

# Black By Michel Pastoureau PDF (Limited Copy)

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## **Black By Michel Pastoureau Summary**

"The Color's Symbolism and Cultural Legacy Through the Ages"

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## About the book

Dive into the enigmatic world of color as Michel Pastoureau, one of the world's foremost color historians, unravels the captivating journey of black in his book, "Black: The History of a Color." This scholarly yet compelling exploration challenges preconceived notions as it traces black's evolution from ancient times to the present day, revealing its profound influence across art, culture, fashion, and politics. From being perceived as the color of darkness and mourning to emerging as a symbol of elegance and power, Pastoureau's work intrigues readers with intriguing historical narratives and visual illustrations woven into an irresistible tapestry. Get ready to uncover the truth behind one of the most paradoxical and powerful colors in human history, as "Black" invites you to see beyond its shades and shadows to discover its deeper meanings and transformations. Whether you're an artist, historian, or simply curious about the unseen stories of the colors that shade our world, this book promises to darken your understanding in the most illuminating way possible.

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## About the author

Michel Pastoureau is a renowned French historian and writer, esteemed for his extensive expertise in the history of colors, symbols, and heraldry. Born in Paris in 1947, Pastoureau has spent much of his academic career unraveling the cultural and social histories of color, making pivotal contributions to the understanding of how colors influence and reflect societal norms across centuries. With a keen eye for detail and a flair for storytelling, he has authored numerous influential works, including "Blue: The History of a Color" and "Red: The History of a Color," each exploring the rich tapestry of historical nuance associated with these primal hues. Pastoureau's profound insights into semiology and his unique ability to interweave art history with anthropology have captivated audiences worldwide, establishing him as a leading voice in the study of cultural history. Currently serving as a director of studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, his scholarship continues to shed light on the enduring power of color in shaping human experiences and thought.

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# Chapter 1 Summary: Mythologies of Darkness

The chapter explores the rich and multifaceted symbolism of the color black in various mythologies and cultures. It begins by discussing how both religious and scientific traditions often start with imagery of darkness or night to explain the origin of the world. Greek mythology introduces Nyx, the goddess of the night, who emerges from Chaos, embodying the primordial void. In this myth, Nyx, cloaked in darkness, is so formidable that she intimidates even Zeus. She is depicted as the mother of a host of entities related to the dark aspects of human experience, ranging from dreams and sleep to death and divine vengeance, exemplified by Nemesis.

Black as a symbol is not confined to Greece; it appears in many other cultures, including Egyptian mythology. In Egypt, black represents the fertile silt of the Nile, contrasting with the desolate red of the desert. This concept of fertile black is reflected in the symbolism associated with various fertility goddesses like Cybele, Demeter, and Isis, who sometimes appear with dark skin or require black sacrifices.

The chapter elaborates on how color symbolism extends beyond fertility myths. The ancient color system links black with the earth, one of the four elements, alongside fire (red), water (green), and air (white). This association persists through the Middle Ages, where societal roles and classes are often metaphorically tied to colors: white for priests, red for



warriors, and black for workers or artisans. Such color associations appear in Roman and Greek literature, medieval chronicles, and iconography, hinting at possible Indo-European roots.

Moreover, black's connection to ancient sacred spaces, like caves and grottos, further exemplifies its dual symbolic nature. These sites were considered fertile and sacred, serving as places for religious ceremonies, births of gods or heroes, and rites of passage. Despite their creative associations, these dark spaces carried an ambivalent symbolism, housing not only life but also danger and misfortune. Plato's allegory in "The Republic" elaborates on this duality by depicting the cave as a prison of ignorance, where the shadows represent a deceptive reality that must be escaped to find truth.

Close to the end of the chapter, the text transitions into how these associations evolve, with forests in Nordic mythologies eventually assuming roles once played by caves, further embedding the symbolism of darkness in the sacred and the mysterious. Lastly, black's deathly aspect is explored through the portrayal of darkness as confining and punishing, contrasting sharply with its life-giving potential in different cultural narratives. In this way, the chapter captures the complex and often contradictory nature of black as a symbol across time and place.



## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** Black represents potential and transformation across cultures.

**Critical Interpretation:** The color black holds profound symbolism of potential and transformation, offering a perspective that can inspire and reshape your approach to life's challenges. From Egyptian myth where black signifies fertile soil, suggesting growth and renewal, to Greek mythology where Nyx, the primordial goddess, evokes the cosmos' beginnings, black epitomizes the idea of possibility arising from the unknown. This opens up the notion of embracing periods of uncertainty or figurative darkness, recognizing them as ripe opportunities for transformation and growth. By seeing the 'void' not as something to fear, but as a canvas brimming with potential, you are encouraged to approach life's uncertainties with optimism and creativity, turning constraints into catalysts for evolution.



## Chapter 2 Summary: From Darkness to Colors

The fear of darkness is a deep-seated trait in humans, who, as diurnal creatures, have always sought comfort in light and vivid colors. Despite poets like Orpheus extolling the virtues of night as the "mother of gods and men," the average person has long perceived night and darkness as realms of danger, inhabited by fearsome creatures and the cause of nightmares. This fear likely dates back to times before the mastery of fire, when night was impenetrably black and the prospect of unseen threats was omnipresent.

The turning point in this fear came with the mastery of fire, approximately five hundred thousand years ago, which *Homo erectus* achieved. This definitive skill set humans apart from animals. Fire not only offered warmth and the ability to cook food, but significantly, it brought light, weakening the ancestral fear of darkness and the night.

