

RED

Red is the most visible and eye-catching of all colours and has a long long history in human art and life. In a sense it is the colour par excellence; in several languages the words for “red” and for “colour” are the same, the precise meaning distinguished only by context (think of the Spanish word *colorado*). Everywhere red is a hue to draw attention.

Red seems to have been the first true colour – the colour of colours – used in prehistoric cave paintings to complement the lines of black and fill in the body of the great conquered bison or other beast. At first sourced from ochre and iron oxide, later from additional sources such as cochineal, the vivid scarlet dye made from insects by the Aztecs and others, the plant-based red dye from the roots of madder, a widely found plant, and more recently artificial chemically based pigments, red in its variety of forms has long continued as the attention-calling colour.

It has been used through the ages and for a multiplicity of purposes – artistic, symbolic, functional, even, judging from the vial of deep red lip-paint found in an ancient Iranian grave from 5,000 years ago, cosmetic, and is one of the basic colour triad – black, red, and white – used for body decoration throughout the world. Ancient Egyptians and Mayans coloured their faces red in ceremonies; Roman generals painted their bodies red to celebrate victories. Red was the colour for the Roman god of war (the planet Mars being named for him because of its red colour), it was also the colour associated with the Roman army, with its banner of red with gold lettering – we still speak of the “redcoats” of the army today.

The colour went on to be used by mediaeval European rulers as a symbol of majesty and might, red being the colour to be flaunted in the clothes and accoutrements of the powerful. Red also had a marked religious significance throughout the Middle Ages: the colour not only of the blood of Christ and the fires of Hell, but of the flamboyant glorifying church, still seen in cardinals’ red robes. In Renaissance art, red colouring drew attention to the most important figures in a painting. In another but equally “look-at-this” direction, proponents of socialism and communism used red – and very effectively – to stir attention to something new and full of energy: recall “The people’s flag is deepest red”, Moscow’s “red square”, and the red flags of the Soviet Union and China.

Because it is the colour evoking the strongest and most immediate reaction, it is commonly used for urgent warnings, as in the internationally recognised colour of road stop signs: “Red for danger” is engrained in us all. It is the elemental colour of blood, of fire (or anyway of how we picture fire), of lava, of molten (red-hot) iron. Fire engines and fire extinguishers are regularly painted red. Red, highly visible, has been chosen for more than three quarters of national flags, is the most common colour in heraldry, and occurs in countless emblems and adverts, drawing our eyes through its highly noticeable appeal.

It has multiple associations, all of them connected with *active, energising, force*, such as its connection with anger, lust, war and fighting, passion, murder, aggression. It is the traditional colour of heat, warning and danger. A red flag on the battlefield or a red flag hoisted by a pirate ship meant no mercy would be shown, in the early days of motor cars a man with a red flag walked in front as a warning, while in football a player flagrantly breaking the rules is given a red card and sent off.

Red has both a bright and a dark side. Its intrinsic link to energy is in some contexts used to signify love and joy. In many Asian countries it is worn at weddings as the colour of happiness and good fortune. In China and Japan it was seen as a colour that could actively fight evil and disease and in keeping with this the gates of temples were traditionally painted red.

On the dark side red is the colour most frequently associated with hatred, anger (“seeing red”), and wickedness (sins are “scarlet” and sinners “caught red-handed”). Red has overtones of seduction, sexuality, and immorality (as in “the scarlet woman”). In some places red signified adultery, prostitutes were required to wear red, and a red light is still the sign of a brothel in a “red-light district”.

Red is not the only colour with two sides but it does seem to have a particularly strong potential for the extremities of good or evil. Against the blazing red fires of hell and damnation is set the inspiring biblical burning bush, Santa Claus’s famous red robes and Christmas gifts, while Hephaistos the powerful Greek God of fire and metal was at once an ingenious creator and inventor, and a vindictive bringer of ill fortune. Fire “from above” can be destructive – but also “divine” and world-changing. The colour’s two sides come out poignantly in the picture of the red, poppy-covered, killing fields of Flanders where so many were slaughtered in the First World War, yearly recalled as people wear red poppies in undying remembrance of the fallen.

There is nothing neutral or apologetic about red (as distinct from the more muted pink or mauve shades) for beneath these surface contradictions runs the continuing characteristic of red as the colour of highly visible, active, and positive force

Red is a great choice for artists selecting their colours, including perhaps for working on this book (on the other hand maybe you shouldn’t think about the choices too hard – why not go with how you *feel* but perhaps look back later on your and others’ work and consider how far the colours, including red, contribute and work together).

BLUE

Many people’s favourite colour (mine too) is blue, common in nature as, nowadays, in art and dress. It is something of a surprise then that it was not one of the colours used in early visual art. Throughout the world, and history, the dominant black, white and red trio long held sway, while others, like the nowadays taken-for-granted blue and green, did not appear at all. Blue is not mentioned in early literature such as Homer and the Vedic writings and has generally been a late-comer in colour language and awareness.

Though certainly not there at the start and ignored for many thousands of years, the colour blue was much valued in early Egypt. It came from the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli, sourced from Afghanistan, which was worked to produce the vibrant and intense “Egyptian blue” in the third millennium BC, when it was famous for its use in jewellery, art objects and tomb paintings to protect the dead in the afterlife, and then, later, in Buddhist temples.

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