

The spiritual value of contrast, black, white, blue and red in Renaissance paintings. Biblical colour symbolism and interpretation of Christian art.

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This contribution seeks to promote an awareness of Biblical colour symbolism for the appreciation of Christian art, and illustrates its significance for religious Renaissance paintings. From a theological premise, the visual arts are appreciated as an expression of spiritual values. Applying a classical philological grammatical method, this article argues for the reception of colour as a creative manifestation, with the medium (material) that constitutes the colour as part of the message. It calls attention to the spiritual value of contrast (e.g. black and white, red and blue) and identifies the role of four specific colours in Scripture: black, white, blue and red, while confirming their later use in Renaissance pictures and otherwise by the liturgical practices of the Western Church.

Key words: Bible, colour, symbolism, renaissance, contrast, Christian

Bybelse kleursimboliek en die verstaan van Christelike kuns: die geestelike waarde van kontras, swart, wit, blou en rooi in skilderye uit die Renaissance

Hierdie bydrae bevorder kennis van Bybelse kleursimboliek as 'n belangrike hulpmiddel by die interpretasie van Christelike kuns, met name die Godsdienstige skilderye van die Renaissance in Wes Europa. Vanuit 'n teologiese perspektief word die visuele kuns benader as 'n uitdrukking van geestelike waardes. Met 'n grammaties filologiese metode, maak die artikel 'n saak uit vir die ontvangs van kleur as 'n kreatiewe daarstelling, waarby die medium (materiaal) wat die kleur daar stel deel van die boodskap kan wees. Dit vra om aandag vir die geestelike waarde van kontras (b.v. tussen wit en swart, blou en rood) en gaan nader in op die simboliese rol van die kleure swart, wit, blou en rood in die Skrif. Die artikel wys uit hoe hierdie kleursimboliek help by die interpretasie van godsdienstige Renaissance skilderye en bevestig word deur die liturgiese praktyke van die Westerse Kerk.

Sleutelwoorde: Bybel, kleur, simboliek, renaissance, kontras, Christelik

Biblical colour symbolism is an important tool for the interpretation of religious paintings. That this is still insufficiently recognized is evident, both from text books and specifically Christian approaches to the visual arts. A recent Cambridge textbook on Renaissance art (Miller 2016) refers to and clarifies many things, but any explanation of possible symbolic values for colour is conspicuously absent. Even Fergusson's work on signs and symbols in Christian art, which is, more than sixty years after its first publication, still the only English standard work of its sort, is very scanty in its information on colours and their symbolism in Scripture and the arts (Fergusson 1989:151-153). Also when individual Renaissance paintings and their symbolism are discussed in an admirable way (e.g. Bruyn 2005:28-37, Hartau 2005:305-338), one looks in vain for even the mentioning of colours, let alone any attempt to explain them. In other instances, scholars recognize that the colours in a particular work must have an important function, but fail to ascertain what function exactly or which symbolic role is attached to them (e.g. Philip 1967: 61-104, Boczkowska 1977:197-231).

While art for the glory of God has enjoyed a revival of interest in recent decades, this has not yet led to study of colour from a Biblical and Church historical perspective. Francis Schaeffer sought to develop a God-focus for art, as a form of praise, if not worship (2006:18): "The arts and the sciences do have a place in the Christian life – they are not peripheral. For a

Christian, redeemed by the work of Christ and living within the norms of Scripture and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the lordship of Christ should include an interest in the arts. A Christian should use these arts to the glory of God, not just as tracts, mind you, but as things of beauty to the praise of God. An art work can be a doxology in itself.” However, Schaeffer mentions the use of colour only in passing (2006:62). Others, like Duncan Roper do mention and appreciate colour, but treat colour predominantly as an expression of creative beauty without considering symbolic or spiritual meaning (1992:27): “It is my claim that in doing so we have a much better account of the aesthetic functioning of natural creation. The latter is rich with nuances, in the shapes of trees, in the awesomeness of vistas, in the sound of waterfalls, creeks and raging storms, in the movements of birds, not to mention the smells, odours and tastes of all manner of things, the tender touch of a hand, and the visual effects of colour and shape. As such these nuances are an integral part of the functioning of natural creation as it is ordered in the coherence of all its different modes of meaning under the ordering hand of God’s Word and Spirit.” Similarly Cameron Anderson, while emphasizing the importance of comprehending colour theory from a practical point of view for evangelical artists (2016:13), does not attempt to consider or introduce the symbolic role of colour from a Biblical and historical classical point of view.

Research design and methodological approach

This prima facie evidence suggests that colour is insufficiently recognized as a tool in the history of Christian art. In an attempt to embrace a more inclusive art history (cf. Alexander 2007:194), this article seeks to address this need from a theological, classical and philological point of view. Its aim is to propose meaning for the use of specific colours from a Biblical perspective, as specific symbolism was attached to colours and their expression in Scripture, also as Christianity functioned in its wider Greco-Roman context.

This is primarily a philological contribution, which seeks to explain colours from a Biblical and Classical perspective. It does not claim that the Biblical sign language it identifies, works for all Christian art, but argues that it may be significant for understanding visual art that operates from a Biblical and Classical framework. As the Renaissance as a period was inspired by both these influences, if the premise of this article is correct, religious paintings of this time are likely to reflect symbolic colour values that are also present in Holy Scripture. In other words, how are colours used and appreciated in the Bible and its Classical context? And, secondarily by means of illustration: Do these values work if they are tested on religious paintings of the Renaissance? For the first question, the methodology is philological, aiming at establishing the accident and meaning of colours, particularly in their Greek primary context. The second question will be addressed in a comparative historical way, as the use of colours in specific paintings is given significance directly from a Biblical perspective, or indirectly as this Scriptural colour symbolism was utilized in the Christian liturgy.

Symbolism has a long history in the tradition of Christian art has always been profoundly symbolic. Some believe this is due to the Biblical prohibition of graven images and their worship (Ex 20). It should be kept in mind, therefore, that even when Christ or the saints are portrayed in Renaissance painting or sculpture, this is not intended as a real representation of their person or presence. “Ein Bild Christi dient der Erinnerung an ihn, als Hinweis auf ihn, ist Ausgestaltung seiner Schönheit, die mit künstlerischer Phantasie geschaut wird, und Mittel religiöser Belehrung” (Pfeiffer 1980:525)¹. Just like medievalism continues beyond the Middle-Ages (cf. Diebold 2012:251), this article argues that Biblical symbolism continues beyond

Scripture and that its expressions are not merely the domain of Theology, but also of the visual arts.

To practically illustrate the symbolic values that may be established from primary Scriptural and Classical sources, this article uses religious Renaissance paintings. In the methodology used, these have a mere illustrative function, as this contribution does not pretend to explain all artistic aspects in these paintings. Its methodological aim is that to show that Biblical symbolism is helpful for the interpretation of these pictures from a spiritual perspective. Religious paintings from this period are especially suitable, as the Renaissance combined the appreciation of Classical and Biblical values, Scripture and its Greco-Roman context. The Renaissance is also unique in the sense that soon afterwards religious symbolism weakened, particularly from the 17th century onwards. German and Dutch painters at the time also introduced new icons and motives (Dittrich 1998:144). Either the French Revolution or the year 1800 is seen as demarcation line for the demise of religious symbolism in Western Europe (Hermsen 2003:103). Also symbolism in the visual arts in general has been in decline since. Only with the introduction of abstract art came a renewal of appreciation of Christian allegory (Pfeiffer 1980:525-536), albeit within a new context of modern and post-modern times. This often misses the former consistency, clarity and universally understood patterns of the medieval and Renaissance art, which were rooted in a firm belief in divine presence, truth and revelation. In the new perception, a work of art is not true because it is an intermediary for truth, but because it is perceived as a true work of art (Leuenberger 1984:130). This statement would have been inconceivable in the days of the Christian Renaissance and appreciated as a departure from a Biblical worldview and value system.

