

# The Colors of a Period as the Embodiment of Dreams

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## **Towards the Surface**

Viktor & Rolf's "Bluescreen" show offers a clear theme direction for KCI's Fashion in Colors exhibition. Whole outfits or details of clothing appeared in a special color known as chromakey blue, on the runway of Viktor & Rolf's 2002-2003 Autumn/Winter collection in Paris. Images of the models were simultaneously projected onto an enormous screen in the background of the catwalk. Using TV and video technology called chromakey, the blue sections on the clothing projected onto the screen visually disappeared, and were suddenly replaced by moving images instead. The audience found themselves looking at a model wearing not a dress or a coat, but crowds in the city, cars racing past each other down the freeway, a series of sand dunes, or pigeons exploding into the air.

The clothes themselves, inherently "unique material objects," were obliterated; patterns and images were projected onto and colored the body instead. The layers of fashion and image—the interweaving of the inherently "unique material object" and "the image"—is something everyone recognizes is a feature of the clothes we wear. Viktor & Rolf's "Bluescreen" show affirmed the message that clothes can be "an embodiment of dreams." However, this show was arguably the first to succeed in reaffirming this so visually and clearly. "Bluescreen" vividly conveyed the message that clothing has layers of invisible and hidden meaning.

In the interview Viktor & Rolf said of their presentation, "fashion is more than just clothes, it provides an aura and an escape to reality, a fantasy, a dream."<sup>1</sup> Clothes provide a way to drift away from and transcend reality and to discover different images—they represent a "unique material object" and at the same time a complex presence, onto which abstract dreams and fantasies are projected.

Before "Bluescreen," Viktor & Rolf held a show featuring black to emphasize form. Black, while filling in the form, also had the effect of completely removing both the rich texture of the materials and the details of the intricate cut used in their designs so that only an integrated flat, black surface and a stunning silhouette remained. Color and texture were completely removed: all that was visible was the silhouette of the clothing that enclosed the form, and the clothing was then used to convey to the observer various images within the silhouette.

Clothes as “surface.” Viktor & Rolf’s work represents and pays attention to this idea. That notion of “surface” intersects powerfully with KCI’s current theme of “color.”

## **Color and Era**

Even if a discussion of color were to be restricted to a single area—dyed fabric, for example—inevitably that discussion would have to incorporate the cultures of different people at different times. The topic would surely encompass the issue of color recognition, followed by symbolism of color, and then a history of the extensive, worldwide trade in color, which dates back to ancient times as evidenced by trade in murex shells and red dyes such as cochineal. One would also cover the history of science and technology, the physiology of the brain, and psychology, all of which are closely linked to any discussion on color. Another approach that could be taken when discussing the color of dyes would be a botanical or zoological one. For any discussion of color, there is also always the angle of fashion, or trends, and the social context of colors, including an examination of social tastes and preferences. Furthermore, there is the matter of color as found in diverse literature from all ages and cultures, where it has been freed from its materiality to appear as its essence. The range of perspectives from which this subject can be examined is truly staggering.

I would, however, like to emphasize that the focus of this exhibition is fashion. We are focusing on the period spanning from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present, with a spotlight on France, which arguably has been the center of fashion during most of this time frame. What we are attempting to do is to completely remove the articles of clothing, most of which belong to the KCI collection, from a temporal axis and to present the relationship between the element of color and clothes in a new way.

Although the following information is not strictly necessary for those viewing the exhibition, this essay will refer to the tendency of certain colors to appear in certain periods. This is something that we at KCI have noticed experientially—we have observed that certain groups of clothes in the collection that have been classified by period are clearly differentiated by tone or color. This suggests the dominant color of that period. The following is a description of color trends as identified by KCI.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century: costumes from this period belonged to the upper class. They are extremely colorful, featuring reds, yellows, and blues on rich silk textile. However, the dominant colors of this period are pale and light tones, colors generally classified as pale pastels. The values of the Rococo period—during which even shadows were depicted in rose pink—were then transformed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by what can be described as “Tabula Rasa” values. The shift to white, in particular white cotton, was fully as dramatic as the revolution itself. As this has already been examined in *Revolution in Fashion 1715-1815*,<sup>2</sup> I will not repeat myself here, but the fact that white, with its strong link to cotton, was recognized as the new color—a fashionable color—was the result of

developments in bleaching methods at the time.<sup>3</sup> The trend for white cotton occurred because it was a completely new clothing material. In other words, it was during this time that white became, for the masses, a color that was attainable yet luxurious and totally new. An examination of the 1800s reveals a convergence towards white as a fashionable color and this is reinforced by the fact that 37% of the costumes in the KCI collection from this period are white.

