

The Colloquial Application of Color and Meaning

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Art during the Renaissance was produced with specific meanings and ideas, such as religion ideals and very specific imagery attached to certain colors like reds and blues. These ideas were not simply stated, but implied with symbols and color. Works of art, during this period, all share one quality that transcends time, the inclusion of specific colors and very specific pigment choices, and images that are easily recognized as icons. The choice of color added more than overall meaning for a work of art but, also gave the patrons proof in a monetary value since artwork was valued by the cost of materials thereby proving their devotion and religious piety. The introduction of cheaper and more readily available literature only added to the abundance of meaning or at the very least reference material available, such as pamphlets, newspapers as well as printed verses in the bible. This ability for the masses to better grasp philosophical and abstract ideas versus previous years prior to movable type adds to the ability for the masses to better understand hidden and cryptic undertones of many paintings.

Colors could be inexpensive, due to ease of collection and proximity to the source of colors, usually made from plant and minerals found in nature like cow urine for Yellow Ochre, Red Lac from India to make reds and Lapis Lazuli which was used to produce ultramarine blue. This allowed for quick preparation of mediums both rare and very expensive once again due to proximity and accessibility of base materials. Knowledge of symbols were taught through oral history and by religious sermons, which gave way to printed word,

Figure 1:

*The Temptation of the Idler; or
The Dream of the Doctor*

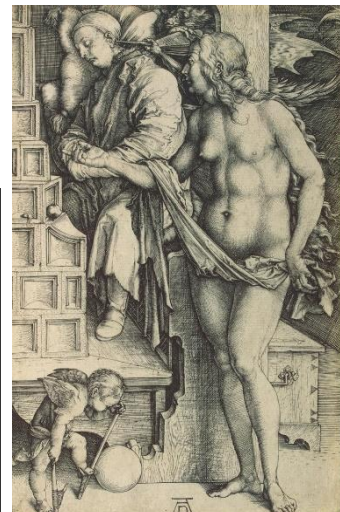
Albrecht Dürer

Circa: 1498

Engraving

Height: 7.4 in. Width: 4.69 in.

Private Collection



which are symbols in their own right. These were all meant to convey virtues held by many as holy or signs of faith. Dürer's use of symbols in his woodcut, *The Dream of the Doctor* (fig 1), the symbols are very apparent and easy to locate. It was as if he was spelling it out to his audience and attempting not to muddle the water with overly complicated metaphors, meanings lost to our modern eye unfortunately. This particular piece of art was chosen not because of color but because of his blatant use of symbols. Like much of his work symbolism played a big role in his compositions. In this piece, Dürer uses these images to add emphasis to the idea and personification of temptation.

Looking at this image, the use of an image of a devil blowing "evil" thoughts into a sleeping man's head creates an image of that small devil on the shoulder making mischief. During that time, it was thought, that the act of sleeping in front of an open fire was comparable to self-indulgence and made a person susceptible to temptation. Dürer implied this with the block shapes to the left side of the image. It is also thought that the nude representation of the female figure, possibly Venus, is meant to be the dream of the doctor. While the inclusion of a cherub or cupid figure is enigmatic, it implies a playfulness, as if the male figure is "playing" with the temptations around him. Although the use of this figure could have a more allegorical meaning of a heavenly and earthly love or in this case the compelling aspect of one over the other as the cupid figure can be seen walking with stilt-like objects, separating itself from the surroundings. The symbols are so obvious and define that it is easy to compare with other works from different artists.

