but he must not take as absolute immutable truth the spectral organization of colors and all the

theories that follow from it. For the historian, as for the ethnologist, the spectrum must be viewed only as one system among many for classifying colors, a system now known and recognized by everyone, “proven” by experience, dissected and demonstrated by science, but a system that may in two, five, or ten centuries make people smile or may be definitively obsolete. The notion of scientific proof is itself strictly cultural as well; it has its history, its reasons, its ideological and social stakes. Aristotle, who did not classify colors according to the spectral order at all, nevertheless “scientifically” demonstrated the physical and optical—not to mention ontological—justness of his classification in relationship to the knowledge of his time and with supporting evidence. That was the fourth century B.C., and black and white were fully part of this classification. They even constituted its two poles.

Without appealing to the notion of evidence, what are we to think of the men and women of antiquity and the Middle Ages—whose visual apparatus was no different from our own—who did not perceive color contrasts at all as we do today? Two juxtaposed colors that constitute a strong contrast for us could form a relatively weak contrast for them, and vice versa. Let us stay with the example of green. In the Middle Ages, to juxtapose red and green (the most common color combination for clothing between the time of Charlemagne and Louis IX) represented a weak contrast, almost a monochrome. Now for us it represents a violent contrast, opposing a primary color and its complementary color. Conversely, to juxtapose yellow and green, two neighboring colors in the spectrum, forms hardly a noticeable contrast for us. Yet in the Middle Ages it was the strongest contrast that could be created; lunatics were dressed in it and it served to indicate dangerous, transgressive, or diabolical behavior!

These documentary, methodological, and epistemological difficulties highlight the cultural relativism of all questions concerning color. They cannot be studied outside of time and place, outside of a specific cultural context. By the same token, any history of colors must first of all be a social history. For the historian—as well as for the sociologist and the anthropologist—color is defined first of all as a social phenomenon. It is the society that “makes” the color, that gives it its definitions and meanings, 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. The problems of color are always social problems because humans do not live alone but in societies. Without admitting this, we would tend toward a reductionist neurobiologism or a dangerous scientism, and any effort to attempt to construct a history of colors would be in vain.

To undertake this history, the work of the historian is twofold. First, he must try to define what the universe of colors might have been for the various societies that preceded our own, taking into account all the components of that universe: the lexicon and phenomena of naming, the chemistry of pigments and colorants, the techniques of painting and dyeing, the systems of dress and the codes underlying them, the place of color in daily life and in material culture, the regulations issued by authorities, the moral standards of the church, the speculations of science, the creations of artists. The grounds for inquiry and reflection are vast and present multifaceted questions. Additionally, in diachronic analysis, in limiting himself to one given cultural area, the historian must study mutations, disappearances, and innovations that affect all historically observable aspects of the color.

In this dual process all documents must be examined; color is essentially a multimedia and interdisciplinary field. But certain fields of inquiry have proved more fruitful than others. That is true of the lexicon; here as elsewhere the history of words contributes much pertinent information to our knowledge of the past. In the domain of color it demonstrates how in every society color's first function is to classify, mark, proclaim, combine, or contrast. Once again, that is true especially in the area of dyes, fabric, and clothing. More so than in painting and artistic creations, this is probably where we find issues of chemistry, technology, and materials most inextricably bound with social, ideological, and symbolic stakes.

In this regard, the history of the color black in Europe, to which the present book is devoted, seems exemplary.