As humans learned to control fire, its uses diversified. By the Upper Paleolithic era, they had developed techniques for producing artificial pigments. Carbon black was likely the first, made by burning organic materials like wood, bark, or bone. These processes expanded the artists' palettes beyond naturally occurring colorants. In places like Lascaux, the use of mineral pigments like manganese oxide became prevalent, particularly for painting animals in cave art. Although carbon blacks persisted, later paintings in the Niaux cave (c. 12,000-13,000 years ago) relied almost



exclusively on wood carbon.

Through the ages, the range and sophistication of pigments grew, reaching new heights in ancient Egypt, which innovated numerous color mixtures. However, for blacks, manganese oxide and carbon blacks remained dominant. Even the invention of ink was dependent on carbon black, dissolved in water with animal glue or gum arabic.

In the Near East and Europe, different cultures continued to innovate with black pigments. In regions rich in bitumen, bituminous black was added to artists' toolkits. In Greece and Rome, craftsmen perfected the production of lampblack and derived intricate blacks from specific carbon sources like dry vine shoots. These pigments evolved with trade and technological exchange, leading to a variety of black shades with diverse properties.

The development of dyes lagged behind pigments. Textile production, which became significant in the Neolithic era, required complex dyeing processes. Dyers initially struggled with volatility in blacks produced using carbon-based methods, and achieving permanent, even coloration in fabrics remained a challenge. Tannin-rich plant sources provided an alternative, albeit less durable and variable in appearance.

By the Middle Ages, dyeing techniques improved with innovations like combining plant dyes with iron-rich muds as mordants. Nevertheless, access



to high-quality materials like expensive oak apple remained limited, keeping rich blacks out of reach for most fabrics. As a result, between antiquity and the late Middle Ages, true black garments were rare and often associated with low social status or specific roles like mourning. The most esteemed black came from animal furs, particularly sable, which was prized for its rich, natural hue.

Overall, the journey of black from a symbol of darkness to a process and palette staple illustrates the intersection of cultural, technological, and artistic evolution throughout human history.

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## Chapter 3 Summary: From Palette to Lexicon

The chapter explores the rich and nuanced perception of the color black in ancient cultures, revealing a complexity often overlooked in contemporary societies. Unlike today's more generalized interpretations, ancient peoples recognized not only one but many shades of black, from matte to glossy, light to dark, and warm to cool tones. This awareness stemmed from early human experiences with darkness, night, and light, leading to a sophisticated palette of blacks evident even in the art from the Paleolithic era through to the Roman period.

Artists of ancient times demonstrated this diversity through a varied use of pigments, adjusting their techniques to achieve the desired effects of texture, density, and luminosity. Unlike dyers, they precisely utilized the many hues according to the materials and techniques at their disposal.

Linguistic evidence further illustrates the expansive understanding of black. Ancient languages often had richer vocabularies for black than modern languages do, with terminology focusing more on the properties of materials and the effects of light than on coloration itself. Words that describe blacks often emphasized texture, brilliance, and density, leading to variability and challenges in translation. For example, in Greek and Latin, certain terms could indicate both black and other hues like blue or green.



The chapter highlights the duality present in Latin regarding the words for black and white. "Ater" and "niger" represented dull and glossy black, respectively; similarly, "albus" and "candidus" indicated matte and shiny white. This duality underscored the significance of these colors for ancient cultures. Over time, "ater" took on negative connotations, while "niger" came to represent beautiful, natural blacks, resulting in derived words like "perniger" (very black) and "denigrare" (to blacken).

This nuanced understanding of color extended to ancient Germanic languages as well, where words such as "swarz" and "blach," or "wite" and "blank," exemplified this emphasis on luminosity over mere coloration. However, with time, these languages saw a reduction in vocabulary, eventually consolidating into single words for black and white we use today, such as "schwarz" and "weiß" in German, or "black" and "white" in English.

The chapter concludes by noting that as this ancient emphasis on light faded, so too did the lexical richness of black and white. Modern languages, like French, for instance, abandoned older distinctions, instead employing comparisons (e.g., "black as pitch") to express nuances. This shift correlates with the historical perception of black evolving from a true color to a more symbolic one post-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, diminishing its variety of shades.

Ultimately, the historical understanding of color, and particularly of black,





shows an intricate relationship between human experiences with light and darkness, the evolution of language, and cultural sensibilities.

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## Chapter 4: Death and Its Color

The complex symbolism of the color black throughout history has varied across cultures and societies. Beginning in the Neolithic era, black stones were integral to funeral rites, symbolizing death but also the promise of rebirth and fertility. This duality extended into the Near East and pharaonic Egypt, where black represented a fecund aspect of the earth. Anubis, the Egyptian god associated with mummification and the afterlife, was painted black to signify his role in guiding the dead to the beyond, emphasizing black as a color of protection and renewal rather than malice.

Contrastingly, in biblical texts, black often conveys negativity, associated with sin, chaos, and divine punishment. While the Song of Songs' line "I am black but I am beautiful" hints at an ambivalence, generally, black symbolizes the dangerous night and death. In the New Testament, Christ as the "light of the world" opposes darkness, reinforcing the dualism between light (life and divinity) and darkness (evil and death). Consequently, black becomes linked to Satan and sin.

Ancient mythologies offer varying depictions of the underworld. Greek myths describe Hades as dark and cold, a realm of shadows and eternal punishment for the wicked, with river barriers like the black Acheron crossing into this world. Cerberus, the monstrous dog, guards the gates, and souls are judged to either join the just or be condemned to Tartarus, a



terrifying region symbolized by blackness and sulfurous landscapes.