To contrast Dürer when it comes to subtle use of symbols, take Leonardo da Vinci's, *The Annunciation* (fig 2.), due to his religiously mandated use of symbols and color. Leonardo da



Vinci, being one of the more prominent artists of his time, the choice of pigment had very little to do with cost and more towards

Figure 2:
The Annunciation
Leonardo da Vinci
Circa 1472
Oil on panel
Dimensions: 38.6 in. × 85.4 in
Uffizi, Florence, Italy

meaning and representation of religious undertones. Da Vinci has a more subtle use of symbolism, his color palette and placement of the figures had more to do with meaning than the actual placement of symbols. He does include a few objects, such as the lilies being held by the angel and the addition of the book on an altar being read by Mary. The colors are in

line with traditional choices of the time notably the ultramarine blue and deep red of the angel figure. However, price was always an issue even with wealthy patrons and had more to do with the association with status and devotion. Richard Stemp states in his book, *The Secret Language of the Renaissance: Decoding the Hidden Symbolism of Italian Art*, “because it was difficult to extract pigment from the stone, the richest, darkest ultramarine was more expensive to use on paintings than gold. It was therefore used on the most important areas of the painting as a sign of status or respect.”¹ Other symbolic meanings he describes concern the usage of colors like white, green and red and how they were meant to represent the three main cardinal virtues of faith, hope and charity. In *The Annunciation*, da Vinci adds these colors to specific spots,

¹ Stemp, 2006, 44

mandated by the church, like ultramarine blue for Mary and reds for the angels figure. This practice continued until Italian artists like Titian rebelled against church mandate and used ultramarine blue in other places and in other fashions such as the sky and on figures other than Mary or the Angel figures. David Bomford states in, *Colour: Art & Science*, “In late mediaeval times, when paintings were valued by the worth of their materials as much as the skill of their execution, the purest ultramarine was reserved for painting the Virgin's mantle and often costed separately in painter's contracts.”² It is not a secret that some of the most expensive paint ever produced came from Renaissance oil paint recipes usually ultramarine, red lac (from India) and gold. So it makes sense that the wealthy patrons wanted the most lavish and expensive color choices to show just how pious they were.

In da Vinci's painting at least two of the three most expensive paint colors can be seen, the ultramarine blue seen in Mary's robes and deep reds seen in the angel figures outfit. His use of these colors, unlike Durer, were made to create a feeling of contemplation and reflection. It was the use of these color and the gold gilding above Mary's head, while small, does add to this notion of devoutness of the patron. The use of one point perspective and the orthogonal lines to move the viewer's eye almost directly to the figure of Mary, who only occupies about a third of the overall composition. The Angel figure is wrapped in robes in typical fashion with the use of a deep red, one of the more expensive colors used. Although, Mary only occupies a small part of the surface area, her depiction is one of depth. She appears to be going into space and that is emphasized by the three quarter turn of the body and naturalistic handling of the robes. The

² Bomford, 1995, 9

ornateness of the altar and sheerness of the fabric draping over it hint at future work that the attention paid to details.

Overall the painting is rather plain, with exception of the two figures, but it is in these small nuances that creates the meaning behind the images such as the blue in Mary's dress or the deep shades of red in the angel's garb, down to the perspective to create a frame work around the entire piece guiding the viewer's eye. Da Vinci used earth tones, all of which were readily available and relatively cheap to produce. The color choices were most likely deliberate and had much to do with the overall meaning, adding an emphasis to the central figures simply by being so plain the figures stand out in comparison. Bomford supports this observation when he states,

“Painters sometimes made precise decisions about their pigments which suggest a sophisticated knowledge of material properties. In his Santa Croce altarpiece, the Sieneese painter Ugolino fi Nerio deliberately chose azurite blue for its greenish tonality, instead of the ultramarine that might have been expected for such a prestigious commission: even the virgin's robe is azurite. This conscious choice set up a whole series of subtle colour contrasts and harmonies that mark out Ugolino as one of the most innovative colourists of the trecento.”³

Da Vinci surely knew of Ugolino and his use of color in his polyptych at the church of Santa Croce in Florence and possibly used some combination of his color theory in his works. This brings into question the choice of pigment and its availability. With that reasoning, how much did the cost of obtaining certain pigments, like Lapis Lazuli, influence artist choices? Did they exclude some pieces or change others because the amount of pigment needed would be too costly and the patrons refused to pay the bill? Were monetary cuts made by using inferior pigments creating subpar finished works or ingenious inventions of necessity?