This contribution is written from a theological perspective and appreciates the visual arts as an expression of spiritual values. It subsequently looks at colour as manifestation, gemstones as the colour palette in Scripture and Antiquity and the spiritual value of contrast, particularly light versus darkness. It then considers the role of four specific colours in Scripture and argues for the following symbolic values: black as the absence of God and a reminder of his judgement; white as the colour of God's presence and holiness, blue for heaven as the seat of God's authority, red as cloth of divine authority and reminder of earthly sufferings. These four colours were selected as their symbolic meaning is relatively straightforward in Scripture. Their use is also confirmed by the liturgy of the Church, as retrospective section will show. Black, white and red were the most important liturgical colours in the Western Church and blue functioned prominently in the Middle-Ages because of its symbolic Biblical associations with heaven.

Scripture: colour as manifestation

Colour in the Bible was in the first place a manifestation. Many of the colours that we today know in a defined and abstract way were less straightforward concepts in Biblical times. Colours were often called after their concrete appearance in creation. Where modern Bible translations speak about red, blue and yellow the words used in holy Writ may actually be precious stones like jasper, sapphire and topaz.

The significance of gems in Biblical times was tied in probably not with their colour only, but also with their worth and significance as a precious stone. This is, for instance, suggested by the use of agate, which was found as the second stone in the third row of the High Priest's breastplate or breast-piece (Ex. 28:19, 39:12). Usually, an agate does not have one specific colour, but the same stone may include red, orange or dark yellow as well as blue colour combinations.

The Hebrew word conveys the idea of a flame, or something that is split in tongues. This is suitably applied to agate as a form of chalcedony (a fine-grained variety of quartz), which lines or bands streams of colours together. These may range from white to dull yellow, red, brown, orange, blue, black and grey. All primary colours, and therefore per inference possibly all colours, are represented in agate.²

The importance of precious stones as manifestation and reference point of colour is still insufficiently recognized. John Gage (*Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*), for instance, only refers to a 13th century lapidary of Albertus Magnus (1999:289), but not to any Classical sources. Lapidaries, however, have a much longer history and were very much a part of Classical civilisation and served as a context for Biblical symbolism.

The oldest treatise on stones extant today was written by Theophrastus (Grk. Θεόφραστος, c. 371 – c. 287 BC). His booklet *On Stones* (Περὶ λίθων) continued to influence other guides on the subject until at least the Renaissance. This was stimulated by Gaius Plinius Secundus (AD 23 – August 25, AD 79), better known as Pliny the Elder, whose *Naturalis Historia* (Natural Histories) built and vastly extended the earlier Greek work. Theophrastus was a native of Lesbos, a pupil of Plato's and successor to Aristotle in the lyceum after the latter's expulsion from Athens (Watson 2001:359).

Theophrastus mentions (Caley 1956:46, Περὶ λίθων 8) that some stones are quite rare and small, such as emerald (*smaragdus*), jasper (*jaspis*), sardine and sapphire. He also refers to their use as seals, to authorize agreements or promises. Some stones however have specific intrinsic powers, like the emerald which reflect its colour in water and is allegedly good for the eyes (Caley 1956:50 Περὶ λίθων 23-24). He also distinguishes between male and female sardion and cyan, where the male is the darker of the two. Agate he regards as a particularly beautiful stone which is derived from the river Achates in Sicily and was sold at a high price at the time (Caley 1956:51-52, Περὶ λίθων 30-31).

Christian lapidaries in the Middle-Ages tend to focus on the breastplate of Moses adorned with twelve stones symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel (Ex. 28:15-20), the ornaments in Ezekiel's prophecy (28:13) and the twelve stones that are portrayed as the foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21: 18-20). In context these provide contrast with the wicked city of Babylon, emblem of sin, who is adorned with precious stone as well (see Rev 18:16, cf. Reader 1981:456).

From the fourteenth century several authors, like John Mandeville (1900:106), suggest that diamonds and other precious stones occur as male and female, beyond masculine and feminine as gender, actually producing little stones by themselves (Watson 2001:366). Although Scripture assigns gender to stones, as it does to all nouns, it does not claim any miraculous multiplication of stones. Neither did Theophrastus.

Gems as colour palette in Scripture and Antiquity

When one looks at precious stones and their use in the Bible, the following overview emerges. As today's names for gemstones are not always equivalent to their antique use, I have added references to Plinius the Elder (who perished near Pompei in AD79). Plinius is particularly useful, because he was a contemporary of the Apostles and lived in the times of the New

Testament. In his *Naturalis Historia*, Plinius mentions the actual colours that were associated with these gemstones at that particular time:

Agate³ (multiple): Ex 28:19, 39:12

Amber⁴ (yellow/orange): Ezek 1:4, 27; 8:2

Amethyst⁵ (violet-purple): Ex 28:19, 39:12, Rev 21:20

Aquamarine⁶ (light blue/green): Rev 21:20

Carnelian/Sardius (orange/red): Ex 28:19, 39:10; Rev 4:3, 21:20

Chalcedony (milky gray variants with blue, yellow or brown): Rev 21:19

Chrysoprase⁷ (golden green): Rev 21:20

Crystal (colourless transparent): Job 28:17, Isa 54:12, Rev 4:6; 21:11; 22:1

Coral gemstone⁸ (shades of red): Job 28:18, Ezek 27:16

Diamond⁹ (white transparent): Ex 28:18, 39:11, Jer 17:1, Ezek 28:13

Emerald/Smaragd¹⁰ (grass green): Ex 28:20, 39:13, Ezek 28:13, Rev 4:3, 21:18

Jacinth (violet blue): Rev 21:20

Jasper (commonly red, also yellow, brown and green): Ex 28:20, 39:13, Job 28:18, Ezek 28:13, Rev 4:3, 21:11,18,19

Onyx (typically black and white): Gen 2:12, Ex 28:20, Job 28:16, Ezek 28:13

Pearl¹¹ (white): Matt 13:46, Rev 21:21

Peridot/Biblical Chrysolite (yellow green): Rev 21:19,20

Ruby (red): Ex 28:17, 39:10; Prov 8:11, 31:10, Job 28:18, Ezek 28:13

Sapphire¹² (translucent blue): Ex 24:10; 28:18; 39:11; Job 28:6,16; Song 5:14; Isa 54:11; Ezek 1:26; 10:1; 28:13, Rev 21:20

Sardonyx (white, red and black stripes): Rev 21:20

Topaz¹³ (multiple, including yellow, red or blue): Ex 28:19, 39:12, Ezek 28:13, Job 28:19, Rev 21:20

Turquoise (dull blue to blue-green): Ex 28:18; 39:11; Ezek 28:13

Several of these gem stones are listed both in the vision of Revelation 21 and as part of the garments of the High Priest of Israel (Ex 28, for the differences see Glasson 1975:95-100, cf. Šedinová 2000:31-47). Church father Epiphanius of Salamis (c.310-403) reflects on the stones on the breastplate of the High Priest in the following way (Stone 1989:474-476):

“O) The Names of the Gems and the Patriarchs and the Apostles. And these are the twelve gems and names which have been written down:

1) Emerald: it is green and yellow-colored; it is found in the river Pison; it is Levi and John.

2) Cornelian: it is pink, of bloodlike aspect; it is found in Babylon; it <is a transparent gem>; (it is) a spell for health; it is Reuben and Philip.

