

blue the history of a color

****Blue: The History of a Color****

blue the history of a color is a fascinating journey that stretches back thousands of years. Blue, a color we often take for granted today, wasn't always as common or cherished as it is now. Its story weaves through art, culture, science, and symbolism, revealing much about human civilization itself. Let's dive into the captivating history of blue, exploring how it evolved from a rare and precious hue to one of the most beloved colors in the world.

The Origins of Blue: From Ancient Pigments to Symbolism

The story of blue begins not with the color itself but with the pigments and dyes humans could create. Unlike red or yellow, blue pigments were notoriously difficult to produce in ancient times. Early societies struggled to find natural sources of blue that could be used for painting, textiles, or decoration.

The Rarity of Blue Pigments in Antiquity

Ancient civilizations relied on minerals and plants to produce colors. Among these, blue was exceptionally rare. The most famous early blue pigment is ****lapis lazuli****, a semi-precious stone mined primarily in what is now Afghanistan. This vibrant ultramarine pigment was ground into powder and used sparingly by ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and later by Renaissance painters.

Lapis lazuli wasn't just a pigment; it was a symbol of royalty and divinity. The famous funeral mask of Tutankhamun, for example, features lapis lazuli inlays, underscoring its value and mystique. Because of its rarity and cost, blue was often reserved for gods, kings, and sacred objects.

Egypt and the Birth of Synthetic Blue

Interestingly, the Egyptians were pioneers in creating the first synthetic blue pigment known as ****Egyptian blue****. Around 2200 BCE, they developed a compound made from silica, lime, copper, and alkali, which could be fired to produce a bright blue pigment. This innovation was revolutionary and allowed for more widespread use of blue in art and decoration.

Egyptian blue adorned tombs, temples, and artifacts, symbolizing the heavens and the divine. This early synthetic pigment influenced later cultures and proved that humans could create blue beyond natural minerals.

Blue in Ancient Cultures: Symbolism and Usage

Blue's significance varied widely across ancient civilizations, often imbued with deep symbolic meanings.

Blue in Mesopotamia and the Near East

Mesopotamians prized lapis lazuli and other blue stones, associating the color with the heavens, water, and the gods. Blue beads and amulets were common, believed to offer protection and spiritual power. The color often represented the divine order and cosmic harmony.

Blue in Ancient China

In ancient China, blue was linked to immortality and the natural world, especially the east and springtime. Blue pigments from minerals like azurite were used in ceramics and paintings, but the color was not as dominant as red or yellow in traditional symbolism. However, blue and white porcelain, which would become iconic centuries later, had its roots in these early uses of blue pigment.

Blue in Ancient Greece and Rome

Contrary to some modern assumptions, blue was less prominent in Greek and Roman art compared to other colors like red, black, and white. The Greeks often associated blue with the sea and sky but did not emphasize it as a symbolic color. Roman frescoes and mosaics employed blue pigments, but again, its use was limited by availability and cultural preferences.

The Middle Ages and the Rise of Blue in Europe

The medieval period marked a turning point for blue's popularity, especially in Europe.

The Introduction of Ultramarine in Medieval Art

By the 12th century, lapis lazuli had made its way to Europe through trade routes, where it was ground into ultramarine pigment. This pigment was prized above all others for its intensity and brilliance. Ultramarine was often more expensive than gold, and its use was carefully reserved for sacred subjects, particularly the robes of the Virgin Mary in Christian art.

This association between blue and holiness elevated the color's status and helped cement its cultural importance. Artists and patrons alike sought to incorporate blue to convey purity, devotion, and the divine.

The Symbolism of Blue in Medieval Europe

Blue came to symbolize many virtues during this period—truth, loyalty, and the heavens. Nobles and monarchs adopted blue in their heraldry and clothing to convey these ideals. The rise of stained glass windows in cathedrals also showcased blue's spiritual resonance, filling sacred spaces with ethereal blue light.

The Evolution of Blue in Modern Times

The journey of blue didn't stop in the Middle Ages. The modern era brought technological advances and cultural shifts that made blue more accessible and widespread.

The Development of New Blue Pigments

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the creation of synthetic blue pigments such as **Prussian blue**, **cobalt blue**, and **cerulean blue**. These pigments were cheaper and easier to produce than ultramarine, allowing artists and manufacturers to use blue more liberally.

