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## THE COLOUR OF BEAUTY



Most people don't look . . .  
 The gaze that pierces – few have it –  
 What does the gaze pierce?  
 The question mark.

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON

COLOUR IS THE LANGUAGE OF LIGHT; IT ADORNS THE EARTH with beauty. Through colour light brings its passion, kindness and imagination to all things: pink to granite, green to leaves, blue to ocean, yellow to dawn. Light is not simply a functional brightness that clears space for visibility. Perhaps of all the elements, light has the most refined imagination; it is never merely a medium. Light is the greatest unnoticed force of transfiguration in the world: it literally alters everything it touches and through colour dresses nature to delight, befriend, inspire and shelter us. The miracle of colour is a testament to the diverse, precise and ever surprising beauty of the primal imagination. The intense passion of the first artist glows forth in the rich colours of creation. In this sense, colour

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is the visual Eucharist of things. In a world without colour, it would be impossible to imagine beauty; for colour and beauty are sisters. As Goethe said: the eye needs colour as much as it needs light.

## SPRING SACRAMENTS OF COLOUR IN THE BURREN

MY EARLIEST MEMORIES ARE OF THE LANDSCAPE OF THE BURREN IN the West of Ireland. The Burren is an ancient kingdom of limestone sculptures carved slowly by rain, wind and time. Limestone is a living stone. Everywhere light conspires to invest these stone shapes with nuance. When rain comes, the whole stonescape turns blue-black. Rain has artistic permission here that it could enjoy in no other landscape. Mostly invisible and quickly absorbed by the earth, rain achieves powerful visibility on the vast limestone pavements. Like an artist who has fallen into despair, it drenches the grey stone with gleaming black. Everywhere the stone drinks in blackness as though it secretly corresponded to its inner mind. Then the rain ceases and the sun returns; the light effects a complete transfiguration. Gradually the dark dries off and the stonescape literally resurrects, glistening with washed whiteness, a reminder that this stone world once lived on the ocean floor.

Winter always makes the Burren more severe. The ameliorating green of trees and grasses diminishes in cold paleness. As the grip of winter loosens, the landscape gradually returns from bleakness to the welcome of exotic spring flowers which have an unexpected home here. The Burren is famous for its rare alpine and arctic flora and gradually amidst the grey stonescape, these delicate flowers creep forth in subtle sacraments of colour. Profusions of gentian surface like blue stars, white and purple orchids rise to offer their quiet grandeur to view, mountain avens with their white and yellow countenances make the stone seem kind. In crowds the harebells test their deft blueness against the breeze. Rich orange,

yellow lichens come to cover the white limestone bearing beautiful names like Sea Ivory, Tar Lichen, Orange Sea Lichen and Common Orange Lichen. And perhaps most striking of all, the Bloody Cranesbill rises in its delicate crimson petals and white heart through the *scailps* (crevices) in the limestone.

As a child I often watched a local blacksmith at work. He would place the silver horseshoes into a black, coal-dust fire to redden them. Under the fierce breath of the bellows the mound of black dust was an instant furnace of redness. Perhaps, similarly the very breath of life breathes into things until their individual colours flame. Such is the generosity of air, self-effacing and unseen it asks nothing of the eye, yet it offers life to the invisible fields where light can unfold its scriptures of colour. We dwell between the air and the earth, guests of that middle kingdom where light and colour embrace.

### THE APPARITION OF COLOUR

ONCE WHILE TRAVELLING IN CHINA I WAS ON MY WAY TO Shanghai Airport. It was a dull morning. The road, suburbs and landscape were grey and colourless. Even the track and trek of commuters seemed like some underworld parade. It began to rain in slanted layers. Then I noticed a cyclist coming towards me. Attached to the back of his bicycle was a large basket piled high with balls of wool in every colour you could imagine. This determined cyclist was like a traveller from another world who transfigured the whole grey suburban landscape with his gentle cargo of blues, yellows, greens, indigos, oranges, purples and ochres.

The presence and experience of colour is at the very heart of human life. In a sense, we are created for a life full of colour. It is no accident that we abandon the world when the colours vanish and the reign of darkness commences. Night is the land where all

the outer colours sleep. We awaken and return to the world when the colours return at dawn. There is a beautiful word in Irish for this: *luisne* – the first blush of light before dawn breaks. Gradually, the coloured horizon of dawn gives way to daylight.

### THE RAINBOW AS PRISM

WE TAKE DAYLIGHT FOR GRANTED. YET DAYLIGHT IS NOT SIMPLY there; it is an event, a smooth all-pervasive happening. Daylight is created light, a light woven seamlessly from a whole series of colours. The unnoticed miracle of everyday light is exposed in the rainbow, an apparition that is both illusory and tenuous. Conamara is a landscape beloved of rainbows. Between the rich light and the frequent rains, rainbows love to appear here. Every rainbow is a revelation: the optic through water drops that separates seamless daylight to reveal and display the secret inlay of colours that dwell at the heart of ordinary light.