3) Topazion: it is red; and it is found in the city Topaz in India; it is Simeon and Matthew.

4) Ruby: which is called carbuncle; it is fire-colored; it is found in Africa; burns at night like fire; it is Judah and Mattathias.

5) Sapphire: it is crimson purple; and it is found in India; it is Dan and Paul.

6) Jasper: it resembles the <emerald>, yellow-colored; it is found on the bank of the river T'ork'omos, on the bank of the Caspian sea; it is Naphthali and Peter.

7) Turquoise: it is blue; and it is found in greater Scythia; it is Asher and Andreas.

8) Amethyst: which is ligron; of which no-one knows the provenance; it is like a bluish sand; some say that it is brought from the Amazons; it is Gad and Thaddeus.

9) Agate: we do not find things compared with the agate; it is zakekn; again it says that (it is) gold-colored; and it is found among the Chaldeans; it is Zebulun and Bartholemew.

10) Hyacinth: it is red; it is found around Babylon; it is Issachar and Simeon.

11) Onyx: it is light (colored); it is found in India; it is Benjamin and J<ames>.

12) ezyl: sea-colored, airlike; it is found (in) <Mt. Taurus> in the bed of the Euphrates river; it is Joseph and Thomas.

13) And thus St. Epiphanius explains the names of the twelve gems; and the great Andrew on the book of the Vision of John (does the same).

14) And the two gems of examination are well known, which people called diamond. And it was on the ankle-length garment upon the shoulders of the high priest when he entered the Holy of Holies three times a year, on the festival of Passover and on Pentecost and on the day of Atonement.

15) And whatever the year was going to be, the gems changed to that appearance.

16) Thus, if it (i.e., the stones) became black, it foretold death; and if it was red (it foretold) the spilling of blood; and if it appeared white, it was a sign of peace.

17) On this account, also in the days of Zechariah the father of John, when he delayed in the Temple and (then) came forth, the people were waiting expectantly to see the gem. And they saw it sparkling bright, whitened like the snow, and they were filled with joy, for the shining of heavenly light rendered the jewel brilliant.”

The spiritual value of light versus darkness

The visibility and appearance of colours in the Bible is closely connected with the presence of light. The very first words that God spoke in Scripture were “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3). It is within the created light that all of subsequent creation comes into being. This association of God with light is a consistent pattern throughout the Old and New Testament. Darkness, on the other hand is associated with his absence, a fallen world subjected to death sin and the power of Satan. The contrast between the two is prominent in the prophets. Malachi (4:2) symbolizes the activity of God with light: “But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings”. Isaiah announces the coming of the Messiah as light breaking through the darkness (Is 9:2): “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” A theme which is picked up by the evangelists, e.g. Matthew 4:12-14 (cf. Lk 1:79). Jesus is the light of the world (Joh 8:12): “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” God’s light facilitates re-creation in a world that is overcome by darkness. Likewise his followers should be agents of light (Matt 5:14-15). Fallen angels may present themselves as agents of light (2 Cor 11:14), but are not.

God’s new heaven and earth will introduce a future where darkness is completely absent (Rev 22:5): “And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.”

It is only in this full array of light, that creation becomes visible in all its colourful splendour. This is best illustrated by one of the oldest emblems of colour and light in human history: the rainbow. Scripture mentions only three people seeing a rainbow. After the great flood, God introduced the rainbow as a sign of faithfulness and a promise that all of humanity would never again be destroyed by floodwaters (Genesis 9:13). In both Old and New Testament prophecy, God is closely associated with this splendour of colours in the rainbow. Ezekiel, in a vision, saw a rainbow above the heavenly throne of God (Ezek 1:27-28), as did John the Divine (Rev 4:3). Later on, John also observes a rainbow that encompasses the head of an angel who carries God’s final plans. These will ultimately lead to the creation of a new heaven and earth, where light and righteousness will reign, and death and sickness will have disappeared (Rev 10:1, cf. 21:4, 2 Pet 3:13).

Colours express the beauty of creation, are intimately connected with the person of God and his plans, whilst indicating his lasting commitment to humanity. The rainbow makes something of the splendour around God’s throne shine through on earth. Consequently, one may

establish an appreciation for the phenomenon of colour in Scripture, which is closely associated with God as Creator and Preserver of this world. “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). In Renaissance paintings God is supposed as the first and greatest Artist, as well as the source of absolute beauty and goodness (Weissert 2003:53), a notion this period shares with modern evangelical authors (e.g. Scheaffer 2006:18, Roper 1992:27).

Blackness as God’s absence and judgement

Black, on the other hand, is the absence of colour, or the absence of light to perceive. In the Old Testament blackness of skin is seen the consequence of judgement or unfavourable conditions (Job 30:30, SS 1:6, Lam 5:10), while black hair is used in a neutral way (SS 5:11, Matt 5:36). Darkness, however, usually expresses God forsakenness and judgement (e.g. Acts 2:20).



Illustration 1

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights (detail third panel)*, c.1490-1510, oil on oak panels, 220 cm × 389 cm (87 in × 153 in), Museo del Prado, Madrid (Public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights#/media/File:El_jard%C3%ADn_de_las_Delicias,_de_El_Bosco.jpg).

This is perhaps best illustrated by Jesus’s words in Matthew 8:11-12: “And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Darkness sometimes operates with other colour combinations, for instance in Revelation 6:1-8, which describes the four horse of the Apocalypse, who bring God’s judgement on earth. The horse is white and symbolizes a righteous king with a crown who will ultimately receive all power. This is followed by a red horse, which stands for bloodshed and removal of all peace from the earth. A third horse is black and indicates the gloomy scales of God’s judgement, while

it also has the OT connotation of killing by famine. The final horse is grey or pale and represents death, followed by hell as it swallows up his victims.

In Scripture, darkness is also a state where the mind is blinded from the will of God: “Then Jesus said unto them, Yet a little while is the light with you. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you: for he that walketh in darkness knoweth not whither he goeth” (John 12:35). Darkness is a state that Jesus came to dispel: “I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness” (John 12:46). The aim of apostolic preaching is defined as “to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me”(Acts 26:18).

In the early medieval period this contrast and spiritual play between light and darkness played an even greater role than the use of colours. Gage comments (1999:69-70): “Thus the world of colour in the early Middle Ages was an essentially unstable one in respect to hue: the only fixed points are those of light and dark. What are the consequences of this for the history of art? The most obvious consequence of this pre-eminence of light and dark is that we shall not be able to expect an early medieval colour-symbolism or iconography based upon hue”.

This subtle play with the forces of darkness and light is also reflected in the Christian art of the Renaissance. Jan van Eyck’s painting of “The Virgin with Chancellor Rolin” is an excellent illustration (Ward 1994:34):

“As Christ is lifted toward Rolin the motion will bring him in front of the dark column that his legs and raised arm al- ready cover. The central columns are associated with the Old Testament and loss of eternal life by their connection to the wall decorated by Old Testament scenes, by their visual effect of blocking passage between the two background cities and between the chancellor and the Virgin and Child, and by their dark color. Christ as the dawning sun appears to be re- placing the era of darkness, just as the crowning of the Virgin covers over the Old Testament scenes at the right.”



Illustration 2

Jan van Eyck, *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*, detail, c. 1435, oil on panel, 66cm x 62cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris (Public domain: https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Maagd_van_kanselier_Rolin#/media/File:Eyck_madonna_rolin.jpg).

