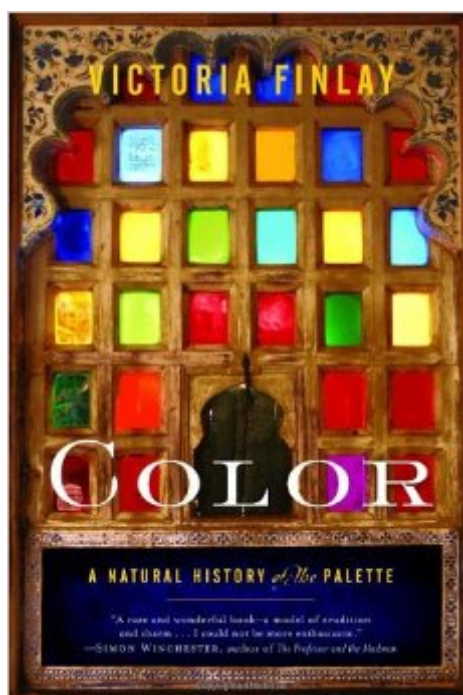


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Color: A Natural History Of The Palette



Synopsis

Discover the tantalizing true stories behind your favorite colors. For example: Cleopatra used saffron—a source of the color yellow—for seduction. Extracted from an Afghan mine, the blue ultramarine paint used by Michelangelo was so expensive he couldn't afford to buy it himself. Since ancient times, carmine red—still found in lipsticks and Cherry Coke today—has come from the blood of insects.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Man, oh, man, did I want to love "Color," but it's bogged down by two major problems. The first is that it wants to be not only a) a history of dyes and pigments but also to some extent b) a history of various colors' cultural associations and c) a travelogue, and there just isn't room in this town for all three of those goals. Each chapter ricochets between the histories of several different types of dyeing materials, their cultural histories in their countries of origin, and author Victoria Finlay's modern-day adventures in those locales. Though the book is organized by the spectrum, with each color (plus black, white, and the first dye, ochre) receiving its own chapter, chasing Finlay's competing agendas makes the book overlong and trying to follow. The author just loses the thread too often. The second is Finlay herself, who makes for a very trying narrator. She has an aggravating tendency to invent elaborate fantasies when facts fail her and expect us to invest in them throughout the chapter, when we just want her to get back to fact. She swears like Mark Twain thought all women did. Her scientific knowledge is lacking and apparently escaped fact-checking (her explanation of why the sky is red at sunset is wrong). Worst, however, is her unabashed

colonialism; her globe-hopping quest for color often doubles as a tour of Britain's erstwhile empire, and there's a patronizing quality in Finlay's distanced view of these cultures that suggests a tyranny of low expectations. Take the chapter on blue, which is in a way the book's strongest because it has a single long-term focus (a journey to a famed lapis lazuli quarry in Afghanistan) but is also one of the most amoral passages I've encountered in nonfiction.

I thoroughly enjoyed this reportage, where Victoria tracks down the origins of so many colours I knew from my childhood paintbox and later days with an aniline dyestuff manufacturer. However good the book is, and I highly recommend this to anyone interested in colourants and their origins, I was left wanting more.....an upto date Part 2 please, to answer the questions that were left unanswered such as, "Is the lack of vivid bright orange just a reaction to the 60' & 70's overuse or is it still the case that cadmium orange (which does not get a mention) has not been replaced with anything quite as powerful? and what are the colours we now use in our paint boxes, wallpapers and so on?" Why am I posing these questions, well Victoria is just the person to tell us authoritatively & accurately. I only had a few quibbles with the entire 400+ pages, one was an editor's slip that allowed India to be separated into Bangladesh, India & Pakistan in 1947! Which I am sure the author knows was not quite the instant route it seems (first it was the eastern half of the division known as Pakistan i.e. East Pakistan which then separated in 1971 I believe from West Pakistan and became Bangladesh). Another was the rather simplistic way she refers to chemical formulas, yes of course AsS is a combination of 1 molecule each of arsenic & sulphur whereas As₂S₃ combines in the ratio of 2:3, however whether this means in fact the latter is any more poisonous than the former can not be assumed from the chemical formula....if I remember my chemistry correctly you need to understand which is more soluble in water or most readily adsorbed in the stomach (a solution of HCl I believe). If the author has confirmed this it was not clear from the text and copious and excellent notes.

In some ways, this little book is hard to explain. Finlay is an excellent writer and thus much of the book is her exotic travels to seek the source of exotic colors from around the world. However, she also explores the history of certain pigments, paints, dyes, and other products. She also gives very interesting details on the production of these pigments, some of which required considerable costs and effort. Finally she gives interesting information about the pigment or product itself, focusing on various chemical properties, such as whether or not it is a poison or is light fast. I enjoyed her early chapters on the production of paint, ranging all the way from ancient Roman encaustic painting, the

hand ground pigments of the Renaissance, and the birth of more standardized paint products during the Industrial revolution. It is fitting that Finlay starts her discussion with ocre, the most common of the dirt colors, which has given us such a broad range of tones through the centuries. In her chapters on Black and Brown, we learn the origins of charcoal, pencil, and ink drawing instruments. In her chapter on White, we learn the terrible history of lead poisoning for those who wore White Lead makeup. In the chapter on Red we learn all about the cochineal beetle, that eats cactus, and has brilliant red blood - the color often called Carmen. We learn of other reds, such as Rose Madder, made from rose petals. Oranges may come from various plant sources and show up in varnish. We hear of brilliant yellows from the urine of cows fed mango leaves, or brilliant but poisonous greens - one of which is suspected of poisoning Napoleon with arsenic infused wallpaper. Finlay goes to Afghanistan to seek lapis blue and has some interesting tales to tell about the Taliban.

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