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First Published in 2018 by QED Publishing
an imprint of The Quarto Group.
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London N7 9BH, United Kingdom.
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-78493-967-0

Printed in China
17 18 19 20 21
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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Contents

Introduction:
A World of Colour 4

Yellows 6
Yellow Ochre 8
Chrome Yellow 10
Gamboge 12
Inca Gold 14
Saffron 16
Orange 18

Reds 20
Cochineal 22
Vermilion 24
Pink 26
Red Ochre 28
Mummy Brown 30

Purples 32
Puce 34
Tyrian Purple 36
Orchil 38

Blues 40
Indigo 42
Prussian Blue 44
Egyptian Blue 46
Ultramarine 48
Woad 50

Greens 52
Verdigris 54
Irish & Kelly Green 56
Scheele's Green 58

Kohl Black & Graphite 60
Lime & Lead White 62

Index 64





Introduction

A World of Colour

Imagine a world without colour. How drab and dreary it would seem! No glowing red and yellow sunsets or brilliant green fields and forests. From showing our support for a particular sports team by wearing its colours, to recognising red or green signals at traffic lights, colour plays a part in everything we do.





The colours of nature

Colour has always played a crucial role in the natural world. Some living creatures use colours as camouflage, to hide among their surroundings. Others stand out in bright colours, which they use to attract mates or to warn other creatures away. Prehistoric peoples learned to recognise the colours of certain plants, fruits and berries. The colours helped them tell which were ripe and could be eaten, and which were harmful.



Colour crazes

Throughout history, many colours – both natural and synthetic – have stimulated the imagination. They have excited, outraged and inspired fashions and fads, from passions for pinks to crazes for particular purples, yellows or greens. Some sources of colour at certain points in history became as valuable as gold. A few were so highly prized that battles were fought over them!

A colourful history

This book contains a selection of colourful tales that will take you on a whirlwind journey to different places at different times in history. As some pigments have given rise to a range of shades, we have handpicked a sample of each tale's colour to show a typical example. Along the way, you'll discover many of the ingenious ways people have obtained colours, how some shades were lost then rediscovered, and how their use was sometimes spread by traders, explorers and conquerors. You'll learn how the colour orange was adopted by the Dutch, how a river flows bright green every year in Chicago, how it took thousands of sea snails just to dye a single purple robe...and much more besides!



Yellow is one of the three primary colours of paints and pigments, along with blue and red. Throughout history, it has been thought of as the colour of sunshine and warmth in many cultures and was so prized in Imperial China that only the country's Emperor and Empress could wear certain yellow shades.

But yellow also has a dark side. It is the colour of cowardice to many and to some, the colour of sickness, possibly because of the yellowing of the skin caused by diseases such as jaundice and malaria.



Yellows

Yellow Ochre | Chrome Yellow | Gamboge | Inca Gold | Saffron | Orange

Ancient colour from the earth

Yellow Ochre

In 1940, four teenagers were exploring the woods near their home town of Montignac, France, when one of them made an astonishing discovery. A deep hole led the boys into the previously unknown Lascaux Cave. Its walls were covered in colourful prehistoric cave art, much of it painted in yellow ochre.

Made to last

The paintings discovered by the teenagers featured yellows and reds made from ochre. There was also black, which came from charcoal. The paintings depicted more than 2,000 different figures, mostly animals such as horses, bulls and stags – and even a rhinoceros! Unlike some other pigments, yellow ochre does not decay or fade quickly, especially when it is not exposed to sunlight. Many of Lascaux's cave paintings are thought to be more than 17,000 years old.

Clay colour

Yellow ochre is an earthy pigment made from clay containing iron oxide. This clay is found in many places in the world, and early people ground it down into a powder. Mixing the powder with plant sap or water made paint that could be dabbed onto rock using hands, leaves, tree bark or thin animal bones. At Lascaux, some of the artwork was spray-painted onto the rock walls by blowing paint through a reed or hollow bone.