White as symbol for holiness

While black is generally regarded as the absence of colour, white technically is a blend of all colours, the sum of them all. This becomes beautifully visible in the rainbow, when the humid atmospheric conditions bend the rays and all the colours of the spectrum become visible to the human eye. Of course, the scientific technicalities behind the splendour of light were not realized in the days before Newton. Mixing paintings that reflect light is a very different business from the constitution of light itself. Still, at an aesthetic level the idea of white as the sum of all colours is most agreeable with the Biblical connection of white and the holiness of God, the Creator of all. Uberto Decembrio (1350-1427) wrote a recently rediscovered essay on shining white ‘De candore’, which seeks the pre-eminence for white pigments. In cataloguing the colour white he stressed the importance of the colour white in ancient History and Scripture (fols 128^r)¹⁴ and its manifestation in Creation (fol126^v-128^r), while it is also symbolic for the light of reason and intellectual freedom (see McManus 2013: 253).¹⁵

White is the personification of light, and as such is often used as a symbol for holiness, cleanness, purity and righteousness (2Chr 5:12; Dan 7:9; Matt 17:2; Mark 9:3, 16:5; Luke 9:29, John 20:12, Acts 1:10, Rev 1:12-14, 4:4, 6:11, 19:8,14 20:11; cf. Dan 11:35, 12:10, Ps 51:7, Is 1:18, Rev 3:18, 7:9, 13 - 14). His close encounters with God, caused Moses face to radiate with light, which suggests a radiant white (Ex 34:29-34). A similar occurrence takes place in the life of Jesus at the mount of transfiguration (Matt 17:2) where Jesus “was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.”

In the New Testament, the holiness and righteousness of believers is seen as a consequence of Jesus’s sacrifice. For this reason red also functions as a cleaning agent that leads to white: “And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:13-14).

Blue for heaven as the seat of God’s authority

The assignment of symbolism to individual colours in Scripture, however, is more difficult, though not impossible. Take the colour blue, for instance. This is used some fifty times in the Bible, but in the Old Testament only. There it is the concrete manifestation rather than an abstract colour that is referred to. In the *Authorized Version*, the Hebrew word in question, *tekeleth* (תְּכֵלֶת), is taken to refer to a sapphire stone, which is indeed blue. Modern translations suggest it rather refers to a cerulean mussel, which was used to dye materials (Strong 1991:124), in which case the colour is violet rather than blue, although most continue to translate with blue. It is probably best to stick to the sapphire, as translation for *tekeleth*, as the Greek Septuagint consistently renders sapphire (e.g. Ezek 1:26 ὡς ὄρασις λίθου σαπφείρου ὁμοίωμα, “the appearance of a stone of sapphire”). The Vulgate Bible of the Renaissance artists certainly read the same (“quasi aspectus lapidis sapphyri similitude”).

Blue is almost always associated with heaven or the dwelling place of God. The colour is quite prominent in Scripture when the Lord reveals himself to Moses and the leaders of Israel, at the time when the Law is given to Israel (Ex 24:10, cf. 25:3, 38:18, Num 4:6 - 12, 2Chr 2:7,

Ezek 1:26). Blue often comes in a context of worship and service to God (e.g. Ex 28:6, 8, 13, 31, Num 15:38 - 40).

When a pagan palace is described the association of יְהוָה is not necessarily the same, although it could hold true that also in pagan cultures the heavenlies and their blue colour was connected to the world of the gods (Esther 1:6): “Where were white, green, and blue, hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble.” For the first portion of this verse, the LXX reads a different original and the three stones that are used to describe this pavement (ἐπὶ λιθοστρώτου σμαραγδίου λίθου καὶ πιννίνου καὶ παρίνου λίθου) do not include a sapphire.

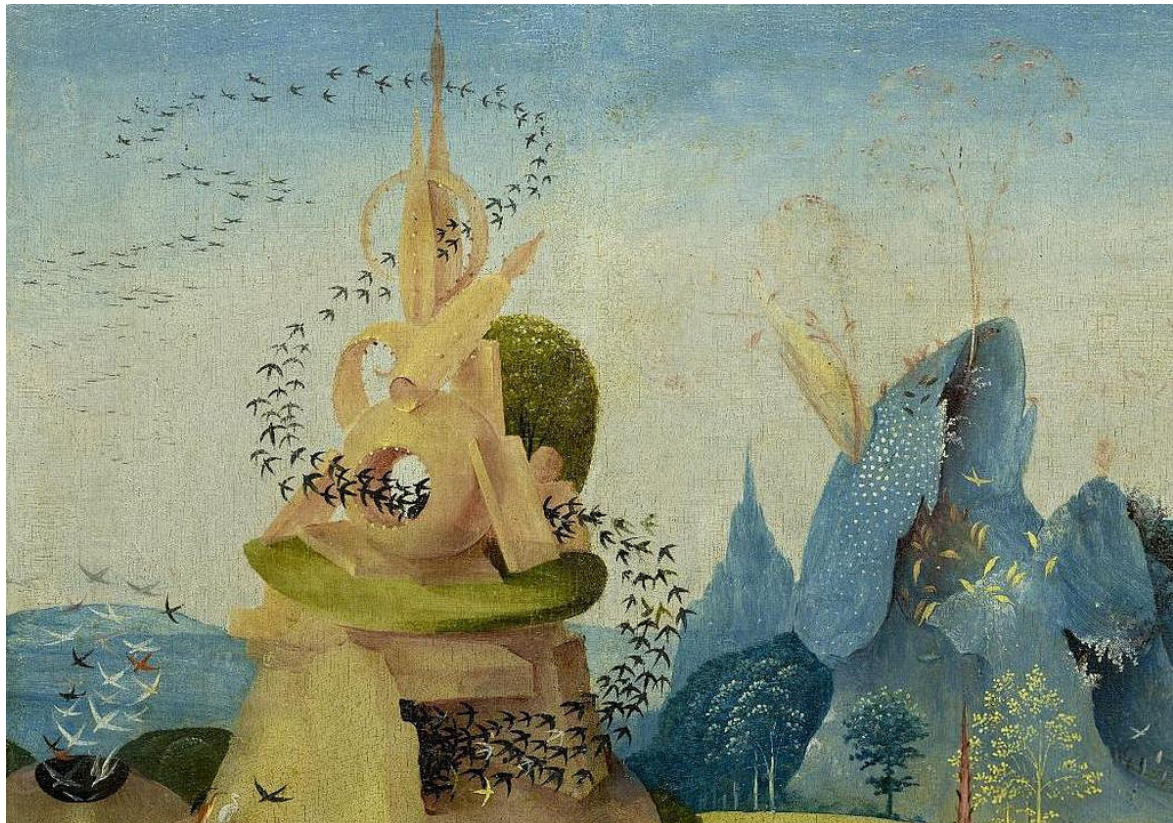


Illustration 3

Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (detail first panel), c.1490-1510, oil on oak panels, 220 cm × 389 cm (87 in × 153 in), Museo del Prado, Madrid (Public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights#/media/File:El_jard%C3%ADn_de_las_Delicias_de_El_Bosco.jpg).

An example where the heavenly association does not apply for obvious reason is Ezekiel 23:6, where blue refers to the raiment of pagan adulterers. This seems a far cry from heavenly values. While the *Authorized Version* translates “clothed with blue”, and modern translations like the New International Version follows suit with “warriors clothed in blue”, there is no sapphire in the ancient Greek translation. The Greek has a verb based on “hyacinth”, which admittedly was understood as blue in classical times (Liddel & Scott 1996:1840), or bluish red (Epiphanius classified the colour as a form of red), but does not have the ‘heavenly’ blue association of the sapphire. The Septuagint translates “clothed with blue” (ἐνδεδυκότας ὑακίνθινα) and this hyacinth is used to illustrate that the spiritual adultery took place with royalty or the leading families of Assyria. This makes every sense in the world, particularly if one takes hyacinth

as a form of red (Epiphanius), and is confirmed by the following verse (23:7), which explains that she committed adultery with the upper class selection of the sons of Assur. The Revised Standard Version correctly tries to bring out this colour distinction by translating: “warriors clothed in purple”, rather than blue.