Colors in fashion underwent another dramatic change in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The colors of costumes representing the late 19<sup>th</sup> century are dazzling and even somewhat gaudy. These colors reflect the discovery of aniline dye in 1856. Impressionist painters, who were exploring new ways to express color on the canvas, frequently featured fashionable clothes in their work. It's possible to suggest that painters responded to the new colors—mauve, magenta, fuchsia, aniline black and methyl blue, for example—because they were making their appearance in artificially dyed “mode” clothing all around town. But the close relationship between color and texture was another aspect the Impressionists did not ignore.

Such deep and dazzling colors are strongly linked with heavy-looking (and literally heavy), luxurious textiles such as velvet, armure weave velvet, damask, grosgrain and satin. Furthermore, black, or colors with little sheen and with color saturation so dark as to be almost black, were another feature in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Adding to the visual and actual weight, much clothing of this period was dominated by excessive decoration, such as passementerie trimmings. Thus, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period represented by colors featuring a unique heaviness.

White reappeared in women's clothing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 36% of the costumes from this period in the KCI collection are white.<sup>4</sup> Eventually a taste for strong colors came to reflect those featured in the Ballet Russe, which at the time took Paris by storm. Alternatively, the new colors might be attributed to the influence of Poiret, who wrote, “I released several aggressive wolves amongst the sheep on the pasture (all in soft colors like pale pink, lilac, and corn): the red, green, violet and royal blue of the wolves made the other colors sing loudly.”<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the cause, people's preferences shifted towards a wide range of colors described as “oriental” (combinations of orange, purple and emerald green, for example). This was not unrelated to the fact that early 20<sup>th</sup> century artists such as the Futurists, the Fauves, and the Russian avant-garde, spurred on by emerging scientific theories of color, experimented extensively with color, and during this process, color came to fill their canvases.

Ultimately, however, black regained its dominance. This took place in the 1920s and Chanel's legendary “Petite Robe Noire,” or little black dress, cannot be ignored when discussing the phenomenon. The modernity of black had dominated men's clothes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>6</sup> but it took a little longer for women to join the trend. Black surged forth as the color of the moment in various phases during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Embraced by the existentialists in the 1950s and the punks in the late 1970s, Japanese fashion, represented by designers such as Rei Kawakubo and Yohji

Yamamoto, sparked a resurgence of black in the early 1980s.<sup>7</sup> By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black had become established as the everyday color, the standard color for women's clothing.

The cycles of fashion have become shorter nowadays and therefore the freedom to adopt different colors should have increased dramatically in comparison to the past. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of a preferred color dominating a certain period still remains. This is inevitable because of the structure of the fashion industry, and is delineated by restrictions applied by the newly emerging consumer society.

When we choose the clothes that we wear we are fully convinced that we are selecting the colors that we like. However, examining the theoretically eternal theme of color, I realized once again that this choice is one that is made within the restrictions of a certain period. That is to say, we are limited to the choices offered by the market at the time; after all, the market itself is strictly controlled by the economics of fashion trends and the structure of the industry. However, no matter how restricted our choices may be, the colors of the clothes that we wear on a day to day basis represent the easiest and most effective way for us to express a range of different feelings—our hopes, desires and emotions. Color, more than anything, is directed straight at our sensibilities.

### **Mad about Mauve: A Newly Discovered Sense of Color**

Aniline dye was accidentally created from coal by the young English chemist William Henry Perkin in 1856 during his research into a remedy for malaria. The first artificial aniline dye was mauve (or mauvein), and the color was an unprecedented, vivid purple with fuchsia tones. Dating back to Grecian and Roman times, purple or Tyrian purple had always been regarded as a particularly noble dye and color, and Perkin gave the name Tyrian purple to the first dye he synthesized. In retrospect, the combination of the unprecedented aniline color, and the sensibilities of the new, moneyed class that suddenly emerged during this period, was probably a happy combination.