Prussian blue, discovered accidentally in the early 1700s, was the first modern synthetic pigment. It became popular in art and industry, including in blueprints and dyes. Later, cobalt blue and cerulean added variety to the artist's palette, each offering unique shades and properties.

Blue in Fashion and Culture

As blue pigments became accessible, blue clothing grew in popularity among all social classes. Denim jeans, dyed with indigo, became a symbol of casual wear and rebellion in the 20th century, showing how blue could shift from royal exclusivity to everyday comfort and style.

In popular culture, blue often conveys calmness, trustworthiness, and stability. Brands frequently use blue to evoke professionalism and reliability in logos and marketing materials. This modern symbolism builds on centuries of cultural meanings associated with the color.

Scientific Understanding of Blue: Light, Vision, and Psychology

Beyond history and culture, blue has a unique place in science and human perception.

Why Blue Is Special in the Spectrum

Blue light has shorter wavelengths than red or yellow, which affects how we

perceive it. The sky appears blue because of Rayleigh scattering, where the atmosphere scatters shorter blue wavelengths more than others. This natural phenomenon ties our experience of blue to the vastness of the sky and the ocean.

The Psychology of Blue

Psychologically, blue is often linked to feelings of calm, serenity, and focus. Many people find blue soothing, which is why it's commonly used in bedrooms, hospitals, and offices. However, in some contexts, blue can also evoke sadness or coldness, demonstrating its complex emotional range.

Tips for Using Blue in Art and Design

Understanding the history and symbolism of blue can enrich how you use it today, whether in painting, decorating, or branding.

- **Consider the shade:** Dark blues often convey seriousness and professionalism, while lighter blues suggest tranquility and openness.
- **Mix with warm colors:** Pairing blue with warm tones like orange or yellow can create vibrant, dynamic contrasts.
- **Use blue for trust:** Incorporate blue in branding or uniforms to evoke reliability and confidence.
- **Balance in interiors:** Blue can cool a room but might feel chilly if overused; balance it with warm textures and lighting.

Exploring blue's history adds depth to our appreciation of this color, revealing why it resonates so deeply across cultures and centuries.

From its rare and precious origins in ancient lapis lazuli to its ubiquitous presence in modern life, blue continues to be a color of endless fascination and significance. Whether you notice it in the vast sky, the strokes of a masterpiece, or the fabric of your favorite jeans, blue carries with it a rich heritage that connects us to the past and inspires the future.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the historical significance of the color blue?

Blue has historically been associated with royalty, divinity, and the infinite, often symbolizing trust, loyalty, and wisdom across various cultures.

When was the color blue first used in art?

The earliest known use of blue pigment in art dates back to ancient Egypt around 2600 BCE, where the synthetic pigment Egyptian blue was developed.

Why was blue considered a rare and valuable color in ancient times?

Blue pigments were difficult and expensive to produce, as natural sources like lapis lazuli were rare and had to be imported from distant regions, making blue a luxury color.

How did the perception of blue change during the Renaissance?

During the Renaissance, blue became more accessible due to the development of new pigments like ultramarine, and it was widely used in religious art to symbolize the Virgin Mary and heaven.

What role did blue play in medieval European culture?

In medieval Europe, blue was associated with nobility and the divine; it was used in stained glass, clothing, and heraldry to convey status and spirituality.

How did the invention of synthetic blue pigments impact art and society?

The invention of synthetic blue pigments like Prussian blue and cobalt blue in the 18th and 19th centuries made blue more affordable and widespread, influencing art movements and everyday fashion.

Why is blue commonly used in corporate branding and logos?

Blue evokes feelings of trust, reliability, and professionalism, making it a popular choice for corporate branding to inspire confidence and stability.

What cultural meanings does blue have in different parts of the world?

Blue holds diverse meanings globally; for example, it symbolizes immortality and protection in some Middle Eastern cultures, while in Western cultures it often represents calmness and sadness.

How has blue been represented in literature and popular culture?

Blue frequently symbolizes depth, melancholy, and tranquility in literature and popular culture, appearing in expressions like 'feeling blue' and in titles like 'Blue is the Warmest Color.'

What scientific discoveries influenced the development of blue dyes and pigments?

Scientific advancements in chemistry during the 18th and 19th centuries led to the creation of stable synthetic blue dyes and pigments, such as Prussian blue and indigo, revolutionizing textiles and art.

