

Q&A-Blue

[Why is the Virgin Mary usually portrayed wearing the color blue?](#)

[Why blues appear vibrant and glowing in dimly lit spaces](#)

[What is the meaning of blue?](#)

Why is the Virgin Mary usually portrayed wearing the color blue?

Embi:

It reflects calm and tranquility, and purity

Jim Wick:

What a superb question,! You may be interested to know that the great English poet and Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote a poem entitled "The Blessed Virgin Compared to The Air That We Breathe". One section of this poem compares the air's blueness to the Virgin's transparent acceptance of God's will: Blue be it. This blue heaven -- the seven, or seven times seven, hued sunbeam shall transmit per fect, not alter it. So God was God of old. A Mother came to mould Perhaps Hopkins was latching onto something theologically revealing by comparing Mary to the color blue.

You see, color psychologists will tell you that of red, blue, yellow and green, blue is the one hue that is both "heteronomous" (passive and allowing of others to perform an action) and "concentric" (looking inward). Mary's response to the guardian angel when it was announced that she was to bear the Divine Lord was heteronomous: "let it be done to me according to thy Word". Her nature was concentric, too. She found meaning not so much from going out of herself to receive the Lord (then she would wear yellow) but from humbling her own soul: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior!" Perhaps the art historians are correct about the shading of the clothes and the light rods, but perhaps there is a theological explanation, too. Hope this helps. Jim Wick/
Wauwatosa, WI

Chris Willard

Good question... During the High Renaissance, the period I suspect you are thinking of, strict conventions existed for the colors of the Virgin and of the Saints as you seem to

imply. Perhaps one reason was so viewers, who often could not read, might identify the principles of the religious scenes. Patrons would not only specify the type of scene they wanted but would often specify certain colors (although local sensibilities of color could override greater conventions). The deep ultramarine was the costliest pigment and the richer you were the more of this you would specify in your contract with the artist. It made sense, evidently to put the brightest and best pigment on the major figure, the Virgin. She is often cloaked in a brilliant red too. When Christ was clad, it was usually in one or both of these hues too.

It is interesting to not not all artists followed this convention. Duccio for example often labeled who was who in the scene, thus avoiding recognition based upon color. Other conventions show St. Francis in browns, St. Peter in yellow ochre, Simon in vermilion. There were a limited number of colors available to Renaissance painters and to make the robes of all the personages in a painting both brilliant and separate (for one couldn't have the robe of the Madonna blending into that of a Saint) was often a tricky maneuver, especially when each wore a robe and a cloak.

Bianca:

My personal opinion is that we often do not take into account the lighting under which these paintings of the Virgin in blue were originally seen. I think the spectrum of light was probably on the blue side in the darkish, naturally lit buildings, and it's possible blue was chosen because it did not recede to the extent it does under modern incandescent and fluorescent lighting. It is actually the red which recedes more. Opens for discussion lots of interesting theological possibilities.

Jupe:

You made some good points but I disagree with the statement that blue would recede more under incandescent (warm) lighting.

Why blues appear vibrant and glowing in dimly lit spaces

Christopher Willard:

It is a known fact, discovered by the researcher Purkinje, that in dim lighting as the rods come into play the red cones become less active. The color range we see shifts toward the violet/blue end of the spectrum. Because of this, the reds in dim light often appear grey while blues suddenly take on an ethereal brightness. It's now known as the Purkinje effect. What is interesting is how in dimly lit apses of churches, the blues do appear vibrant and glowing. Did the Renaissance artists know this and willfully paint in blues for this effect? I've never seen any source material to this but I'm interested if any art historians recall anything. As for blue and red receding...my students find that it all depends upon context as to which colors recede and which advance, thus finding the stereotypical rules are very often broken.

What is the meaning of blue?

LKPete

Yipes! Where to start? Where to stop? Let me dive into my files. Off the top of my head, I can tell you that in the Swedish version of the story of Little Red Riding Hood, the girl's hood is blue, and she isn't saved from the wolf by a woodsman but eaten by the wolf instead. The end. This may go a long way in explaining Ingmar Bergman... More later. Oh, the expression "blue stocking" originates in Venice (Italy, not California) because of the hosiery worn by aristocrats. Boston Brahmins got tagged with this in the 19th century. And, of course, the centuries' long controversy over why the word "blue" never once appears in either the Iliad or the Odyssey. This has been ascribed to Homer's blindness, that the ancient Greeks didn't see color the way "we" (18th century Brits) do, or that (and my favorite guess) that the stories were hundreds of years old by the time Homer got around to writing them down, and that perhaps in the Greece of Ulysses's day a specific word for blue hadn't been deemed necessary. According to Berlin & Kay, blue is the last of the basic colors to be given a name. Simply referring to something as "sky colored" or "sea colored" seemed perfectly adequate. At least until the concept of acid-washed jeans came along. All for now (really).



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Q&A - Color & Shapes (/q-and-a/qa-color-and-shapes)

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Q&A - Global Color (/q-and-a/qa-global-color)

Q&A - The Brain (/q-and-a/qa-the-brain)

Q&A - Behavior (/q-and-a/qa-behavior)

Q&A - Vision (/q-and-a/qa-vision)

Q&A - Color Therapy (/q-and-a/qa-color-therapy)

Q&A - Interiors (/q-and-a/qa-interiors)

Q&A - Healthcare (/q-and-a/qa-healthcare)

Q&A - Children (/q-and-a/qa-children)

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- Q&A - Color & Consumers (/q-and-a/qa-color-and-consumers)
- Q&A - Music (/q-and-a/qa-music)
- Q&A - Cars (/q-and-a/qa-cars)
- Q&A - Colors (/q-and-a/qa-colors)
 - Q&A - Black White Grey (/q-and-a/qa-colors/qa-black-white-grey)
 - Q&A - Blue (/q-and-a/qa-colors/qa-blue)
 - Q&A - Green (/q-and-a/qa-colors/qa-green)
 - Q&A - Orange (/q-and-a/qa-colors/qa-orange)
 - Q&A - Purple (/q-and-a/qa-colors/qa-purple)
 - Q&A - Red (/q-and-a/qa-colors/qa-red)
 - Q&A - Yellow (/q-and-a/qa-colors/qa-yellow)
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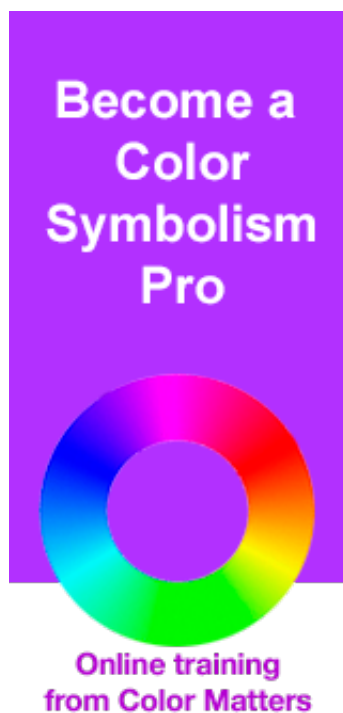
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