A third possible exception to the general association of blue with heaven is suggested by Jeremiah (10:9): “blue and purple is their clothing: they are all the work of cunning men”. However, as with the passage from Ezekiel, while the Masoretic rendering has תְּכֵלֶת, the original Hebrew vocalisation may have been different. It was certainly understood to be different in the second century before Christ. This is why the Jewish translators of the Septuagint, like they did with the Ezekiel passage, translated with hyacinth and not with sapphire. Their version reads: “[They are] all the works of craftsmen, they will clothe themselves with blue and scarlet” (ἔργα τεχνιτῶν πάντα· ὑάκινθον καὶ πορφύραν ἐνδύσουσιν αὐτά·).

These instances suggest that there is a lot more consistency in meaning and use of colours in the original text of Scripture. When there is no intention to express the heavenly connection of blue, the association with a sapphire is lacking in the divine text. Conversely, whenever the sapphire is felt to be there by ancient authorities, the heavenly connection of blue is also present.

To emphasize the heavenly origin and mission of Jesus, Renaissance painters often opt for a blue garment, or include a blue mantle or scarf of some sort when portraying Christ. Hieronymus Bosch is an example in case, with his painting of Jesus carrying the cross on the Via Dolorosa. The blue that Bosch employed in his palette was azurite,¹⁶ while other Renaissance artists also used ultramarine and indigo.¹⁷ His different shades of red (including pinkish colours) are acquired with vermilion and carmine lake.¹⁸

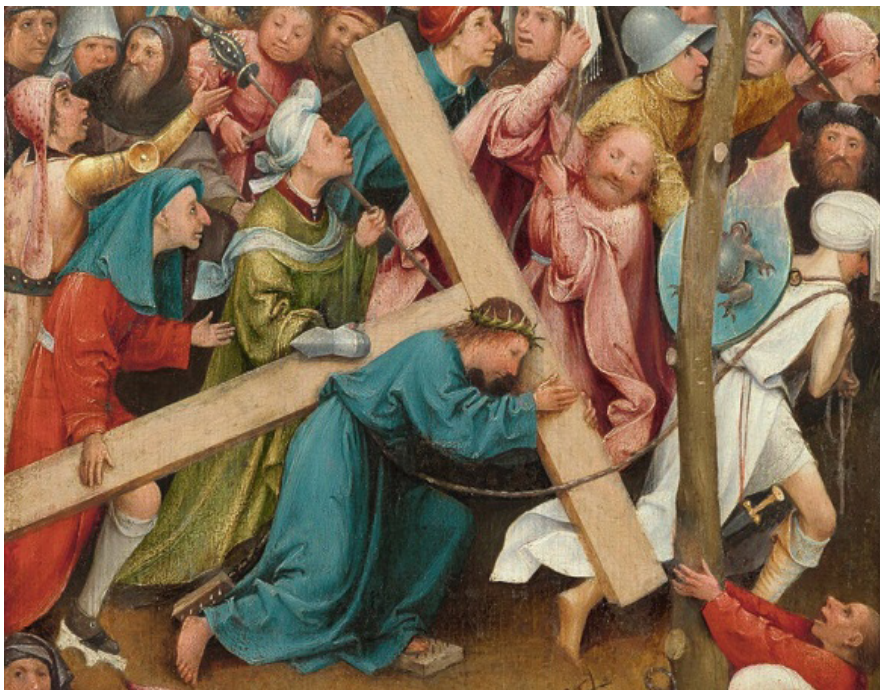


Illustration 4

Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ carrying the Cross*, c.1480, oil on panel, 57 cm × 32 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Public domain: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Carrying_the_Cross_\(Bosch,_Vienna\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Carrying_the_Cross_(Bosch,_Vienna))).

The azurite used by Bosch is historically one of the most important blue pigments. Otherwise Egyptian blue, lapis lazuli and smalt (cobalt glass or ‘powder blue’) are significant. Initially, Egyptian blue was the most widely used, particularly for wall paintings.

“Egyptian blue (cuprorivaite) is the oldest known artificial blue pigment. Its origin is linked with metallurgical and glassmaking technologies dating back to at least 2500 BC in the Mesopotamic region. Egyptian blue was the most important and frequently used blue pigment in the antique world, such that the use of any other pigments for blue is seldom.” (Gaetani, Santamaria, Seccaroni, C, 2004: 13)

From the early Middle-Ages, however, the role of Egyptian blue would be taken over by lapis lazuli, particularly from the 8th century onward (Gaetani, Santamaria, Seccaroni, C, 2004: 20). Its deep blue was achieved by crushing the valuable gemstone lapis lazuli into a fine powder and mixing it with other ingredients. This is a vivid illustration of the fact that there was also a material component to colours, often reflected in contracts. Colours like lapis lazuli, also called ultramarine, were very expensive to make. Its first known use dates back to Afghanistan in the 6th century. In the 14th and 15th centuries it was extensively used in Italy for the illumination of manuscripts and in paintings. Because it was imported to Venice from overseas, it received its name ultramarine (Latin: *ultra mare*, from beyond the sea). In the Renaissance this pigment was more expensive than gold. This is why artists often had to sign a contract which stipulated the exact extent of the area which was to be covered. Only early in the 19th century French chemists developed a far less expensive synthetic form of ultramarine.

The Biblical and Classical practice to associate colours with their concrete manifestations in nature continued to be utilized in Christian art. The use of lapis lazuli in particular is a fine example of this fact that the

“materials of the artist cannot be regarded simply as tools, for they were often repositories of values in their own right... Lapis lazuli was, and still is, a rare and costly stone, and nothing suggests more strongly the survival into the Renaissance of medieval attitudes towards the intrinsic value of materials than the fact that in Italian contracts for paintings, until well into the sixteenth century, ultramarine together with gold was frequently specified for use in the most important designate areas of the work.” (Gage 1999:13)

Genuine ultramarine is particularly interesting in the light of the ancient lapidaries and the Biblical use of gemstones to express colour symbolism. This material component to the Renaissance use of colour might be considered even less of a coincidence, if taken into account the elaborate use of gold, silver and precious stones in Mediaeval sacred art and sacred objects. The extensive use of ultramarine on Mary’s garment, along with the use of gold as background in, for example, Simone Martini’s *Christ Discovered in the Temple* (fig. 6 below) makes good sense when seen in this light.

An artist could emphasize the importance of a person, either Biblically speaking or in terms of his own time, by using expensive material. So whenever this costly blue was used, there could be a heavenly connotation or an expression of importance, or often both.

Michelangelo applied lapis lazuli to the heavens in his ‘Last Judgement’ and Pietro Perugino (and many others) used it for the Virgin Mary. A beautiful example of the latter is the mantle of the Virgin and the blue precious stones represented in the Van Eyck Ghent Altarpiece. This was painted in two layers of ultramarine over an azurite base (Gage 1999:14).



Illustration 5

Jan en Hubert van Eyk, *Het Lam Gods*, Ghent Altarpiece, c.1430-32, 350 cm x 461 cm, St. Bavo Cathedral, Ghent (Public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghent_Altarpiece#/media/File:Lamgods_open.jpg).