Additional Resources

****Blue: The History of a Color****

blue the history of a color reveals a fascinating journey that spans cultures, science, art, and symbolism. As one of the most popular and widely recognized colors globally, blue carries a rich legacy that intertwines with human civilization itself. From ancient pigments to modern digital screens, the evolution of blue encapsulates technological advancements, cultural shifts, and changing perceptions of beauty and meaning.

The Origins of Blue: A Rare Hue in Ancient Times

Historically, blue was an elusive color. Unlike reds and yellows, which could be easily extracted from natural sources like ochre and charcoal, blue pigments were difficult to produce and often prohibitively expensive. The scarcity of naturally occurring blue pigments meant that blue was rarely found in early human art and decoration.

Ancient Blue Pigments and Their Sources

The earliest known blue pigment was made from lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone mined primarily in Afghanistan. This pigment, known as ultramarine, was highly prized in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. Its vibrant, deep blue color was often reserved for the most sacred and prestigious purposes, such as the adornment of royal tombs and religious artifacts.

In addition to ultramarine, Egyptians developed a synthetic blue pigment called Egyptian blue, derived from calcium copper silicate. This pigment was used extensively in wall paintings and ceramics, marking one of the earliest instances of man-made blue pigment.

The Symbolism of Blue in Antiquity

Blue held a complex symbolic role in ancient societies. In Egypt, blue was associated with the heavens, water, and fertility, often linked to gods like Amun and the Nile River's life-giving waters. In Mesopotamia, the color represented protection and divinity.

Despite its symbolic importance, blue was not a common color in everyday life due to its rarity and high cost. This scarcity contributed to blue's association with wealth, power, and the divine.

Blue in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: A Symbol of Status and Spirituality

The medieval period saw a transformation in the use and availability of blue pigments, most notably with the rise of ultramarine as a prized material in European art. Derived from lapis lazuli, ultramarine was more expensive than gold and was often reserved for the robes of the Virgin Mary, symbolizing purity and heavenly grace.

The Impact of Ultramarine on Art

Ultramarine's brilliance and durability made it a favorite among Renaissance painters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. The color's association with the divine enhanced its use in religious iconography, elevating blue from a rare curiosity to a significant artistic element.

However, the expense of ultramarine restricted its use to the most important commissions. This economic factor influenced the color palette of medieval and Renaissance art, indirectly shaping cultural perceptions of blue as a noble and sacred color.

Other Blue Pigments and Innovations

During this period, other blue pigments emerged, including azurite, a mineral-based pigment more affordable than ultramarine but less vibrant. The development of indigo dye, extracted from plants, also expanded the use of blue in textiles, particularly in Asia and Europe.

Industrialization and the Democratization of Blue

The 18th and 19th centuries marked a turning point in the history of blue, as technological advancements made blue pigments and dyes more accessible and affordable. This democratization of blue altered its cultural and social significance.

The Invention of Prussian Blue and Synthetic Pigments

In 1706, the accidental discovery of Prussian blue revolutionized pigment production. As the first modern synthetic pigment, Prussian blue was inexpensive, stable, and vibrant, rapidly gaining popularity in painting and printing.

This innovation was followed by the synthesis of cobalt blue and cerulean blue, each with unique chemical compositions and shades, expanding artists' palettes and enabling mass production of blue materials.

Blue in Fashion and Industry

With indigo dye production scaling due to colonial trade and industrial processes, blue became a staple in textiles worldwide. The iconic blue denim jeans emerged in the 19th century as durable workwear, eventually becoming a cultural symbol of casual style and rebellion.

Industrial applications of blue pigments also increased, from blueprints in engineering to blue-tinted glass and ceramics, illustrating the color's integration into everyday life beyond art.

Blue in Modern Science and Technology

In the 20th and 21st centuries, blue continued to evolve with scientific discoveries and technological innovations.

The Science of Blue Light and Color Perception

Blue light occupies a specific range in the visible spectrum, approximately 450-495 nanometers. Research into blue light's effects on human health and circadian rhythms has grown, especially with the proliferation of screens emitting blue wavelengths.

Interestingly, blue's perception can be influenced by cultural and linguistic factors. Some languages historically lacked a distinct word for blue, underlining the color's complex relationship with human cognition.