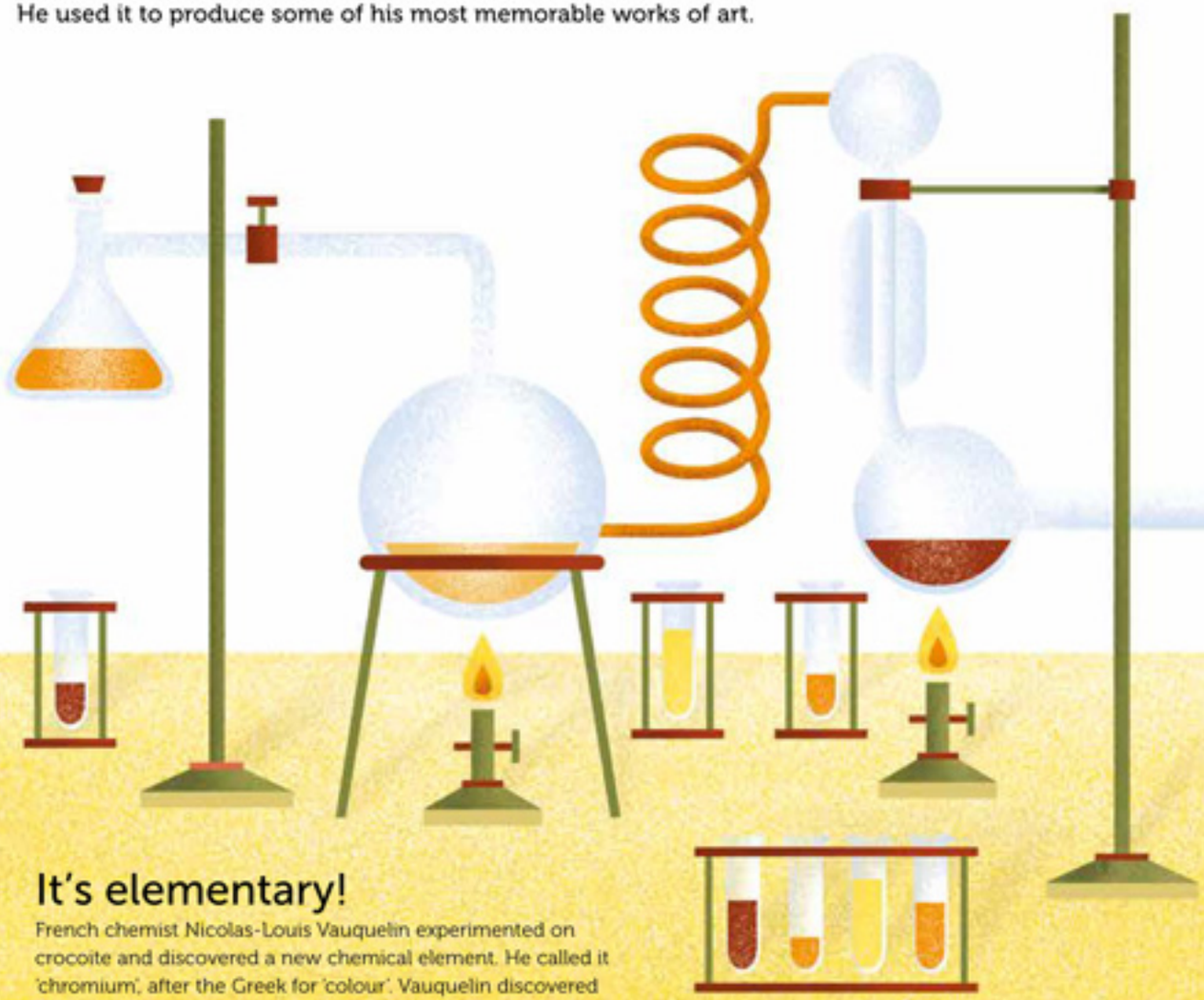
Around the world

Royal tombs in ancient Egypt were often decorated with yellow ochre walls, and Australian Aboriginals painted with it, too. It was later used by many famous artists including Rembrandt, Renoir and Raphael. By the 18th century, France had become a centre for the production of yellow ochre. The Huli tribe in Papua New Guinea and the Fulani people in western Africa still work with yellow ochre, using it as make-up for ceremonies, covering their entire face in the colour.

Setting the art world alight

Chrome Yellow

In the early 1760s, a French geologist found a new mineral lurking deep within a Russian gold mine. He named it 'crocoite'. It would give rise to a stunningly bright yellow colour seized upon by a young, struggling painter: Vincent Van Gogh. He used it to produce some of his most memorable works of art.



It's elementary!

French chemist Nicolas-Louis Vauquelin experimented on crocoite and discovered a new chemical element. He called it 'chromium', after the Greek for 'colour'. Vauquelin discovered that a combination of chromium and lead produced a vivid yellow colour. It soon became a popular ingredient in artists' paints. King George IV of England liked it so much that he had much of his seaside retreat, The Royal Pavilion at Brighton, decorated using the colour.

Bright lights

Chrome yellow's bright yellow-orange hue was a hit with French painters such as Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne. Vincent Van Gogh's early paintings were dull and drab, but after being inspired by others' bright artworks, he began working in feverishly bright colours. He used chrome yellow extensively on a series of paintings of sunflowers and wheatfields. Nearly a century after it was painted, one of his paintings of sunflowers sold for US$39.7 million!



Browned off

It eventually became clear that over long periods of time, chrome yellow changed under light, slowly turning to a dull brown. This fate is befalling some of Van Gogh's paintings. Artists began switching to other yellows that didn't fade and change. However, this shade of yellow is still used for school buses in the United States, as well as yellow lines and other road markings.