In a sense, one could speak of the secret life of colour. Despite its outward beckoning, like true beauty, colour is immensely hesitant in giving away its secrets. Painters learn to respect the hesitancy of colour and endeavour to refine their skill to become worthy of its revelations. A painter learns the language of colour slowly. As in learning any language, you struggle for a long time outside the language. There is a willed deliberateness to how you sequence the strange words to make a sentence. Then one day the language lets you in to where the words dance to your thoughts with ease and fluency. Perhaps for a painter, too, there is a day when colour lets him in, when his palette sings with synergy and delight. For the artist Paul Klee that day happened during a trip to Tunisia in 1914. He wrote: 'Colour possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always, I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour. Colour and I are one. I am a painter.'

The attempt to understand and explain colour has always fascinated the human mind. In classical times Aristotle's theory held that colour belonged objectively to things. This understanding held sway until the seventeenth century. One day in his room, a young Isaac Newton was experimenting with light. He placed a prism against the light ray coming through his window and noticed how the prism split the white light into its constituent colours. The genius of his intuition inspired him to place a second prism upside down in the path of the diverse colours. In that moment the colours coalesced again into a seamless white light. Newton concluded that colour is generated by subjective perception and vision. For Aristotle, light awakened colour. For the medieval mind, light was the vehicle of colour. But for Newton light *is* colour.

### THE ROSE IS RED BECAUSE IT REJECTS RED

COLOUR HAS ALWAYS INTRIGUED ME AND IN RESEARCHING THIS book I found great delight in learning about colour, what it actually is and how it comes about. We need to sketch in some simple physics in order to illuminate this. Colour is not a cloak worn by an object; each colour is generated and shows the vulnerability of an object: its Being-Seen-ness. One of the great illusions of human vision is that there is stillness, yet what seems still to our eyes is in fact never still. The whole physical world is in a state of permanent vibration and change. Each object is constantly astir. The physical world is an electromagnetic field. Each thing is deftly aflow in the play of energy, namely, electromagnetic waves. The waves flow in different frequencies. Our eyes only pick up a small section of this vibrating wave-world: this is what we call visible light. What we see, we see in light; yet what we see is always partial, a selection from the full spectrum of what is there but not visible to us. There is a real world of invisible light here around us but we cannot see it.

Though we feel at home and sure in the visible world, it is in truth a limited place. Visible light comprises only one-tenth of the whole light spectrum. When we see the whole flow of visible light together, it is white.

Different colours arise when certain wavelengths are filleted from the spectrum. Colour is always the result of a subtraction from whiteness and not the singular, lonely choice of outer garment by an object. Each object is already pulsing to a certain frequency and the hunger or generosity of this frequency determines how much colour an object absorbs. Each bird, stone, tree, wave and face is sistered to sunlight in an individual way. Each thing comes alive in the sun: how a stone vibrates to the sun is how it absorbs the light's energy at that frequency and the rhythm of the frequency is the key to its colour. This frequency fillets out a specific colour from the spectrum of light and this then becomes the colour of the object. For centuries a granite rock might lie in the corner of a field, perfectly still, dressed in sure colour – this is what the eye sees, yet what the eye cannot see are the secret vibrations and continuous inner change that underlie and indeed create this still, coloured image. Colour is never dead or neutral: it issues from individual, secret frequencies.

What is the spectrum of colour? It is the reservoir, the broad band of colour that is always present. But the human eye can never behold the whole visual/non-visual range of that spectrum. In this sense, each object is an abbreviation: its individual frequency absorbs one colour from the spectrum, while the other colours are still present but remain unseen. This is why there is transparency. When the rays of light do not correspond with the individual pulse of an object, the object reflects the light. But we never actually notice or see the light rays which pass through. It is the light rays which the object resists and will not let in that return and reach our eyes. The very thereness of a flower or a stone is an act of resistance to light, and colour is the fruit of this resistance. The colours we cannot see are the ones the object absorbs. The colour it rejects is,

ironically, the one in which we see it dressed. For instance, a rose absorbs yellow and blue, and it rejects red. So we see a rose as red. A daffodil absorbs blue and red, but rejects yellow and yet it is this yellow we see.

While the object resists the light, the object is also penetrated by the light. The activity that gives an object its colour has all the play and excitement of lovemaking. Yet much remains hidden in the solitude of the object where the unseen colours continue to dwell. If an object could get up and look at itself in a mirror, it would undoubtedly be surprised at its public countenance. In all probability this is not how it would see itself; the mirror would offer no glimpse of the inner colours which have no need of the outside eye: they continue to live concealed within the object.