Roman concepts of the afterlife mirrored Greek notions. Black, the color of death, came to signify mourning within Roman society. From the Republic era, magistrates at funerals wore dark togas (toga praetexta pulla), marking

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## Chapter 5 Summary: The Black Bird

In the intricate tapestry of Germanic and Scandinavian mythology, colors and animals carry immense symbolic weight, akin to beliefs in other ancient cultures like the Greco-Roman pantheon. Central to this mythos is Nott, the night personified, portrayed as a daughter of the giant Norvi. Draped in black, she traverses the night sky in her chariot pulled by the capricious horse, Hrimfaxi. Yet, despite their somber appearance, neither Nott nor Hrimfaxi embody consistent evil. This characteristic stands in stark contrast to Hel, a terrifying goddess linked to death and decay, born of the trickster god Loki and sister to monstrous beings Fenrir and Midgardr serpent. Hel's ghastly visage—a disordered mop of hair with skin half black and half pallid—reflects a deeper duality of death and fear intrinsic to German sentiments, as black signifies more than just darkness.

Color symbolism is intricately nuanced within these mythologies. To the Germans, black's connotations vary widely. A matte, dull black called "swart" signifies death and discomfort, while "blaek" shines with an intensity so vivid it has associations with enlightenment, epitomized by the prowling black crow. This black bird doesn't only flaunt its hue; it embraces a multiplicity of roles: divine, warrior, and bearer of ultimate knowledge. Odin, the paramount Norse god, lends this bird additional gravitas through Huginn (thought) and Muninn (memory), his two crows that roam the world, gathering intelligence for him to wield covenants over mortal fate. In Nordic



warfare, these birds are more than adornment; they become talismans carried into battle, their cries the warriors' own war cries, laden with potential for both luck and foreboding.

In stark contrast to its noble standing among Norse deities, Christian interpretations cast a much darker shadow over the crow. The Bible perceives it as impure, a scavenger with a penchant for carrion, thus associating it with sin. Early Christian texts amplify this through stories like that of Noah's Ark, where the crow's failure to return earns God's disfavor, juxtaposed against the dove's redemption via olive branch. These biblical narratives continuously enforce a duality—white signifying purity and hope, black impiety and doom.

Nevertheless, this stark binary is not a universal archetype; other ancient cultures embraced ambivalence and even positive connotations regarding black. Greek mythology speaks of Apollo's initial favor towards a white raven, only turned black due to its betrayal. This tale reflects how ancient societies often perceived the crow's blackness as a metamorphosis tied to moral lessons rather than an inherent evil.

Within these multifaceted interpretations, divination practices further solidified the bird's role within Norse and Germanic societies. While Christians shunned the crow for its diabolical associations, ancient peoples revered its intelligence and its role in prophecy, with Roman and Germanic



traditions supporting its status as a creature of discernment. Modern science concurs, ranking the crow as a prodigiously intelligent animal, its wisdom perhaps too acute for the medieval Christian framework, where it stood as both revered and reviled—a living testimony to the colors black both inherits and redefines.

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## Chapter 6 Summary: Black, White, Red

In early Christian theology, colors were charged with deep symbolic meanings, with white and black frequently juxtaposed as representations of Good and Evil. This dichotomy came from biblical associations such as light and darkness in Genesis, as well as natural day-night contrasts. However, exceptions existed where black could embody positive virtues, especially in the context of monasticism. Starting in the late Carolingian period, black became the preferred color for the Benedictine monastic habit, representing humility and temperance, key virtues in monastic life.

Despite these exceptions, black was more commonly associated with affliction and penitence, particularly in Christian liturgy. Initially, clergy performed rituals in ordinary clothes, with white garments gradually reserved for Easter and other significant holidays. By around the year 1000, a standardized color system emerged across Roman Christianity: white for purity in celebrations of Christ, angels, virgins, and confessors; red for the apostles, martyrs, and the Holy Spirit, signifying blood and sacrifice; and black for periods of penitence like Advent and Lent and for mourning the dead on Holy Friday. This triadic system stemmed from broader cultural patterns where white, red, and black held more symbolic weight than other colors until a shift in the central Middle Ages introduced a six-color system including blue, green, and yellow.





This triadic color symbolism extended beyond religious uses and into the secular. In medieval place-naming (toponymy) and personal naming (anthroponymy), only white, red, and black were used to denote attributes or historical significance. For instance, Emperor Henry III, known as Henry III the Black, earned his moniker for his harsh exercise of power, not for physical attributes but because he was seen as an enemy of the Church.

Medieval literature also featured this triad, often using colors to distinguish characters, especially in stories like "Little Red Riding Hood," where each color signifies different roles or themes. Red could symbolize danger or connection to the Holy Spirit, as implied by the girl's attire and birth on Pentecost; whereas fairy tales like "The Crow and the Fox" also employed these colors to construct narratives around contrasting qualities.

In games like chess, introduced to Europe from India via Persia and later the Muslim world, color changes reflected cultural shifts. Initially, black and red pieces opposed each other, but as chess entered medieval Europe, white replaced black in this opposition, aligning the game with prevalent symbolic values where white was a more contrasting opponent to red. This change reversed again in the mid-thirteenth century, returning to the now-familiar black and white opposition on chessboards.

