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Michel Pastoureau, *Yellow: The History of a Color*. Translated by Jody Gladding. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019. 240 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-691-19825-5.

Review by Heather McCune Bruhn, Penn State University.

In Spring 2003, I was riding the Cologne metro with my husband in a car full of kindergarten students. We pulled into a station entirely tiled in orange. “O-R-A-N-G-E” the children slowly chanted in unison. Next came a red station (“R-O-T”) followed by blue (“B-L-A-U”), pink (“R-O-S-A”) and finally yellow (“G-E-L-B”). Those children, so full of the joy of color and proud of their ability to name individual shades, serve as a reminder of the importance of color. Colors can brighten an underground station, transform a room, and signal when to stop and when to go. Color saturates our world and it is the subject of many recent publications, both popular and scholarly. *Yellow: The History of a Color*, Michel Pastoureau’s most recent volume in his color series, unites the best aspects of a popular picture book and a scholarly study. Its lavish illustrations and numerous thematic sections make it accessible to the casual browser, while its detailed investigation of the social history of yellow rewards a closer reading.

Yellow is the fifth volume in a series that began in 2001 with the publication of *Blue*.^[1] It was followed by *Black* (2009), *Green* (2014), and *Red* (2017).^[2] The critical success of *Blue* may account for the copious use of colored pages and large-scale illustrations in each of the succeeding volumes. *Yellow* may be the last in the series: Pastoureau indicates that the five works form “an edifice” (p. 9) that is the product of nearly fifty years of dedication to the history of color. Enthusiastic readers might hope for future publications (*White* or *Purple*, perhaps) to augment this worthy construction.^[3] In each of the published works, Pastoureau presents a chronological account of a color from prehistory to the present day, concentrating primarily upon the Western European tradition. Pastoureau is a medieval historian with a background in heraldry, numismatics, and symbolism whose research and teaching are firmly rooted in that tradition. In his own estimation, he is “not competent to speak about the whole planet and uninterested in compiling, second- or third-hand, works by other researchers on other countries” (p. 10). By avoiding a broad global perspective, the author is able to concentrate on the depth of his experience with color in Western Europe. The result is a subtle, nuanced investigation that relies heavily upon visual, textual, and lexical analysis to present a social history of color.

Numerous volumes on color have been published in the past two decades. These tend to fall into broad categories: monographs on a single color or family of colors; highly visual lexicons of color organized either chronologically or by hue; scientific and technical studies of color; the recipes

and techniques of a particular artist or period; and the historical origins of particular colors and materials.[4] A good example of this last category is Victoria Finlay's *Color: A Natural History of the Palette* (2002).[5] It is both history and travelogue, recounting the author's investigation of various pigments at their sources, along with historical accounts and popular tales. This popular, well-researched volume was followed more recently by Finlay's *The Brilliant History of Color in Art* (2014), a broader and more lavishly illustrated historical overview of the subject, and a good example of a visual lexicon.[6] Other notable visual lexicons include David Coles's *Chromatopia: An Illustrated History of Color* (2018), which investigates color through the lens of a specialist in art materials: Coles's family owned an art supply shop, and after art college, he worked for Cornelisson and Son (a pigment and art supplier) in London for many years and finally started Langridge Artist Colours, his own pigment and oil paint company, in 1992.[7] François Delamare's *Blue Pigments: 5000 Years of Art and Industry* (2007, trans. 2013) exemplifies a scientific and technical study of a single color.[8] Delamare is a materials scientist who delves into the many solutions to the problem of creating a bright, satisfying blue pigment, given the relative rarity of blue rocks and minerals in the natural world.

Michel Pastoureau's *Yellow: The History of a Color* is full of visual appeal. Its publishers spared no expense: This volume is saturated in color from its vivid dust jacket and endpapers that reproduce paintings by Mondrian to the beginnings of chapters presented with multi-page illustrations on bright yellow backgrounds. The three main chapter titles are intriguing: "A Beneficial Color" (chapter one), "An Ambiguous Color" (chapter two), and "An Unpopular Color" (chapter three). Each one presents a distinct historical time period, from prehistory to the fifth century CE, the sixth to fifteenth centuries CE, and the fourteenth century CE to the present day, respectively. Although each chapter is rather broad in scope, divisions within the chapters serve to divide and organize the material both chronologically and thematically. Given its structural organization, it is quite easy to browse through this volume, enjoying the sumptuous illustrations, and settle on one or two themes to explore. The footnotes and the thematic bibliography provide ample direction for further study.

Pastoureau's visual analysis of yellow is strongest when he has written primary source material to rely upon. Although he references archaeological evidence and scientific investigation in his discussion of prehistoric color, for example, the lack of written sources results in a more tentative treatment of yellow in this period (pp. 18-22). By contrast, his reading of yellow in the Greco-Roman tradition is deeper and more nuanced. It is in his use of primary sources that Pastoureau excels: He takes mythology and the works of the great authors as his starting point, and adds documentation of popular culture (household inventories, sumptuary laws, recipes, poetry, and more) to add breadth to his investigation. Some of the most satisfying inquiries in this volume depend on lexical analysis: Pastoureau concentrates on the subtle nuances associated with the individual terms for yellow and its properties, for example, positive associations of orangey *crocus* and the negative connotations of greenish *galbinus* (pp. 62-63).