Perkin went on to build a dye factory in Greenford, England and began commercial production. Large quantities of the synthesized mauve dye were supplied at a low price and this became the catalyst for the development of other new artificial dyes. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century is a period marked by innumerable inventions and developments in dye colors.<sup>8</sup>

There were significant developments in the industrial revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with opportunity ripe for products developed by the chemical industry. Perkin's discovery ignited the sudden growth of this industry, and was followed by a dramatic expansion of the chemical industry. Chemical dyes initially had the drawback of not being colorfast, but improvements were made over time. Once large quantities of fabric could be dyed at a low cost, artificial dyes replaced natural dyes. People involved in the dyeing industry were then able to expand the application of dyes as a medium of expression, and many people had the opportunity to enjoy the new range of colors. Amongst the

records of the Lyon presence at the International Exposition held in Paris in 1889 is a thesis by Léo Vignon, titled “La chimie à l’Exposition de 1889 [Chemistry in the 1889 Exposition].”<sup>9</sup> Vignon wrote of how he had benefited greatly from the remarkable progress achieved in the chemical industry, and he attributed that progress to artificial dyes. The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century saw a dramatic democratization of clothing, with the new dyestuffs joining improvements to the sewing machine as major factors contributing to this democratization.

Spurred on by initial success, manufacturers came up with more colors that could not be created with natural dyes—colors that had “never been seen before (effets inconnus jusqu’alors)” or were “extraordinarily bright (vivacité extraordinaire)” —in quick succession. The new sensibility is evident from the names given to these dyes—*aniline black*, *methyl violet*, etc.—names that sound chemical. However, in later years, once the novelty had worn off, such colors began to appear gaudy and artificial.

Fortunately, *mauve* had staying power long enough to support a trend that benefited the industry. The color’s popularity may have come from, in part, from its membership in the purple family. Purple was the color favored by Empress Eugénie of France’s Second Empire, a woman at the forefront of fashion at the time. When Queen Victoria of England, on the advice of Empress Eugénie, wore a lilac velvet dress at her daughter’s wedding in 1858, *mauve* was officially “in.” According to the author of *Mauve*, a biography about Perkin,<sup>10</sup> three months after the *Illustrated London News* carried a detailed description of the dress worn by Queen Victoria, fashion magazines touted *mauve* as Queen Victoria’s favorite color, the fashionable color, spreading the trend. The credibility of this statement may not stand up to detailed analysis, but I mention it here because it throws some light on the kind of events which may serve as the catalyst for a color fashion.

Although *mauve* is now universally known as the name of a color, it was originally the French name for a pale purple flower. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *mauve* denoted a bright purple color, with a slight leaning towards ultramarine blue. I believe it is a purple distinct to this period, as seen in, for example, show exhibits cat. 50. The synergistic effect of the eccentric clothing fashionable at the time and the color *mauve*, as can be seen in this bustle dress, perfectly conveys the outlandish quality of *mauve*.

### **Renoir’s Sense of Color**

Clothing in a similar color can be seen in Renoir’s *Reading the Role* (1874, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Reims, France). Renoir embarked on his career as a portrait artist with *Lise with a Parasol* (1868, Folkwang Museum, Essen) and produced numerous portraits in the 1880s. *Mauve* with blue tones is also featured in *Madame Claude Monet Reading* (1872, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown). The dress worn by the model in *La Parisienne* (1874, National

Museum of Wales, Cardiff), which Renoir exhibited in the First Impressionist Exhibition in 1874, is somewhat bluer in tone than mauve; it is a vivid blue. After this exhibition, Renoir went on to become a highly acclaimed portraitist. In *La Parisienne*, however, the vivid purple-blue of the model's dress is such that the observer's attention is directed away from the model's face. Rather than a conventional portrait, this painting seems more like a fashion plate or a pin-up photo, and in it the new color "blue" may take on an important significance. The model for the painting was actress Madame Henriot, who was appearing on the stage at the Odéon. As Madame Henriot was still a budding actress, her clothing was not likely to have been designed by a great couturier such as Worth, but the bright blue-purple of her outfit shows that she was dressed in the height of fashion, nonetheless. In other words, this painting reveals how the invention of new chemical dyes created a dramatic change in the preference for certain colors in fashion.

At the time, Impressionist painters were using chemically synthesized inorganic pigments that allowed them to experiment with new colors. Renoir, it could be said, found that fashionable women's dresses worked perfectly as a medium for the new colors of mauve and bright blue that he favored. Eventually, these pigments would be "released" from the dresses, and form dots in the sky, in water, or on the surface of rocks in Renoir's paintings.