However, around the thirteenth century, black began losing its positive connotations, becoming primarily associated with negative symbols. In



feudal times, black was predominantly viewed as sinister and was often linked to death, sin, and the diabolical, influencing cultural, religious, and artistic expressions. The Benedictine monks, with their black habits, remained notable exceptions, holding onto the ancient virtues of a color otherwise marginalized or demonized by society. This era marked the transformation of black into a “devil’s palette,” a perception that would dominate Western imagery for centuries.

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# Chapter 7 Summary: The Devil and His Images

## In the Devil's Palette

The concept of the devil predates Christianity, yet his detailed characterization prominently arises in Christian tradition. Jewish traditions provide little emphasis on an evil counterpart to God, and the Old Testament does not feature the devil in the form that Christian theology later took. In Christianity, the devil occupies a significant role, especially highlighted in the Gospels and the Book of Revelation, which delineate his opposition to God's goodness and foretell his temporary reign before the end of times.

Theologians crafted the devil as a fallen angel, chief among rebels, not equal to God but significant nonetheless. While Christian teachings condemned the dualistic view equating the devil with God, in everyday medieval life, he was perceived as almost as powerful as God, influencing the moral struggles faced by individuals. The dichotomy of good and evil played out in daily life and was starkly depicted in religious art and literature, warning of eternal damnation or salvation come Judgment Day.

The idea of a purgatorial middle ground for souls only emerged fully by the 12th and 13th centuries. Satan, a term derived from the Hebrew for "adversary," first mentioned in the Book of Job, became synonymous with



the devil. Christian art borrowed from Greek depictions of satyrs, rustic followers of Dionysus, lending the devil his initial visual traits. Over time, the devil's iconography evolved, becoming common in Romanesque art from the 11th century, complete with his entourage of demons and monsters.

In artworks, the devil often appeared amidst scenes of the Last Judgment—a motif where Christ, Saint Michael, and demons weigh the souls of the righteous and the damned. The damned were visualized being cast into hell, which medieval art depicted as a gaping monster's mouth, filled with leaping flames and infernal tormentors.

Hell in Christian thought was an abyss filled with eternal darkness and fire, designed not to consume but preserve bodies for perpetual punishment. Theological discourse focused on spiritual alienation from God as the ultimate torment. Over time, specific tortures were devised for different sins, embedding a moral lesson within artistic representations. By the 13th century, the seven deadly sins became associated with distinct colors: pride and lust with red, envy with yellow, and others each linked with varying hues.

Thus, medieval Christianity painted the devil not just as an antagonist to God's creation but as an enduring image of sin and morality, woven deeply into the tapestry of art and daily life, a formidable believer's cautionary figure in the path to redemption.



## Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** The duality of good and evil in daily life.

**Critical Interpretation:** In the medieval world depicted by Pastoureau, living amidst the vivid imagery of hell and judgment conveyed through art, you are constantly reminded of the moral struggles that define your existence. This highlights a lesson on the perpetual battle between good and evil that resonates across centuries, pushing you to reflect deeply on your own actions and choices. Embrace the duality of this dance between light and shadow—not as a constant fear, but as guidance towards moral clarity and personal growth. Recognizing this duality invites you to confront the shadows with courage and compassion, finding strength in the determination to favor good and avoid the pitfalls of sin. The narrative of these ancient struggles becomes an opportunity to seek redemption and cultivate a life imbued with purpose and integrity.



## Chapter 8: The Devil and His Colors

Between the sixth and eleventh centuries, our understanding of the devil gradually evolved, starting as a vague concept and later solidifying into a more defined image. Initially, the devil was depicted in various forms, but post-1000 AD, he assumed a grotesque and beastly appearance. Satan was perceived as thin and emaciated, symbolizing his origin from the dead. Typically portrayed as naked and often covered in hair or marked with spots or pustules, he was envisioned with an unsettling bicolor scheme—black and red. His bat-like wings, horns, and tail, along with cloven hooves reminiscent of a goat, highlighted his fallen angel status. His face, often large and dark, bore a cruel, distorted grimace that Romanesque art, known for its vivid imaginations of good and evil, depicted with significant diversity.

In the eleventh century, chronicler Raoul Glaber offered a vivid description of the devil from his own terrifying encounter, emphasizing a grotesque, almost other-worldly creature dressed in tattered attire—a curious choice given the more common representations of the devil as naked. Similarly, demons under Satan's command were often represented with grotesque and hideous features, characterized by nakedness and dark, menacing colors. These demonic creatures were believed to possess humans, incite chaos, and try to claim the souls of the weak and dying. However, they could be repelled by faith, exorcisms, and religious rituals.



One constant in these depictions was the use of the color black, which became synonymous with the devil and his minions from the eleventh century onwards. This association may have its roots in both church traditions and paganism, although the Bible itself doesn't consistently link black with evil. Beyond black, the visual palette also included browns, grays, purples, and dark blue, the latter sometimes seen as a form of black until the twelfth century. Notable is the depiction of a blue devil on the wooden ceiling of the Zillis church, demonstrating the early, negative connotations of the color blue before its later association with purity and divinity.

The combination of black and red particularly symbolized the evil emanating from hell—red for infernal flames and the blood of the damned. The mingling of these colors created a striking and malevolent visual; however, not all reds were considered evil, with some representing the blood of Christ or the Holy Spirit's purifying fire. By the thirteenth century, green devils emerged, coinciding with increasing Christian-Muslim tensions during the Crusades, given green's prominence in Islamic symbolism.

