

Savage nations,
uneducated people,
and children have
a great predilection
for vivid colours.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 1810

Chromophilia, chromophobia

Politics of colour

A certain distaste for colour runs through Western culture like a ladder in a stocking. Many classical writers were dismissive. Colour was a distraction from the true glories of art: line and form. It was seen as self-indulgent and, later, sinful: a sign of dissimulation and dishonesty. The bluntest expression of this comes from the nineteenth-century American writer Herman Melville, who wrote that colours 'are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like a harlot'.⁶ But arguments like these are very old indeed. The Protestants, for example, expressed their intellectual simplicity, severity and humility in a palette dominated by black and white; bright colours like red, orange, yellow and blue were removed both from the walls of their churches and their wardrobes. The pious Henry Ford steadfastly refused for many years to bow to consumer demand and produce cars in any colour other than black.

In art, the tussle over the respective merits of *disegno* (drawing) versus *colore* (colour) raged on through the Renaissance and, although somewhat muted, into the present day. *Disegno* represented purity and intellect; *colore*, the vulgar and effeminate. In an imperious essay from 1920, tellingly entitled 'Purism', the architect Le Corbusier and his colleague wrote that:

[I]n a true and durable plastic work, it is form which comes first, and everything else should be subordinated to it... [Cézanne] accepted without examination the attractive offer of the colour-vendor, in a period marked by a fad for colour-chemistry, a science with no possible effect on great painting. Let us leave to the clothes-dyers the sensory jubilations of the paint tube.⁷

Even among those who accept the value of colour, the ways in which they were conceptualised and ordered had an impact on their relative importance. The ancient Greeks saw colours running along a continuum from white to black: yellow was a little darker than white and blue was a little lighter than black. Red and green were in the middle. Medieval writers had great faith in this light-to-dark schema too. It was only in the seventeenth century that the idea emerged of red, yellow and blue as primary colours, and green, orange and purple as secondary ones. Most iconoclastic of all was Newton and his spectrum, an idea that he wrote about in 1704 in *Opticks*. This was hugely influential: suddenly white and black were no longer colours; the spectrum no longer ran from light to dark. Newton's colour wheel also imposed order on the relationship between complementary colours. These were colour pairs – for example, green and red, blue and orange – that were found to resonate strongly with each other when placed side by side. The idea of complementary colours would prove to have a profound effect on the art that followed; artists including Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch used them to give structure and add drama to their paintings.

As colours came to take on meanings and cultural significance within societies, attempts have been made to restrict their use. The most notorious expression of this phenomenon was through the sumptuary laws. While these were passed in ancient Greece and Rome, and examples can be found in ancient China and Japan, they found their fullest expression in Europe from the mid-twelfth century, before tailing off again in the early modern period. Such laws could touch on anything from diet to dress and furnishings, and sought to enforce social boundaries by encoding the social strata into a clear visual system:

the peasants, in other words, should eat and dress like peasants; craftsmen should eat and dress like craftsmen; and so on. Colour was a vital signifier in this social language – dull, earthy colours like russet [page 246] were explicitly confined to the meanest rural peasants, while bright, saturated ones like scarlet [page 138] were the preserve of a select few.