Marcel Proust made frequent references to mauve in his novel *In Search of Lost Time*, and mauve, the color of the time, was strongly associated with a central character, Odette, the high-class prostitute who represented the height of fashion in her period. Proust's depiction of the turn of the century was enhanced by his lush sense of color and his rich language, and the color relationship between fashion and his characters is also of great interest. The great aristocrat, the Duchess de Guermantes, appears in the novel wearing a black velvet dress, white muslin evening dress and (an almost lurid) red velvet evening dress. Meanwhile, other than the Fortuny dresses that she mainly wears indoors—richly colored dresses that are metaphors for Venice or Carpaccio—Albertine, the main character's lover, is represented in white and gray.

Mauve made its appearance in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was literally the driving force behind a new interest in colors in fashion, but as I pointed out earlier, there was another color—black—that also represented this period. I would like to remind readers of the impressive women, dressed in black, who were depicted at the time by artists such as Manet,<sup>11</sup> Monet, Renoir, Tissot, Caillebotte, Degas, Sargent, Carolus-Duran, or Jean Béraud. Renoir's paintings of the 1870s frequently feature women dressed in black.<sup>12</sup>

In Renoir's *Madame Georges Charpentier and Her Children* (1878, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), we see Madame Charpentier, one of the "queens" of Paris society at the time, posed for Renoir dressed in the newest fashion. Marguerite Charpentier's dress was designed by the House of Worth, and she is depicted with her two children. The Charpentiers first purchased a painting by Renoir in 1875 and after this the couple commissioned Renoir to paint several portraits of their

family. Georges Charpentier was a prominent publisher who produced books by popular authors of the time such as Zola, Maupassant, and the Goncourt Brothers, and the significance of Renoir's encounter with this family was greater than that of simply gaining a financial sponsor. Marguerite presided over the leading salon in Paris and those that attended not only included the previously mentioned writers but diverse cultural figures and celebrities of the Third Republic, including musicians, politicians and feminists. Many of those who ordered portraits were of the moneyed class and the woman being portrayed would choose together with her couturier a fashionable outfit for her to wear in the painting. Black was the color of the moment, as it represented dignity, mystery and elegance.

Black clothing, or very dark clothing, was also embraced by ordinary people, as can be seen in Renoir's *The Umbrellas* (1881-86, The National Gallery, London). In scenes painted by Parisian artists of the time, black or dark clothing was particularly evident in clothing worn by working women. At this stage, black clothing represented typical work clothes in urban society for both men and women. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, though, black began to suggest ambiguity—it was both a fashionable and a practical color. It was Coco Chanel in the 1920s who brilliantly extracted and applied this element to the “Petite Robe Noire,” the black dress that was the quintessential representation of this ambiguity.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period in which a moral society was advocated, when it was almost compulsory for people in “civil society” to wear certain clothes for certain occasions. For the sake of practicality, it was essential for women to own at least one mourning dress, or a black dress to be worn during the long, socially decreed term of grieving.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the development of black chemical dyes democratized black fabric; it became an economical and practical color to wear. Black fabrics or fabrics that were chemically dyed in vivid mauves and reds could also be interpreted as representing the dark, cloying and hidden aspect of moralistic society during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A color that gradually rises to the surface to reveal itself in fashion, or the surface of an era—a fashionable color—is ultimately related to some extremely complex social factors. Within the schema of nature versus artifice, new colors—because no one had ever seen them before—captured the hearts of people including artists and women during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The colors that are expressed by a certain period are not unrelated to the dreams of the people who lived in this period or the psychology or mindset that they unconsciously reveal. The “surface” of clothes can be colored in accordance with the wishes of each individual—despite the continued presence of certain restrictions. Each time the restrictions loosen a bit—such as when aniline dyes were invented, or chromakey techniques were discovered—a new dimension of desire can be fulfilled.

Towards “Color”

Until Renoir began to depict, to his heart's content, what for him signified eternal beauty—the female nude, his primary interest during his last years—he strove to portray the truth and beauty of the times using clothes, or fashion worn by a women's body as his medium. Above all, color, which is the one of the most important elements of fashion, clearly defines the unique image of the time.

As perceived by Viktor & Rolf, I would like readers to be reminded of the fact that clothes which should by rights be a “unique material object,” are, simultaneously, immaterial substances that drift away from and transcend reality, offering up alternate images or dreams.