Blue in Digital Media and Branding

The digital age has solidified blue's status as a dominant color in branding and user interface design. Companies like Facebook, Twitter, and IBM rely heavily on blue to convey trust, professionalism, and calmness.

The versatility of blue in digital media is partly due to its ability to contrast well with other colors and evoke a wide range of emotions, from serenity to authority.

The Cultural and Psychological Dimensions of Blue

Beyond its physical properties and historical uses, blue carries deep cultural and psychological significance.

Blue in Global Cultures

Around the world, blue symbolism varies widely:

- In Western cultures, blue often represents calmness, stability, and sadness (“feeling blue”).
- In Eastern traditions, blue can symbolize immortality and spirituality.
- In Middle Eastern cultures, blue is thought to ward off evil spirits, evident in talismans like the Nazar.

The Psychological Impact of Blue

Studies indicate that blue can lower heart rates and reduce anxiety, making it a common choice in environments designed for relaxation or concentration. On the other hand, excessive exposure to blue light, particularly from screens, has raised concerns about sleep disruption.

Blue the History of a Color: An Ongoing Story

The history of blue is not static but continues to unfold as new materials, technologies, and cultural trends emerge. From ancient lapis lazuli to synthetic dyes, from sacred symbolism to mass-market fashion, blue’s story reflects broader human developments in art, science, and society.

As society’s relationship with color evolves, blue remains a color of complexity and depth, embodying both timeless beauty and modern innovation. Understanding blue the history of a color offers valuable insight into how this hue has shaped—and been shaped by—human experience across millennia.

Blue The History Of A Color

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the blues. Finally, Pastoureau follows blue into contemporary times, when military clothing gave way to the everyday uniform of blue jeans and blue became the universal and unifying color of the Earth as seen from space. Beautifully illustrated, Blue tells the intriguing story of our favorite color and the cultures that have hated it, loved it, and made it essential to some of our greatest works of art.

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blue the history of a color: Yellow Michel Pastoureau, 2023-04-25 From the acclaimed author of Blue, a beautifully illustrated history of yellow from antiquity to the present In this richly illustrated book, Michel Pastoureau—a renowned authority on the history of color and the author of celebrated volumes on blue, black, green, and red—now traces the visual, social, and cultural history of yellow. Focusing on European societies, with comparisons from East Asia, India, Africa, and South America, Yellow tells the intriguing story of the color's evolving place in art, religion, fashion, literature, and science. In Europe today, yellow is a discreet color, little present in everyday life and rarely carrying great symbolism. This has not always been the case. In antiquity, yellow was almost sacred, a symbol of light, warmth, and prosperity. It became highly ambivalent in medieval Europe: greenish yellow came to signify demonic sulfur and bile, the color of forgers, lawless knights, Judas, and Lucifer—while warm yellow recalled honey and gold, serving as a sign of pleasure and abundance. In Asia, yellow has generally had a positive meaning. In ancient China, yellow clothing was reserved for the emperor, while in India the color is associated with happiness. Above all, yellow is the color of Buddhism, whose temple doors are marked with it. Throughout, Pastoureau illuminates the history of yellow with a wealth of captivating images. With its striking design and compelling text, Yellow is a feast for the eye and mind.

blue the history of a color: Blue Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond, 2022 This picture book follows one color's journey throughout history -- from ancient Afghan painters to 1905, when a chemical blue dye was created -- and around the world, as it becomes the blue we know today.

blue the history of a color: Black Michel Pastoureau, 2023-06-13 The story of the color black in art, fashion, and culture—from the beginning of history to the twenty-first century Black—favorite color of priests and penitents, artists and ascetics, fashion designers and fascists—has always stood for powerfully opposed ideas: authority and humility, sin and holiness, rebellion and conformity, wealth and poverty, good and bad. In this beautiful and richly illustrated book, the acclaimed author of Blue now tells the fascinating social history of the color black in Europe. In the beginning was black, Michel Pastoureau tells us. The archetypal color of darkness and death, black was associated

in the early Christian period with hell and the devil but also with monastic virtue. In the medieval era, black became the habit of courtiers and a hallmark of royal luxury. Black took on new meanings for early modern Europeans as they began to print words and images in black and white, and to absorb Isaac Newton's announcement that black was no color after all. During the romantic period, black was melancholy's friend, while in the twentieth century black (and white) came to dominate art, print, photography, and film, and was finally restored to the status of a true color. For Pastoureau, the history of any color must be a social history first because it is societies that give colors everything from their changing names to their changing meanings—and black is exemplary in this regard. In dyes, fabrics, and clothing, and in painting and other art works, black has always been a forceful—and ambivalent—shaper of social, symbolic, and ideological meaning in European societies. With its striking design and compelling text, *Black* will delight anyone who is interested in the history of fashion, art, media, or design.