³ Bomford 1995, 10

This must question the idea of moveable type, namely Guttenberg's Press, simply because of the impact on abstract thought and ideas was enormous. As everyone knows the invention of moveable type created an explosion of literacy during the Renaissance. While everyone did not instantly become literate, the accessibility to books was no longer left only to the wealthy who could afford hand written books and even cheaply produced newsprint and pamphlets. The inexpensive forms of mass printing allowed for less dependency on oral history, which in turn, allowed for pictographic and textual based learning allowing for better interpretation of the images from artists like Van Eyck and Vermeer, *The Arnolfini Portrait* and *Saint Praxedis*, each in its own right are filled with symbols or symbolism.

While one piece is dated before the invention of the printing press, being invented around 1440, the imagery and traditions would have been known and practiced. By including Vermeer's image a shift in depicting those meanings can be more subtle and implied versus having actual pictorial representation of the virtues and meanings due to a better understanding of abstract thoughts.

In Vermeer's, *St. Praxedis* (fig 3), the central figure is a woman holding a crucifix and



Saint Praxedis
Johannes Vermeer
Circa: 1655
Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 40 in × 33 in
National Museum of
Western Art in Tokyo

squeezing a blood soaked cloth into an urn.

Vermeer's placement of the urn on a small step or pedestal, as altar of sorts adds to the idea of the woman and her commensurate faith. Her contemporary dress in vibrant

reds and whites reflecting the three cardinal virtues and the colors associated with them, in this case, the reds and white

possibly representing faith and charity of the central figure of the painting. This is framed by a

vibrant hue of ultramarine blue, because of the limited use and apparent highlighting of the main figure. The central figure is carefully gathering of what could be conveyed as blood with a solemn, concentrated gaze directed at her activity, which is emphasized by the decapitated body of a figure directly behind her hands. All of these images and colors imply a religious ritual or ceremony, a stark contrast to my next image and its symbolism.

In Van Eyck's, *The Arnolfini Portrait* (figure 4), the use of symbols are more apparent



Figure 4
Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife
Jan Van Eyck
Circa: 1434
Dimensions: 23.62 in. x 32.28 in.
National Portrait Gallery, London

and in a more deliberate and obvious manner: from the representation of a dog possibly implying loyalty, to the

white covering of the woman's head symbolic of purity and her green colored dress, meant to convey a meaning of hope. Other items such as the elaborate chandelier with a single lit candle could possibly be a symbol for a sanctuary lamp in a church or the lit candle may allude to

the presence of the Holy Ghost or God. The mirror with the reversed image of the entire scene containing two witnesses, one possibly being the artist himself, shown in detail. The simple act of the woman's hand being held by the husband, possibly meaning a traditional oath of marriage. All of these symbols were well known images, associated with marriage, to the patrons of Van Eyck and with the addition of his signature creates an almost documented scene of the marriage, consummating it in a way. Each image is laid out in a specific context, not unlike Dürer, each item having a space reserved for the viewer to discover. Rather, not needing any explanation at

all since it would have been common knowledge passed down from generation to generation by oral tradition.

All of these paintings and the one woodcut possess one element that is cohesive, an understanding of symbology and color usage. By having this understanding each artist had an ability to convey with little to no effort a meaning of faith, contemplation and or reflection of the patron's devoutness. Leonardo da Vinci had his masterful usage of perspective, selective color placement and composition, while Van Eyck and his addition of everyday object and elaborate scenery to convey a meaning of hope and prosperity for the newlywed couple both create paintings wrought with meaning and virtues. When comparing Johannes Vermeer, Albrecht Durer, Leonardo da Vinci and Jan Van Eyck, although separated by time and distance, they all used symbols. Whether in depictions of actual objects or in their use of one color over another, they create meaningful and powerful imagery accessible by anyone during that artist's era.

Works Cited

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