In this history of yellow, the author presents us with a story arc for yellow: It is at first a popular and positive color, one associated with gold and the sun. It begins, however, to fade in popularity first through its association with feminine clothing, and thus effeminate characteristics, in ancient Rome. By the second chapter, "An Ambiguous Color," the fate of yellow is in peril. First, it is disassociated from gold, and the rising popularity of the precious metal for church plate (and the use of metallic thread in liturgical textiles) helps to ensure that there is no place for yellow in the Bible or in liturgical treatises. While Pastoureau's argument appears soundly based upon the

written evidence, there are several deep yellow vestments that were made of Byzantine silk (not metallic gold) for Ottonian churchmen: I know of at least two in Hildesheim (associated with Sts. Bernward and Godehard), one in Mainz, and one in Brauweiler. With heraldry in the same chapter, Pastoureau is on firmer ground, having both written and visual sources to support his analysis. He sets up an effective comparison between the writings of two heralds, roughly fifty years apart, illustrating first the positive associations of yellow and then the negative (p. 94). A negative yellow is one that indicates bad humors, like dark urine or jaundice. It can also signify lust, envy, and treachery, and became the color associated with Judas, the ultimate betrayer (p. 94, 104-125).

The final chapter of *Yellow* is “The Unpopular Color,” and Pastoureau illustrates its near disappearance from clothing, from paintings, and particularly from Protestant life, with its rejection of bright color. He is careful to present the exceptions to this trend, and in doing so, avoids oversimplifying this complex narrative. Yellow was prized at the court of Henry VIII as a symbol of joy, for example, and silver stain made yellow increasingly available on stained glass beginning in the fourteenth century (pp. 141-43, 146-47). The taste for exotic yellow imports from the East in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is another notable exception (pp. 176-84). It can be difficult to prove an absence, but Pastoureau skillfully employs both visual analysis and a wide range of primary sources (color manuals, scientific treatises, herbals, and lexicons) to demonstrate the decreasing popularity of yellow. In a particularly interesting section, “Discretion, Transgression, and Modernity,” he contrasts the negative associations of yellow (to mark prostitutes, “yellow journalism,” yellow for cowardice) from the 1850s to World War I with the increasing popularity of the color among artists (pp. 186-97). Thus, Eugène Delacroix linked yellow and orange with joy and pleasure, and Vincent van Gogh rhapsodized about the bright yellows of southern France to his brother Theo (pp. 193-94). This taste for yellow was also accompanied by newer, brighter shades of synthetic pigments that could be acquired in pre-mixed tubes of paint (pp. 194-97). The technological advances revolutionized painting, as seen in the work of the Impressionists and the generations who followed them. Pastoureau ends his study of yellow with a brief exploration of orange, a short discourse on yellow in sport (the importance of the yellow jersey in cycling, for example), and some examination of yellow in popular culture today: yellow vests, yellow taxis, yellow post boxes in some countries, and so on (pp. 198-206, 207-09, 210-21). Could yellow, once again, become popular? With this monograph, Michel Pastoureau has certainly made a good case for the color.

NOTES

[1] Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color*, trans. Markus I. Cruse (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2] Michel Pastoureau, *Black: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); Michel Pastoureau, *Green: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014); Michel Pastoureau, *Red: The History of a Color*, trans. Jody Gladding (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[3] Orange is briefly covered in *Yellow: The History of a Color*, pp. 198-205.

[4] Notable examples not mentioned in the text include: Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Mark Clarke, *Medieval Painters'*

Materials and Techniques: The Montpellier Liber Diversarum Arcium (London: Archetype Publications, 2011); Esther Wipfler, ed., *Kunsttechnik und Kunstgeschichte: Das Inkarnat in der Malerei des Mittelalters* (Munich: Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, 2012); Philip Ball, Mark Clarke, and Carinna Parraman, *Colour in the Making: From Old Wisdom to New Brilliance* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013); Kassia St. Clair, *The Secret Lives of Colour* (London: John Murray, 2016); Stella Paul, *Chromaphilia: The Story of Color in Art* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2017). For technical studies produced before 2000, see especially Robert Feller, ed., *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1986); Roy Ashok, ed., *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1993); Elizabeth West Fitzhugh, ed., *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1997).

[5] Victoria Finlay, *Color: A Natural History of the Palette* (New York: Random House, 2002).

[6] Victoria Finlay, *The Brilliant History of Color in Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2014).

[7] David Coles, *Chromatopia: An Illustrated History of Color* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2018).

[8] François Delamare, *Blue Pigments: 5000 Years of Art and Industry*, trans. Yves Rouchaleau (London: Archetype Publications, 2013 [original French edition Paris: Presses de l'École des mines, 2007]).

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