Needless to say, various images have been created through the skillful combination of the body itself, and clothing which serves as a thin substitute for skin, and all the elements of clothing, such as color, texture of fabric, and form. From now, clothing plays the role of canvas, but we also directly add color to our skin, hair and face. Young people deconstruct the elements of clothing—taking a part of a sleeve here and a bit of bodice there—and then creatively put them together again to suit their own taste. In the future, it is possible that the making clothes as we know it now, involving cloth, dying, cutting and sewing, will be replaced by a completely new production method, and that might change everything. Even so, for now, we cannot resist colors that color our bodies, for those colors stimulate our emotions and sentiments, our sense of beauty, and harbor complex significations.

In this exhibition, clothes have been completely removed and liberated from an historical context, so that they might fall within a new context—the basic element of color. It is at this point that we should be able to embrace new questions generated about the essential meaning of color with a fresh sensibility.

#### Notes

1. Viktor & Rolf, interview by the Kyoto Costume Institute, *Fashion in Colors* (this catalogue), p.279.
2. Refer to Kyoto Costume Institute, *Revolution in Fashion 1715-1815*, Kyoto Costume Institute, 1989.
3. Bleaching methods were developed in France by Bertholet in 1786 and improved on by Tennant in 1796.
4. The following are the figures representing the ratio of white clothing in the KCI collection:  
1800-1829: 37% of the 84 samples are white.  
1900-1910: 36% of the 139 samples are white.
5. Paul Poiret, *En habillant l'Époque*, Grasset, 1930, p.64.
6. John Harvey, *Men in Black*, trans. Ryoko Ota, Kenkyusha, 1997.
7. For more details, refer to Akiko Fukai, *Japonism in Fashion*, Heibonsha, 1994.
8. The following are only the major discoveries concerning chemical dyes:  
1857     Monnet establishes an industrial production system in Lyon to manufacture Perkin's purple.

- 1858-59 A Lyon dye manufacturer produces fabric dyed with magenta, the red dye produced by French chemist Verguin.
- 1861 Lauth synthesizes Methyl violet.
- 1862 Hoffman synthesizes Hoffman violet.
- 1862 Martius and Lightfoot synthesize Bismarck brown.
- 1863 Lightfoot synthesizes Aniline black.
- 1868 The German chemists Graebe and Liebermann produce Alizarin. Alizarin is the chemically synthesized version of the natural dye “madder” and was the first chemical dye to replace a natural dye.
- 1876 Caro’s Methyl blue.
- 1877 Malachite green (Dobner and Fisher).
- 1878 The German chemist Bayer synthesizes Indigo (commercially available from 1897).

9. Léo Vignon, “La chimie à l’Exposition de 1889,” in *Lyon à l’Exposition Universelle de 1889*, ed. Adrien Storck and Henri Martin, vol. 2, A. Storck, 1891, p.131.

10. Simon Garfield, *Mauve*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, p.61.

11. See also Claude Imbert, “Manet, Effets de Noir,” trans. Shigemi Inaga, *Fashion in Colors* (this catalogue), pp.287-290.

12. The following paintings by Renoir feature women wearing black dresses:

*Cabaret of Mother Antony*, 1866. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.

*Woman with Parrot*, 1871. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

*Portrait of a Woman (Mme. Georges Hartmann)*, 1874. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

*Bal at the Moulin de la Galette*, 1876. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

*Portrait of the Countess de Pourtalés*, 1877. Museu de Arte de São Paulo.

*Madame Georges Charpentier and Her Children*, 1878. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

*Madame Charpentier*, 1878. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

*At the Milliner’s*, 1878. Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge.

*After the Luncheon*, 1879. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.

*At the Concert*, 1880. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown.

*Young Woman Reading an Illustrated Journal*, 1880-81. Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design.

*Two Sisters (on the Terrace)*, 1881. Art Institute of Chicago.

*The Umbrellas*, 1881-86. National Gallery, London.

13. Mourning clothes at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—according to the catalogue *Femme fin de siècle 1885-1895* (Musée de la Mode et du Costume, Editions Paris-Musées, 1990, p.56), widows wore mourning clothes for 18 months.

First stage—6 months. Full mourning (grand deuil). Black clothing, no outings permitted.

Second stage—6 months. Minor mourning (petit deuil). Jet accessories, black lace, some white can be worn. Outings permitted.

Third stage—6 months. Semi-mourning (demi deuil). Black, gray or mauve dress, almost normal social life can be resumed.

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