In artistic expressions from this period, the density of color was crucial for portraying evil; the devil was often depicted with deeply saturated hues, contrasting with the divine luminosity of light. The association of density with hell led figures like Saint Bernard to critique color's hindrance to



spiritual enlightenment. Interestingly, a reversal was sometimes found in the portrayal of demons with paler or even colorless appearances—an artistic challenge given medieval perspectives on color. Such depictions often employed diluted colors or green tints, never using white, which, like black, was considered a color of its own.

In the late Middle Ages, this iconography extended to historical figures marked as heretics. For example, the theologian Jean Hus, condemned for his heretical beliefs, was symbolically adorned with devil figures on a miter during his execution. This consistent use of devil imagery in religious and secular contexts underscores the enduring and complex relationship between color, symbolism, and perceived morality in medieval culture.

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## Chapter 9 Summary: A Disturbing Bestiary

The chapter "A Disturbing Bestiary" delves into how medieval Christianity perceived and demonized certain animals by associating them with Satan and the infernal abyss. This reflection on the perceived diabolical nature of various animals is rooted in a combination of their physical traits and roles within mythologies and religious texts.

A key element in this perception was the color black, which was symbolically linked to darkness, mystery, and evil. Real animals such as the bear, cat, wild boar, wolf, crow, and owl were demonized not only for their traits or behaviors but also for their nocturnal and black features. Additionally, legendary creatures like basilisks, dragons, and bats (seen in medieval zoology as part rat, part bird) were considered part of Satan's court. These animals, scorned by medieval society, were thought to maintain a privileged relationship with darkness and thus deemed diabolical.

The crow holds a prominent place in this infernal menagerie. Once respected in ancient mythologies for its intelligence and prophetic abilities, Christianity vilified it due to its black plumage and carrion-eating habits. This transition was accentuated in northern Europe, where the crow was linked to pagan rituals and regarded as a messenger of the gods. The church positioned it strongly within the diabolical realm due to its association with paganism and its black appearance.



Similarly, the bear, once considered the king of animals, was transformed into a symbol of Satan by the Church. Emblematic of strength and sometimes seen as an anthropomorphic figure with ties to human ancestry, the bear was feared for its wild nature. The Church initiated campaigns to eradicate the bear, dismantling its revered status and associating its hibernation with a retreat into hellish darkness, while attributing vices such as brutality and lechery to it.

The cat, particularly the black cat, was viewed with suspicion due to its nocturnal habits and elusive nature. It wasn't until later that cats gained domestic acceptance for their utility in controlling rodent populations, though initially, they were considered deceitful and mysterious, aligned with other nocturnal, devil-associated creatures.

The wild boar, admired by various ancient cultures, was another animal the Church classified as diabolical. Its black fur, nocturnal essence, and fierce demeanor made it a prime representative of dangerous, ungodly rebellion. These animals were crafted into symbols of disorder and impurity in the visual and literary depictions of the time, with characteristics enhanced by descriptions of their blemishes, fierce nature, and unsettling physicality.

The chapter thus illustrates a rich tableau of animals seen through the lens of medieval Christianity's battle against pagan symbolisms, focusing on how



darkness and blackness were closely associated with evil and chaos during that era.

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## Chapter 10 Summary: To Dispel the Darkness

In the medieval period, the interplay of light and darkness was not just a theological concept but a central theme impacting various aspects of life, beliefs, and the arts. Light held a near-divine significance as a visible yet immaterial phenomenon, an emanation from God. This raised the question of whether color, inherently linked to light, shared this divine attribute or was merely a material addition to the world.

This debate held significant implications for the Church. If color was part of divine light, it helped diminish darkness, thereby elevating the presence of the divine. This notion closely tied the pursuit of color to the pursuit of spiritual light. Conversely, if color were deemed merely material, it could be viewed as a human contrivance detracting from the pure, divine creation, potentially leading the faithful away from God.

These theological debates spilled over into everyday life and influenced how color was integrated into material culture, from the garments people wore to the imagery they revered. The role of color in church settings and worship practices was paramount, as demonstrated by divergent attitudes over time. Although some religious figures were staunchly against vibrant hues, associating them with worldliness, others, like Abbot Suger of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis, fervently embraced color. Suger, active in the 12th century, was convinced that color and light were intertwined, presenting an



enhanced medium through which to honor God. Under his influence, color was used richly to beautify religious spaces, reflecting God's glory through stained glass and opulent decoration.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the majority view among religious leaders shifted towards chromophilia. Religious spaces became vibrant sanctuaries of light and color, as shown by Romanesque and Gothic architecture, where stained glass played a pivotal role in symbolizing transcendental light.

In contrast, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, representing the Cistercian order, held a contrarian view. To Bernard, color was not inherently linked to light but was dense and opaque, detracting from spiritual clarity. He saw color as a vanity, an unnecessary luxury that obscured divine truth. Bernard's disdain for vibrant or polychromatic expressions is evident in his rejection of ornate multicolored displays and his preference for simplicity and monochromatic harmony.

The conception of black as the anathema of divine light grew during this period, setting a precedent that would later influence Renaissance and Reformation thinking about aesthetics and spirituality. While medieval clergy like Bernard dismissed its use, others ignored this rigid standpoint and saw light and color, including black and white, as expressions of divine beauty to varying degrees.



Underpinning these diverse views were emerging theories of optics and light, which later fueled intellectual exploration during the Renaissance. The progression from solely theological debates to practical and intellectual inquiries marked the complex and evolving understanding of light, darkness, and color in medieval and later periods, deeply influencing Christian art and architecture.