#### THE EYE IS THE DESTINATION OF COLOUR

WHEN WE COME TO GLIMPSE HOW COLOUR ARISES, WE BEGIN TO understand what a rich symbolic world colour suggests. Colour is not simply a surface pigment or covering. The very heart of an object glows through its colour, and colour is always reaching towards us. Without our eyes there is no colour. All colour is colour reflected from an object towards us and the eye is the secret destination of colour. What happens between the granite stone and the sun is read by the brain and the eye as colour. We could say, then, that it belongs to the psychic grandeur of the human heart, that it is fashioned to behold the world in the vitality, warmth and wonder of colour. We are creatures fashioned to behold colour because the soul loves beauty. Plato stated this elegantly in the *Phaedrus*. He suggests that our present love of beauty is an awakened echo of our earlier life in the eternal world. There we knew beauty because we lived in her grace: 'But of beauty, I repeat again that we saw her there shining in company with the celestial

forms; and coming to earth we find her here too, shining in clearness through the clearest aperture of sense . . . But this is the privilege of beauty, that being the loveliest she is also the most palpable to sight.'

The beauty of colour is an intricate play of presence and absence. As we have seen, a colour is never alone, for each reflected colour arises through the interplay of other hidden colours which we do not see. After the perished paleness of winter, the sight of a field of new spring grass is pleasing in its hope and urgency. Yet such a field of breathing greenness is the achievement of chlorophyll, which has breathed in the red and blue of the sunlight to reflect and release green. Colour is always a dance where the vital partners are invisible. Indeed one could legitimately speak of the music of colour. A soprano can break a wine glass if her note happens to hit the natural vibrational note of the glass and, in a sense, this is the way that colour too is released. When a ray of light hits the natural vibrational note of an object, it alters the vibration; it becomes absorbed itself in this alteration and what is reflected outwards is the object's colour. The Impressionist movement, for instance, was totally immersed in the attempt to capture these vibrations of colour.

From another perspective, we could say that the colour we perceive is the remains of the other colours which have been absorbed. The colour that gleams towards us lives from its invisible ghosts, the colours buried deep in the seen object. When we behold the magnificent and vanishing raiment of autumn colour, we are seeing a double valediction, the inner leave-taking of the hidden companion colours without which the outer autumn colours could never have attained visibility. Language is weak in bringing the visual to expression. The French philosopher Derrida said that colour has not yet been named. All colour has its origin in the brightness of white.

our language confirm blue as the indecipherable source from where the unexpected sets out towards us. All the while we continue with our lives never suspecting that we have become its destination and target. Great rituals are meant to harness and bless the unexpected. Perhaps this is why blue appears as desirable for a bride. For her wedding, it is recommended that she have:

Something old,  
 Something new,  
 Something borrowed,  
 Something blue.

When we quarried limestone, it was surprising to find deep beneath the white-grey surface a richer colour. When we broke into the deeper layering and the caked stone fell out, we noticed that the interior of the limestone was a rich blue. This blue depth of limestone was often counterpointed by white knuckles of fossil nesting within it. The most beautiful blue stone of all is of course lapis lazuli.

The other blue of childhood was bluestone. In summer the green potato stalks were sprayed with bluestone to prevent blight. We had to fill a large barrel of water and then the powdered bluestone was suspended in the water in a canvas bag. For some days afterwards the potato stalks looked as if they had been caught out in a blue rain.

### COLOUR THRESHOLDS

The line changes the colour of the colours on either side of it.

PATRICK HERON

A colour *shines* in its surroundings. (Just as eyes only smile in a face.)

WITTGENSTEIN

OUR EXPLORATION OF COLOUR HAS CONCENTRATED ON CERTAIN distinctive colours but every colour tends to change in the vicinity of other colours.

Colour is the clothing of beauty. No colour stands alone. Each single colour emerges in a dance where its other sustaining partners are invisible. Colour is always a togetherness that remains kinetic, a brightening or darkening. Yet each colour has its own individuality, personality and native mood. The divine artistry of nature is seen in how lyrically it combines and modulates its raiment of colours. Natural beauty is not accidental. There is a wondrous elegance and grace of imagination behind it. An artist who takes her easel outside to paint the most ordinary corner of a field learns quietly the intricacy, elegance and majesty of what is hidden in the ordinary. Colour has bequeathed her deepest secrets to nature.

Within even one, single colour there is a fluent geography of tone: at one end the colour belongs more to the darkness, at the other end more to the light. Each colour is its own spectrum. Within itself and together with other colours each colour remains fluent in that perennial yet elusive dance of hue.

Vasili Kandinsky, the Russian painter, often said that when he saw colour, he heard music: 'Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another to cause vibrations in the soul.'

Paul Klee said: 'Colour links us with cosmic regions. In this it is similar to music. Colour can take on, in the same manner as musical tones, myriad possible shades from the first small steps to the rich flowering of the coloured chord.'

We will conclude our exploration with a pen sketch of a master colourist, Vermeer: his use of light and subtlety of tone evoke the inner nuance and sophistication of colour.