It should be realized however that in the fifteenth century in the Netherlands, where oil painting was first developed in its modern form, the valuable material lapis lazuli was rather less frequently used than it was in Southern European countries. "The new technique of preparation of colours had the advantage of coating each particle in a film of oil which insulated it against chemical reaction with other pigments, reducing the risk of changes in their colour. Extensive mixture was thus a far less chancy business than it had been hitherto, and a far wider range of pigments could be used than ever before." (Gage 1999:14)

Although not many contracts from this period survive, the case of Dieric Bouts's Altarpiece of the Last Supper (1464-8) for the church in Leuven is instructive. The agreement makes no reference at all to the materials to be used, but only to the required standard of workmanship, and technical analysis of the central panel shows that the blue used is chiefly azurite with a minimal addition of lapis lazuli, chiefly in the sky. Gage (1999:14): "It seems that the practice of mixture which the oil medium allowed had led to a reduction in the status of the materials themselves."

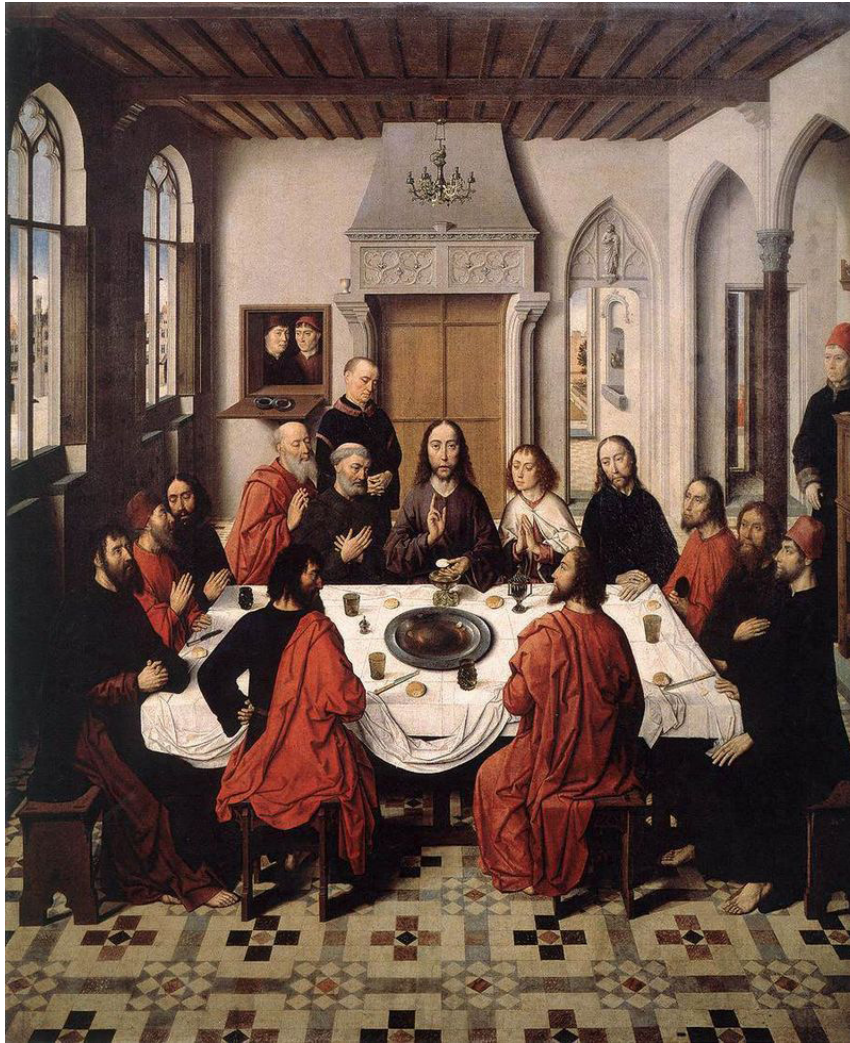


Illustration 6

Diederick Bouts, *The Last Supper*,

c. 1464-67, oil on panel, 180 cm x 150 cm, St Peter, Leuven (Public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dieric_Bouts#/media/File:Dieric_Bouts_-_The_Last_Supper_-_WGA03003.jpg).

Red as cloth of divine authority and suffering

Red was already touched upon with Epiphanius's understanding of Hyacinth and the adulterers in Ezekiel. The use of the colour red in the Bible is somewhat diverse, if not complicated. The term scarlet (κόκκινος) is found for the rope that Rahab the prostitute left hanging from her window (Josh 2:18), as well as for the mock royal robe that put around Jesus by the Roman soldiers to mock him as the king of the Jews (Matt27:28). This use of scarlet in combination

with fancy dress, is also present in Jeremiah (4:30) where people try to dress up in scarlet (περιβάλλη κόκκινον), but fail to impress.

As a general rule for the Old Testament scarlet, proper red or scarlet is associated with ritual sacrifice and payment for sin (Ex 25:4, 26:1, 31, 36, 27:16, 28:5-8, 15). This is even truer for the New Testament, where scarlet is almost exclusively linked with sin (Heb 9:19) or, when it refers to clothes: with a life of sin (Rev 17:4) that is abhorrent to God.

The same kind of red is sometimes referred to by both κόκκινος (scarlet) and πορφυροῦς (purple). The royal robe of Matthew 27, is called purple in John (19:2,4). It may be helpful to recognize that colours may have different shades and qualities for several people and in different circumstances. On which colour the observer settles might well be dependent on his consciousness and perspective at the time. Observers' claims may be jointly inconsistent, while yet none of them is obviously false (Sundström 2007:141). In this case of Jesus's scarlet versus purple robe it is likely that the robe had both qualities and each evangelist emphasized a different shade. Also, in Hebrew similar expressions are often used as a repetitive enforcement, saying the same thing twice, but with a slightly different emphasis. Although written in Greek, Revelation has Hebrew style characteristics that also show in emphasis by saying the same thing twice in a slightly different way. St John the Divine was a Jew after all. Revelation 17:4 describes an evil woman as "clothed in purple and scarlet" (περιβεβλημένη πορφυροῦν καὶ κόκκινον); whilst her sinful city (Rev 18:16) is said to be "clothed in fine linen, purple and scarlet" (βύσσινον καὶ πορφυροῦν καὶ κόκκινον).

Apart from these uses of red, there is also the fiery red (πυρός), which stands for war and devastation (Rev 6:4; 12:3). The LXX uses this word as equivalent for the Hebrew *adom* (אדום, cf. Zech 1:8, 6:2). This is also used as the colour for blood and bloodshed, for instance in 2 Kings 3:22: "red as blood" (אדום כדמים). Although modern Western colour symbolism tends to attach different meanings to colours than Holy Scripture, there is something to be said for its viewpoint that, in general, two meanings may be attributed to every colour, one exalted and the other debased (Wilson 1935:317).

As with other religious symbols, colour symbolism attests to a continuity of history, not by transcending time, but by making vivid, concrete, and actual God's unifying purpose within time. "It impresses upon men with dramatic impact the reality of God's action in the past, and in some measure is instrumental in actualizing his purpose for the future" (Cherbonnier 1956:38).