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## Chapter 11 Summary: The Monks' Quarrel: White Versus Black

The chapter "The Monks' Quarrel: White Versus Black" discusses the historical evolution of monastic dress, particularly focusing on the colors associated with various monastic orders and the symbolic meanings they carried. In the early days of Western monasticism, simplicity and modesty in dress were paramount. Monks often wore the same undyed and unprocessed woolen garments as peasants. This practice aligned with the Rule of Saint Benedict from the sixth century, which discouraged concern over clothing color or thickness, viewing color as a needless embellishment.

As monasticism evolved, clothing began to serve as a symbol of monastic identity and the specific religious community to which the monks belonged. Initially, there was no uniform color, but by the Carolingian era, dark colors were favored, and black—though challenging to achieve—became increasingly associated with monks because it symbolized humility and penitence.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, during the expansion of the Cluniac order, black became the emblematic color of monks following the Rule of Saint Benedict. However, some hermetic movements objected to this growing emphasis on luxury and advocated a return to the austere habits of the first monks, seeking coarse, undyed fabrics instead.





The Cistercian order emerged from this chromophobic wave at the end of the eleventh century, striving to return to the simplicity of early monastic life by using only undyed wool. Although initially termed as "gray monks" due to the natural wool color, they eventually adopted white habits, though the exact timing and rationale remain unclear. This choice set off a significant controversy between the Cluniacs and the Cistercians from 1124 to 1146, centered on the symbolism of black versus white.

Peter the Venerable, the Cluniac abbot, critiqued the Cistercians, including Bernard of Clairvaux, for their choice of white, which he argued was inappropriate for monastic humility. In rebuttal, Bernard defended white as the color of purity and virtue, while black represented death and sin. This dispute fundamentally transformed the symbolic use of color in monastic clothing, solidifying black as the Cluniac color and white as emblematic of the Cistercians.

The chapter emphasizes that although notions of color were rooted in ideology, practical limitations often dictated the actual shades worn—true black and white were difficult to produce and maintain. The debate between the Cluniacs and the Cistercians highlighted how color became a symbolic battleground, paving the way for later developments in heraldry, where colors would gain widespread emblematic significance.



The chapter also notes that the Dominicans, founded later, uniquely combined black and white in their attire, symbolizing their preaching mission and strategic approach to color in distinguishing themselves from other orders. This nuanced use of color marks a pivotal moment in the broader medieval understanding and representation of religious identity.

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# Chapter 12: A New Color Order: The Coat of Arms

## A New Color Order: The Coat of Arms

The development of coats of arms traces back to the mid-twelfth century, with origins tied to evolving military gear. Knights, donned in helmets and hauberks that obscured their identities, began painting symbols on their shields—ranging from animals and plants to geometric designs—to distinguish themselves during battles. This evolution was not solely a material necessity but also mirrored the shift in feudal society, where identity markers like patronymic names and distinctive clothing were emerging. Initially exclusive to individual warriors, coats of arms became hereditary symbols of noble lineage and were later adopted by women, clergy, bourgeoisie, artisans, and even peasants. By the thirteenth century, these emblems extended to cities, trade guilds, religious institutions, and varied communities.

A common misconception is that coats of arms were reserved for nobility. Historically, this was not the case. The right to bear a coat of arms transcended social classes. Any person, family, or group could adopt a coat of arms, provided it did not duplicate another. These symbols served as markers of identity, possession, and decoration, appearing on numerous items and documents, which grants historians the means to trace historical



ownership and sponsorship.

Coats of arms comprise two primary elements: figures and colors, displayed on a shield. The triangular shield shape, rooted in medieval design, was common but not mandatory. The combination of colors and figures followed strict rules. Unlike the open-ended selection of figures, only six colors predominated medieval heraldry, categorized as white, yellow, red, black, blue, and green. Known as or, argent, gueules, azur, sable, and sinople in French heraldry, these colors have since remained staples in Western culture.

These heraldic colors were singular and abstract—their various shades irrelevant to their symbolic intent. Despite potential variations in hue, the crux of heraldic color use lay in a fundamental rule: colors were divided into two groups, one containing white and yellow, the other encompassing red, black, blue, and green. Colors from the same group could not be juxtaposed or superimposed, ensuring the emblem's visibility and possibly reflecting an evolving medieval color symbolism.

Heraldry, initially tied to war and chivalry, swiftly permeated broader society, reshaping social codes and color hierarchies. The addition of blue, green, and yellow to the traditional spectrum of white, red, and black marked this transformation, and the case of black emerges as particularly illustrative of these cultural shifts.



## **In the Devil's Palette: The Theatricality of Funerals**

In the late Middle Ages, French monarchs adhered to traditional mourning colors—kings dressed in purple and queens in white. However, in the sixteenth century, Anne of Brittany—wife of both Charles VIII and Louis XII—introduced black as a mourning color for queens in the French court. This change marked the end of the era of "white queens," often young widows who lived far beyond their spouses, symbolically altering the long-lasting presence they cast over the monarchy and court life.

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## Chapter 13 Summary: Who Was The Black Knight?

In medieval heraldry, the color black underwent a remarkable transformation. Previously associated with negative connotations and linked to devilish imagery for centuries, black was integrated into heraldic designs in the 13th century, becoming as common and respectable as other colors like red and white. This shift was pivotal in the rehabilitation of black, which began to feature on the coats of arms of both illustrious and modest families across Europe. Notable figures such as the Count of Flanders and even the Holy Roman Emperor incorporated black into their insignias, demonstrating its acceptance and power.