blue the history of a color: *Green* Michel Pastoureau, 2023-06-13 In this beautiful and richly illustrated book, the acclaimed author of *Blue* and *Black* presents a fascinating and revealing history of the color green in European societies from prehistoric times to today. Examining the evolving place of green in art, clothes, literature, religion, science, and everyday life, Michel Pastoureau traces how culture has profoundly changed the perception and meaning of the color over millennia—and how we misread cultural, social, and art history when we assume that colors have always signified what they do today. Filled with entertaining and enlightening anecdotes, *Green* shows that the color has been ambivalent: a symbol of life, luck, and hope, but also disorder, greed, poison, and the devil. Chemically unstable, green pigments were long difficult to produce and even harder to fix. Not surprisingly, the color has been associated with all that is changeable and fleeting: childhood, love, and money. Only in the Romantic period did green definitively become the color of nature. Pastoureau also explains why the color was connected with the Roman emperor Nero, how it became the color of Islam, why Goethe believed it was the color of the middle class, why some nineteenth-century scholars speculated that the ancient Greeks couldn't see green, and how the color was denigrated by Kandinsky and the Bauhaus. More broadly, *Green* demonstrates that the history of the color is, to a large degree, one of dramatic reversal: long absent, ignored, or rejected, green today has become a ubiquitous and soothing presence as the symbol of environmental causes and the mission to save the planet. With its striking design and compelling text, *Green* will delight anyone who is interested in history, culture, art, fashion, or media.

blue the history of a color: *Pink* Michel Pastoureau, 2025-02-11 From the acclaimed author of *Blue* and other color histories, the beautifully illustrated story of pink, from the first ancient pigments to Barbie Pink has such powerful associations today that it's hard to imagine the color could ever have meant anything different. But it's only since the introduction of the Barbie doll in 1959 that pink has become decisively feminized. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, pink was frequently masculine, and the color has signified many things beyond gender over the course of its long history—from the prim to the vulgar, and from the romantic to the eccentric. In this richly illustrated book, Michel Pastoureau, a celebrated authority on the history of colors, presents a fascinating visual, social, and cultural history of pink in the West, from antiquity to today. Pink pigments first appear in ancient Macedonian paintings, but it was not until the eighteenth century that vivid, saturated pinks were developed for dyeing and painting. At the same time, a popular new flower—the pink rose—finally gave the color a standard name, and pink, assuming a place in everyday life, began to acquire its own symbolism, distinct from that of red, yellow, or white. Bringing the story up to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, *Pink* describes how the color, both adored and detested, became associated with many other things, from softness and pleasure to nudity and sex. Illustrated throughout with a wealth of captivating images, *Pink* is an entertaining and enlightening account of the evolving role and significance of the color in art, fashion, literature, religion, science, and everyday life across the millennia.

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with colour throughout human history. Color is fundamental to our experience and understanding of the world. It crosses continents and cultures, disciplines and decades. It is used to convey information and knowledge, to evoke mood, and to inspire emotion. This book explores the history of our understanding of color, from the ancient world to the present, from Aristotle to Albers. Interspersed in the historical story are numerous thematic essays that look at how color has been used across a wide range of disciplines and fields: in food, music, language and many others. The illustrations are drawn from the Royal College of Art's renowned Colour Reference Library which spans six centuries of works and nearly 2,000 titles, from a Gothic manuscript on the composition of the rainbow to hand-painted Enlightenment works on color theory and vibrant 20th-century color charts, including many fascinating examples not seen in other books. Delving far and wide in this fascinating and varied subject, this book will help readers find new layers of meaning and complexity in their everyday experiences and teach them to look closer at our colorful lives.