In Renaissance paintings, Jesus is often portrayed in a combination of red and blue garments, indicating the richness and layers in colour symbolism. While red indicates both his suffering and sacrifice, it also points to royalty; whereas blue points to his heavenly mission and origin. El Greco (Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος, 1541-1614) has both colours for Jesus's garments on the Via Dolorosa (c.1580), while Simone Martini of Sienna (c. 1284-1344) shows Jesus there wearing blue and red as well. Mary often receives blue and red garments as well. She is clothed in blue, because of her presumed position in the heavenlies; and carries red closer to her heart because of her suffering on account Jesus's mission (Luke 2:35). This is why, if two different colours are present, the upper garment is usually blue while the dress is red. Martini also uses red as symbolic for the activity of the Holy Spirit. This is visible in the red Bible, the Word of the Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), which Martini has the young Jesus carry as his parents discovered him in the temple (Luke 2:41-52)



Illustration 7

Simone Martini, *Christ Discovered in the Temple*, 1342, Tempera and gold leaf on wood panel, 495 mm x 351 mm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (Public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simone_Martini#/media/File:Simone_Martini_-_Christ_Discovered_in_the_Temple_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg).

A similar attire of a red dress and blue mantle is found in Botticelli's *Wemyss Madonna*, dating from the first half of the 1480's. While lighter areas and under-layers were painted with egg tempera, oil was used for the darker colours and final glazes: "the red lake glaze and the deep blue folds of the Virgin's tunic and mantle are painted in heat-bodied walnut oil, exploiting the higher refractive index of oil to give these areas a rich, transparent and saturated appearance." (Higgitt, C, White, R, 2005:89)



Illustration 8

B Sandro Botticelli, *The Virgin Adoring the Sleeping Christ Child*, c.1490, Tempera and gold on canvas, 122 x 80.3 cm, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh (Public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_works_by_Sandro_Botticelli#/media/File:Botticelli_Scotland_96.jpg).

From a Biblical symbolic point of view it is likely that the use of blue and red for Mary's garments expresses a spiritual contrast and message. These are not merely different colours, but their contrast also points to a tension in the spiritual message which the artist wishes to convey. "Blue, the color of the sky, symbolizes Heaven and heavenly love. It is the color of truth, because blue always appears in the sky after the clouds are dispelled, suggesting the unveiling of truth." (Ferguson 1989:151) Red represents power to rule. It has been called "the color of sovereign power" (Ferguson 1989:152), while it also has a connotation with flames of suffering as well as the equipping power of the Holy Spirit, which was symbolized by tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2).

The contrast between blue and red common in Renaissance portraits of Mary may emphasize the tension between her heavenly calling and earthly pilgrimage, as she underwent pain and suffering because her willingness to be Jesus's mother (cf. Luke 2:35), while the Holy Spirit sustained her on the way. This contrast may be simultaneously ('Simultankontrast') or successively ('nachwirkend' or 'Sukzessivkontrast', see Rehm 2010:165-166). In other words, not only the colours as such, but also their contrast in apposition has meaning. Either in the here and now, or pointing to a future state that contrasts the present. In their person, Jesus, Mary and the saints carry heavenly status and belonging, but while on earth this brings sacrificial service and suffering. They are pilgrims and the world in its present fallen state is not their home.

Other painters like to emphasize blue or red, one or the other. We already noticed that Bosch gave Jesus a blue garment on the Via Dolorosa. Reversely, Italian painters like Simone Martini and Benvenuto di Giovanni di Meo del Guasta (c.1436 – 1509) opted for a red dress for Christ on the way of the cross, emphasizing Jesus's atoning suffering.

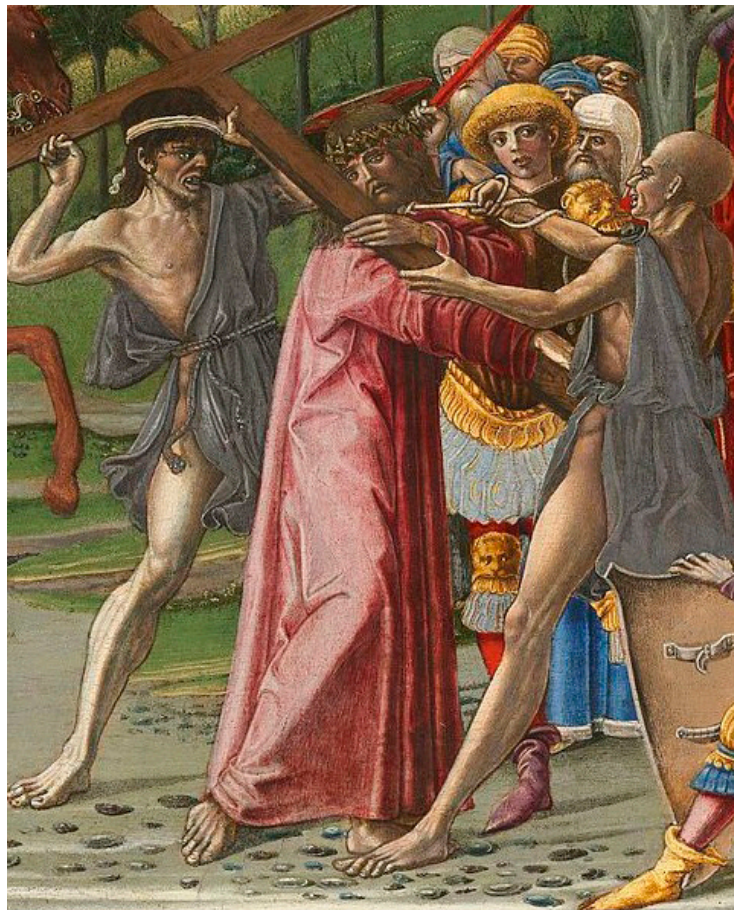


Illustration 9

Benvenuto di Giovanni, *Jesus carrying the Cross (detail)*, c. 1491, tempera on panel, 41.4 x 47.4 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington (Public domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Christ_Carrying_the_Cross_A18132.jpg).

Colour symbolism in liturgical tradition

A further indication of the symbolic value and function of the colours black, white, red and blue is also found in the liturgy of the Western Church, which provided a spiritual context to Christian artists at the time. Initially white was the only liturgical colour used in church. Clergy robes called “albs” (*albus* is Latin for white) are reminiscent of this. According to tradition white was exclusively used up to the fourth century. Pastoureau (1999:113, cf. Morrisloe 1908) writes: “Dans les premiers temps du christianisme, on observe pour le culte une prédominance de la couleur blanche ou des étoffes et des vêtements non teints, le prêtre célébrant l’office avec son costume ordinaire”.¹⁹

Black and red were introduced from that time, but it is not until Innocent III (d. 1216) that the green is first mentioned on record; as well a possibility of violet for occasional use. Before this time only black, white and red had achieved any general acceptance for specific offices in the Western Church (Gage 1999:70). But even by AD1300, when a system of vestment had developed, there was hardly a compulsory codified practice in the West, and for instance, great diversity in use of sombre colours (Pastoureau 1999:132).

Blue was widely popular in an age obsessed with Mary as perceived queen of heaven, significant for the medieval period and Renaissance, while its use is seldom permitted for liturgical purposes nowadays (Pastoureau 1999:130). For the interpretation of Medieval and Renaissance art it is important to realize that modern liturgical values do not always coincide with their Biblical or historical meanings.²⁰

Complexity of Renaissance

Although the Renaissance drew on classical as well as Biblical sources, these overlapped in terms of colour symbolism. Classical sources became more prominent in the 16th century, after Antonius Thylesius published his *Libellus de Coloribus* (1528) and Pelegrino Morato *Del Significato de’ Colori* (1535).