The term "sable," used in heraldry for black, originated from the Slavic word for the luxurious sable fur, symbolizing its transition into a desirable and fashionable color. This evolution was reflected in literature and culture, particularly within the chivalric romances of the time. The Black Knight became a recurring motif in Arthurian and other medieval tales, symbolizing mystery and anonymity rather than malevolence. Iconic figures like Lancelot and Tristan often donned black armor to disguise their identity during quests or tournaments, highlighting the color's association with secrecy and intrigue.

This concept extended into later literature, as seen in Walter Scott's 1819 novel "Ivanhoe," where a mysterious Black Knight aids the hero in a



tournament, later revealed to be King Richard the Lionhearted in disguise. Here, black serves as a marker of transition and concealment, distancing the character from past captivity towards regained sovereignty.

Transitioning into the later medieval period and beyond, from the 14th to the 16th centuries, black experienced a resurgence as a fashionable and luxurious color. While still used in contexts associated with witchcraft and mourning, black gained a new level of respectability and elegance. This was due in part to urban dress practices and the civic moral codes that aligned with the dignified attributes of the color. Advances in dyeing technology also enhanced the quality and variety of black fabrics, making it a favorite among princes and the nobility.

By the end of the Middle Ages, black had fully shed its negative image and established itself as a curial and even royal color, maintaining its prominence well into the early modern period. This transformation underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of color symbolism throughout history, where societal, cultural, and literary influences converge to redefine perceptions and meanings.

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## Chapter 14 Summary: The Colors of the Skin

In the medieval Christian era, skin color was a significant indicator of social and moral standing, often more so than hair or eye color. Texts and images from this period reflect an evolving perception, largely influenced by geography and societal context, where darker skin was frequently associated with negativity. Those with dark skin were often depicted as outsiders, aligning them with evil, paganism, or moral transgressiveness, reflecting a worldview where physical appearance was seen as indicative of one's inner nature.

A notable example of this is the portrayals of Judas Iscariot. While the New Testament and apocryphal texts provide no description of his appearance, medieval Christian art and literature increasingly characterized him with attributes suggesting a diabolical nature. By the twelfth century, artists and writers depicted Judas with a series of negative attributes, including dark skin and red hair, aligning him visually and symbolically with evil.

These attributes were not limited to Judas. In medieval chansons de geste, dark skin was similarly used to characterize Saracens, who were often depicted as adversaries to Christian knights. Such descriptions reinforced the association of darkness with evil, and over time, the term "Moors" came to refer broadly to Muslims, symbolizing their perceived moral and cultural opposition to Christianity. The use of color in medieval literature also



highlighted distinctions not only between Christians and non-Christians but also between nobility and commoners. Knights were described with light, bright colors, emphasizing their nobility and grace, whereas villains were associated with dark colors and attributes considered base or ignoble.

This preference for lightness extended to women in medieval literature as well, where beauty was linked to brightness and fairness. Descriptions of women often focused on their light skin and graceful appearance, while dark features were associated with ugliness and animalistic qualities, as vividly described in Chrétien de Troyes's works. This rejection of dark skin was reflected in medieval art, where dark-skinned individuals were often depicted as devils, demons, or other negative figures, further perpetuating the stigma against darkness.

Overall, medieval perceptions of color and skin reflect complex social and moral codes, where lightness was equated with virtue and nobility, and darkness with corruption and otherness. This inherent bias influenced both the visual and literary arts of the time, reflecting broader cultural attitudes and prejudices that shaped medieval society.



## Chapter 15 Summary: The Christianization of Dark Skin

In the transition from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century, a notable shift in the European perception of black-skinned individuals began to emerge within the artistic and cultural milieu. This change marked a departure from the predominantly negative connotations traditionally associated with dark skin. Although such biases persisted, a nuanced portrayal of black-skinned figures started appearing in medieval artwork, such as miniatures, stained glass, and tapestries.

One of the earliest representations can be traced to the “fiancée” in the Song of Songs, who declares, “I am black but I am beautiful,” a figure occupying a modest role in medieval iconography. More prominently featured was the Queen of Sheba, a biblical figure known for her legendary visit to King Solomon. Artists from the late thirteenth century often depicted her with dark skin, emphasizing not negativity but rather her exoticism. The Queen of Sheba's dark skin illustrated her distance from King Solomon's Israel, portraying her as a regal figure bearing gifts of gold, spices, and gems, much like the Three Wise Men visiting Jesus. This connection was further accentuated by the portrayal of the Queen as an ancestor of the Magi and sometimes a prefiguration of the Church paying homage to Christ.

Additionally, the enigmatic figure of Prester John began appearing in medieval iconography as an African king, emphasizing Christianity's reach



and the universal mission of evangelism. Once believed to preside over a Christian kingdom in Asia or Africa, Prester John was seen as a potential ally in the Church's efforts against Islam. His representation as a black sovereign symbolized the extensive curiosity and expanding horizons of Europeans during that era.

Within this evolving iconographic landscape, Balthazar, one of the Three Wise Men or Magi, adopted a black skin tone in the latter half of the fourteenth century to symbolize Africa. This development is first documented in the heraldic *Armorial du héraut Gelre*, and by the fifteenth century, it became commonplace to depict Balthazar as black in various artworks. Texts often explained this portrayal with a lineage tracing back to Ham, son of Noah, emphasizing the universal inclusivity of Christianity.

A striking precursor to these developments was the veneration of Saint Maurice, an African saint whose iconography underwent significant transformation beginning in the mid-thirteenth century. Maurice, of Coptic origin, led a Roman legion and was martyred for his Christian faith. Initially depicted with European features, Maurice's representation as a black African enhanced his prestige rather than diminishing it. By the height of his cult's popularity, Maurice was celebrated as a black patron saint of knights, a symbol of loyalty and faith.