blue the history of a color: *The Chemical History of Color* Mary Virginia Orna, 2012-10-06 In this brief, Mary Virginia Orna details the history of color from the chemical point of view. Beginning with the first recorded uses of color and ending in the development of our modern chemical industry, this rich, yet concise exposition shows us how color pervades every aspect of our lives. Our consciousness, our perceptions, our useful appliances and tools, our playthings, our entertainment, our health, and our diagnostic apparatus - all involve color and are based in no small part on chemistry.

blue the history of a color: *A History of Color* Robert A. Crone, 2012-12-06 This is the first comprehensive text on the history of color theories since Halbertsma's book of 1947. Color is discussed in close connection with the evolution of ideas of light and vision. The book has chapters on the ancient Greek ideas of vision and color; on the contributions of Arabic science; on the Scientific Revolution from Kepler to Newton; on the early history of the three-color hypothesis; on the trichromatic theory and defective color vision; and on Goethe's, Schopenhauer's and Hering's theories. New understanding of the structure and functions of the retina and the brain finally results in the modern science of color vision. A History of Color has been written for ophthalmologists, optometrists and others who are interested in visual science and its history. The book requires no specialized knowledge.

blue the history of a color: *Sky Blue Stone* Arash Khazeni, 2014-05-10 This book traces the journeys of a stone across the world. From its remote point of origin in the city of Nishapur in eastern Iran, turquoise was traded through India, Central Asia, and the Near East, becoming an object of imperial exchange between the Safavid, Mughal, and Ottoman empires. Along this trail unfolds the story of turquoise--a phosphate of aluminum and copper formed in rocks below the surface of the earth--and its discovery and export as a global commodity. In the material culture and imperial regalia of early modern Islamic tributary empires moving from the steppe to the sown, turquoise was a sacred stone and a potent symbol of power projected in vivid color displays. From the empires of Islamic Eurasia, the turquoise trade reached Europe, where the stone was collected as an exotic object from the East. The Eurasian trade lasted into the nineteenth century, when the oldest mines in Iran collapsed and lost Aztec mines in the Americas reopened, unearthing more accessible sources of the stone to rival the Persian blue. *Sky Blue Stone* recounts the origins, trade, and circulation of a natural object in the context of the history of Islamic Eurasia and global encounters between empire and nature.

blue the history of a color: *History of color photography* Joseph Solomon Friedman, 1947 History of color photography

blue the history of a color: *Color History* Amelia Khatri, AI, 2025-02-18 Color History unveils the captivating stories behind the pigments and dyes that have shaped civilization, exploring color's historical, social, and artistic significance. It demonstrates how hues have influenced diverse aspects of human life, from fashion and art to politics and scientific discovery. For example, purple dye, once painstakingly derived from Tyrian snails, was so valued it became synonymous with royalty. The book also traces the development and cultural impact of synthetic reds, revolutionary pigments that

transformed art and industry in the 19th century. The book examines the origins of color production, cultural symbolism, and color's impact on art and science. This historical narrative adopts a narrative non-fiction approach, blending scholarly research with engaging storytelling. Starting with the fundamentals of color theory and ancient production methods, the book progresses through specific colors and their historical development, examining both the technical processes and the cultural meanings in various contexts. It concludes by addressing the ongoing evolution of color in modern art, design, and science.

blue the history of a color: The Brilliant History of Color in Art Victoria Finlay, 2014-11-01
The history of art is inseparable from the history of color. And what a fascinating story they tell together: one that brims with an all-star cast of characters, eye-opening details, and unexpected detours through the annals of human civilization and scientific discovery. Enter critically acclaimed writer and popular journalist Victoria Finlay, who here takes readers across the globe and over the centuries on an unforgettable tour through the brilliant history of color in art. Written for newcomers to the subject and aspiring young artists alike, Finlay's quest to uncover the origins and science of color will beguile readers of all ages with its warm and conversational style. Her rich narrative is illustrated in full color throughout with 166 major works of art—most from the collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum. Readers of this book will revel in a treasure trove of fun-filled facts and anecdotes. Were it not for Cleopatra, for instance, purple might not have become the royal color of the Western world. Without Napoleon, the black graphite pencil might never have found its way into the hands of Cézanne. Without mango-eating cows, the sunsets of Turner might have lost their shimmering glow. And were it not for the pigment cobalt blue, the halls of museums worldwide might still be filled with forged Vermeers. Red ocher, green earth, Indian yellow, lead white—no pigment from the artist's broad and diverse palette escapes Finlay's shrewd eye in this breathtaking exploration.

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