Morato dedicated the longest chapters in his book ‘On the Meaning of Colours’ on green, red, and white, which for him represented the Biblical virtues of hope, charity and faith. This, however, seems to be mainly based on his personal interpretation, despite the countless classical references that *Del Significato* contains (Osborne 2015:82). This suggests that the antique concepts overlapped with personal interpretation and caused to some extent at least a departure from proper Biblical symbolism. This should not really be surprising. A mixture of influences in a turbulent world like the Renaissance is unlikely to lead to uniform results in all authors and artists. And then of course, the Renaissance was a revival movement that appreciated different and at times incompatible, sources like Scripture and Pagan Antiquity. Italian artists like Botticelli (*Birth of Venus*) rediscovered and appreciated pagan myths, but this did not imply that they ceased to be anything else than 15th century Italians who had been culturally Christians for a thousand years. They did not become classical, they merely integrated classical concepts.

In retrospect

Holy Scripture is a rich source of colour-symbolism, which was drawn from in later Christian liturgy and the visual arts in Western civilisation over the centuries. Scripture was found to consider colour not so much as a theoretical value, but as a concrete manifestation in creation. This notion is valuable for Evangelical and Catholic artists who wish to pursue art ‘for the glory of God’, from the premise of a creative relationship between the artist as creature, using created materials to glorify the ultimate Creator of all.

The spiritual value of contrast is a fruitful venue to explore, particularly between darkness and the God-created light, which reveals colours in all their splendour. It is the light of God that brings forth colours, while any conceivable beauty is dispelled by darkness.

This contribution restricted its scope to the use of four colours. In Biblical symbolism black, white, blue and red have a consistent meaning that is supported by a philological basis in the use of these colours in their Scriptural context. While the symbolic value of a colour may depend on its specific context, the core symbolism of each colour is often restricted to a few basic meanings. As contexts are often readily recognized, interpretation of religious Renaissance art that is based on this colour imagery is not necessarily speculative. Especially, as theirs was not mere ‘*ars gratia artis*’. Colours were, more often than not, an integral part of a spiritual message that the artists sought to convey.

To appreciate the values that Renaissance artists expressed in their paintings, it is important to recognize the role of this Biblical colour symbolism in their work. Both the production of Christian art and its interpretation call for a renewed awareness of the spiritual value of colour in Scripture.

Notes

- 1 Translation author: “An image of Christ serves the memory of him, as a reference to him, is the embodiment of his beauty, which is looked upon with artistic imagination, and a means of religious instruction.”
- 2 The use of primary colours to achieve others was probably not practiced widely until the seventeenth century. Gage (1999:14): “To the devaluing of intrinsically precious pigments which oil painting brought with it can be added the identification of a small set of ‘primary’ colours, a set which became codified, around 1600, as black and white, red, yellow and blue. It was the oil-painters’ capacity to mix which led to the recognition that only a few colours were needed to mix many.” The practice of mixing paints to achieve different colours, however, is at least as old as the thirteenth century BC, for instance lapis lazuli was mixed with red ochre to obtain purple (Brysaert 2006:262).
- 3 Cf. Plinius, *Naturalis Historia*, liber 37.3.
- 4 Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 37.11.37, describes amber’s static’s electricity: in Syria quoque feminas verticillos inde facere et vocare harpaga, quia folia paleasque et vestium fimbrias rapiat. “that in Syria the women make whorls of it and call it ‘harpax,’ or ‘the snatcher,’ because it picks up leaves, straws and the fringes of garments.”
- 5 Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 37.21 speaks about the “flashing purple” quality of the amethyst (est amethysti fulgens purpura). The Hebrew word for amethyst goes back to the root “to dream” and the Greek to the combination of “not” and “to be affected by alcohol”, which might suggest that the gem guarded one against intoxication.
- 6 Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 37.20.76: “Many people consider the nature of beryls to be similar to, if not identical with, that of emeralds. Beryls are produced in India and are rarely found elsewhere. All of them are cut by skilled craftsmen to a smooth hexagonal shape since their colour, which is deadened by the dullness

- of an unbroken surface, is enhanced by the reflection from the facets. If they are cut in any other way they lack brilliance. The most highly esteemed beryls are those that reproduce the pure green of the sea, while next in value are the so-called ‘chrysoberyls.’ These are slightly paler, but have a vivid colour approaching that of gold.” (Eandem multis naturam aut certe similem habere berulli videntur. India eos gignit, raro alibi repertos. poliuntur omnes sexangula figura artificum ingeniis, quoniam hebes unitate surda color repercussu angulorum excitetur. aliter politi non habent fulgorem. probatissimi ex iis sunt qui viriditatem maris puri imitantur, proximi qui vocantur chrysoberulli, paulo pallidiores, sed in aureum colorem exeunte fulgore.)
- 7 Cf. Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 37.20.
- 8 Cf. Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 37.56.
- 9 It was known in Plinius’ day that even the toughest gemstones can be worked with a diamond point, see *Naturalis Historia* 37.76.
- 10 Plinius (*Naturalis Historia* 37.21) speaks about the sea-green tint of the ‘smaragdus,’ (est smaragdi virens mare).
- 11 In Roman times, pearls were quite popular and even regarded the most precious product of the sea (see Plinius H.N. 37.78). Amongst Julius Caesars countless affairs was a relationship with Servilia, mother of Marcus Brutus, for whom in his first consulship he bought a pearl costing six million sesterces. See Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar* 50.2(). In English ‘pearl’ is a name of relative late use and dates back to the publication of the Geneva Bible (1599). The medieval Wycliffe Bible, for instance render Matthew 13:45-46 as follows: “Again the kingdom of heavens is like to a merchant, that seeketh good margarites”, which is derived from the Greek μαργαρίτης.
- 12 Cf. Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 37.67.
- 13 Cf. Plinius, *Naturalis Historia* 37.32.
- 14 In his *De Candore*, section F, Uberto Decembrio gives quotations from Ecclesiastes 9:8, Wisdom 7:26; Daniel 9:8, II Maccabees 9:8, Mark 9:2, 16:4; John 20:12; James 2:2; Revelation 4:4
- to emphasize the pure and divine character of white. (McManus 2013:261)
- 15 In Byzantine arts white receives emphasis as well. Gage (1999:70) point to the white robe of Christ in the Transfiguration as “one of the very few colour traditions recorded in the Byzantine Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Fourna.”
- 16 Raft explains that the ‘lazur’ applied in wall paintings was at the beginning of the Middle Ages first of all ultramarine made from lapis lazuli. Later the term changed its meaning and must be translated azurite (Raft 1968:4).
- 17 Like with the French synthetic alternative for lapis lazuli, Prussian blue became an alternative for indigo in the 18th and 19th century, despite its being prone to fading (Kirby, J, Saunders, D 2004:74).
- 18 <http://www.webexhibits.org/pigments/intro/renaissance.html>
- 19 Translation author: “In the earliest times of Christianity, the colour white is predominant in worship or fabrics and clothing that are not dyed, the priest celebrating the office in normal clothes.”
- 20 The liturgical significance of colours today is, to some extent, different from the medieval period and Renaissance. In Innocent’s day, black was initially used for seasons of penance, but today its liturgical use is largely restricted for mourning; in Anglo Catholic traditions also to mourn Jesus’s passing on Good Friday. Eastern Orthodox Church and the Eastern Catholic Churches of Byzantine Rite still do not have a universal system of colours. Today white is the colour of joy and festivity, although its earlier use was connected to the Christians who died for their faith and were sanctified by Christ’s sacrifice (Rev 6:9-11). Red has lost some of its earlier association with the power of the Holy Spirit and divine authority, and is now almost exclusively used for Our Lord’s passion and feasts of martyrs. Green, which does not have a clear symbolic use in Scripture, is today interpreted as the colour of new life and the work of the Holy Spirit, reserved for the ‘ordinary’ time after Epiphany and Pentecost. Violet, a relative newcomer, is now commonly used for days of penance and preparation, like the seasons of Advent and Lent.

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