

Considering the Fascinating World of Color Theory Across Cultures and Religions: Enhancing our Appreciation of Visual Storytelling

By Cana Hartman

Color theory is a fascinating subject that explores the psychological and cultural implications of color. It is defined as the study of how colors work together and how they affect our emotions and perceptions. Specific symbolism may be assigned to a color because of its rarity or monetary value of the day, or associations to observations in nature. We see this across different cultural, spiritual, or religious groups throughout our recorded history. Viewing the St John's Bible has made me reflect on the color choices made, and how that enhances the visual telling of the passages. Let's take a look at how color theory presents itself in a variety of cultures and religions, and then specifically Christianity. Pondering this, I believe, will enrich our experience viewing the St John's Bible, and perhaps we will then pick up on other colorful cues throughout our lives.

Nowadays, colors can be created in a myriad of ways; it is a vast science. Most pigments are now created in a lab, using chemicals and modern processes. However, some artists still experiment with more traditional ways of using natural ingredients to produce the desired shades. But, all paint and dye is generally made up of water, resins, pigments, and additives. The expense and accessibility of the ingredients can greatly affect the cost, and thereby the frequency with which specific colors are used. Two great examples of this are Tyrian Purple and Ultramarine.

Purple is widely associated with royalty. In ancient Roman culture, for example, Tyrian purple was reserved for the clothing of emperors and senators. Sumptuary laws prohibited commoners from wearing the shade, and senators were only permitted to have a single purple stripe on their clothing. This was because the vibrant purple dye was made from a particular species of sea snail (*Murex*), and it was expensive and very difficult to create. The dye did not fade with time but instead increased in brilliance with exposure to air and sunlight. This reverence for purple spilled over into Egypt with the Romans, and a deep red-purple paint became a symbol of royalty in painted statues and other art, using Imperial Porphyry, an igneous rock, also difficult to process.

One of my favorite stories in art history is that Michelangelo couldn't afford enough ultramarine blue paint for the Virgin Mary's cloak, and so never completed his painting "The Entombment". Johannes Vermeer put his family in debt to acquire the pigment for his paintings featuring the color, such as "The

Milk Maid". Ultramarine pigment was made from a deep blue precious stone, lapis lazuli. During the time of the Renaissance, when so much recognizable Christian imagery was produced, this ingredient was literally worth more than gold. Again, the inaccessibility of a color brought about great reverence. And, a figure that was given great esteem during this time period was the Virgin Mary. Still to this day, you will almost always see her depicted with a blue cloak.

Religions hold fast to different colors, but across all, you can see how they evoke emotion and a sense of alliance. Islam, for example, has a strong tie to the color green. When you visit mosques and other sacred Islamic places, you'll see it featured. In the Qur'an, it is written that the inhabitants of paradise will wear green garments of fine silk. Some say it was Muhammad's favorite color and that he wore a green cloak and turban. It was so closely associated with Islam during the medieval times, that the color was specifically omitted from most European coats of arms and Christian Crusaders strictly avoided it.

Especially during this time of year, there is a strong association between the color blue and Judaism. Retailers will put out almost anything blue and call it a Hanukkah decoration. Despite the capitalistic motives, blue has a much deeper symbolic significance in the Jewish tradition. In the Torah, the Israelites are commanded to dye one of the threads of their prayer shawl with tekhelet, an indigo-colored dye. Here, blue represents the sky and spirituality, and when they see that thread it reminds them of the blue sky and God above them in Heaven.

Buddhists recognize "The rainbow of Nirvana". In this religion, color seems to go even deeper than surface decoration; it symbolizes a state of mind. They believe that meditating on the individual colors and their essences is a way to achieve spiritual transformation. The highest state of all is to attain "rainbow body" when matter is transformed into pure light. Just as the visible light spectrum contains all color, the rainbow body signifies the awakening of the inner self to all possible earthly knowledge before stepping over the threshold to the state of Nirvana.

In Christianity, we love to use color symbolism in our sanctuary. We assign colors to each liturgical season. Here are some common Christian associations that will help us to look with renewed eyes at the colors in the St John's Bible and in our worship:

- Black, which represents death, is the liturgical color for Good Friday. It can also represent sin, which results in separation from the light of Christ.
- Blue, the color of the sky, is symbolic of heaven and of truth. It can be used as an alternative to purple for the color for Advent,

differentiating it from Lent. As we have discussed, it is often used in depicting the Holy Family, specifically Mother Mary.

- Green is the color of plant life and spring and thus represents the triumph of life over death. It's the liturgical color for the Trinity season in some denominations and is also used during Epiphany. It brings thoughts of life, restoration, and renewal. In contrast to the colors of dead or dying vegetation, evergreen trees never lose their foliage and have become a symbol of God's earthly birth (Christmas), and His everlasting life.
- Purple, the color for penitence and mourning, is the traditional color for the seasons of Advent and Lent. It is also the color of royalty, demonstrating the anticipation and reception of the coming "king" (Jesus Christ) celebrated during Advent.
- Red, the color of blood and fire, is the liturgical color for Pentecost and to commemorate martyred saints. The color red is mentioned numerous times in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. For instance, in Exodus 12:7-13, it is mentioned in reference to the Passover lamb, when God instructed the Israelites to take the blood of a lamb and put it on the sides and top of their doorframes to protect them from the plague that was to come. The book of Leviticus extensively implies an association with sacrifice, which is seen as a symbol of atonement for sin. It is also linked to the temptations of the flesh and sin, as implied in Isaiah 1:18 1.
- White, a symbol of purity, innocence and holiness, is used during Christmas and Easter, and is sometimes represented by silver. A garment that is white is considered to be the cleanest possible and is also used to describe the condition of the human heart after we are cleaned from sin. When Jesus washes us clean, it is said that our sins are washed white as snow. Brides in our society usually wear white as a symbol of purity (of intention, you Victorian) before entering into a sanctified marriage.

Overall, the study of color and its impact on our emotions and perceptions is an important aspect of art, culture, and communication. Understanding color theory can help us appreciate the significance and meaning behind different color choices, whether it's in a painting or a religious ceremony. Visual storytelling surrounds us every day. Therefore, exploring and considering colors can lead to a richer and more fulfilling experience in our daily lives, a deeper appreciation for religious traditions, and it might help us appreciate the St John's Bible even more.

The Entombment by Michelangelo



The Milk Maid by Vermeer



Colors of the liturgical seasons