Saint Maurice also became the patron saint of dyers, which, intriguingly,



tied into his name ("Mauritius" akin to "maurus," meaning black) and the challenges of creating indelible black dye. His feast day, September 22, was widely observed throughout medieval Europe, further cementing his status within various artistic and cultural expressions.

These portrayals underscore a pivotal shift in the medieval European mindset, where black-skinned figures were increasingly seen not as malevolent but as integral characters within a broader Christian narrative, marking the beginning of a complex and evolving relationship with race and representation in religious art and culture.

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## Chapter 16: Jesus with the Dyer

In this chapter, the deep connection between dyers and sacred figures, particularly Saint Maurice and Jesus, is explored. Dyers in the Middle Ages found immense spiritual significance in their craft, associating their trade with divine interventions and protections. One of the most significant stories they clung to was the Transfiguration of Christ, where Jesus revealed his divine nature to his disciples, Peter, James, and John. During this event, his clothes became "white as the snow," a transformation that dyers viewed as a divine affirmation of their work with colors. Despite the Transfiguration only becoming an official Roman Church holiday in 1457, dyers had been venerating this event through commissioned artworks since the mid-thirteenth century.

Beyond this divine revelation, dyers often depicted and celebrated an apocryphal tale from the noncanonical gospels which narrates Jesus' boyhood in Tiberias. In this story, a young Jesus apprentices under a dyer—often named Israel or Salem—who entrusts him with vats of dye containing sumptuous fabrics. When the dyer leaves, Jesus immerses all the fabrics into a single dye vat, against his master's specific instructions. Upon returning to a potential disaster, the dyer is outraged, but Jesus miraculously corrects his mistake, changing the fabrics to their correct colors, thereby demonstrating his divine powers.



This narrative was especially meaningful to medieval dyers, as it elevated their often-maligned craft by linking it to Jesus' miraculous acts. Various versions of this tale exist, reflective of the time's cultural dynamics; initially, Jesus' mistake involves immersing the fabrics in blue, a color of little value at the time. However, as societal perceptions changed—blue becoming

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## Chapter 17 Summary: Dyeing in Black

The chapter "Dyeing in Black" delves into the complexities and evolutions within the medieval textile industry, primarily focusing on the art and challenges of producing black dyes. During this era, the industry was heavily compartmentalized and regulated, with specialized guilds based on materials like wool, silk, and linen, and specific colors such as red, blue, or black. Each color and material had its own set of rules, with dyers often possessing licenses only for their specific specialties.

Initially, crafting a true black dye was a formidable task. Most black dyes resulted in shades that were off-black, appearing grayish, bluish, or brownish, and lacked the vibrancy and uniformity achieved in red and blue dye ranges. The primary sources for black dyes came from vegetable origins such as alder, walnut, chestnut, and specific oaks. The process of obtaining black involved using mordants rich in iron oxide to deepen the hues across multiple dye baths. However, these materials, especially from the walnut tree, were shrouded in superstition and feared for their supposed malevolent properties, from being toxic to surrounding plants and animals to supposedly attracting evil spirits.

Over time, despite these superstitions, dyers occasionally improved their vegetable-based blacks through techniques sometimes forbidden by professional standards. These included using iron filings mixed with



vinegar, although this could result in a corrosive and non-permanent dye. Another workaround involved giving fabrics a preliminary blue base using woad dye before applying the black dye, which was permitted as it was seen as layering rather than mixing colors. Subterfuge was also common; some dyers applied lampblack or charcoal to fabrics for a temporary facade of a deep black, leading to legal disputes when these dyes inevitably faded.

A truly robust and consistent black was achievable through the costly oak gall or oak apple, which thanks to its tannin-rich composition, produced a high-quality black when combined with iron salts. However, this dye was precious and required importing from regions like Eastern Europe or North Africa due to its scarcity in local Western European oaks.

The rising popularity of black fabrics, especially among the nobility in the late Middle Ages, drove technological improvements in dyeing techniques. Dyers, compelled by demand, refined their processes through enhanced use of mordants, embracing walnut-based dyes, employing a woad foundation, and relying more on oak apples, despite their expense. This resulted in the spectacular, solid blacks that elite society craved, showcasing how societal and ideological shifts often prompt advances in technique rather than the other way around.

Lastly, the chapter touches upon the symbolic significance of black in medieval alchemy, where it was both a stage in material transformation and



a symbol of potential or decay. Known within alchemical texts and practices, black was one of the four cornerstone colors, carrying both positive and negative connotations depending on the context, much like its role in society and fashion.

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## Chapter 18 Summary: The Color's Moral Code

The chapter "The Color's Moral Code" delves into the historical allure of the color black and its evolution into a symbol of authority and virtue. The text explores when this growing fascination began, suggesting that it predated the Great Plague of 1346–50, a catastrophic event that decimated Europe's population. Initially, there appeared to be a temptation to link the adoption of black to this disaster, seeing it as a reflection of collective penitence or divine punishment. The color black took on a liturgical significance, reminiscent of religious ceremonies during Advent and Lent, and was reflected in sumptuary laws, literature, art, and societal regulations.

Historical analysis reveals that the preference for black began before the plague, notably among legal and religious figures in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. In France under Philip the Fair, England during Edward I's reign, and Italian cities circa 1300–1320, black became a favored color for judges, lawyers, and other officials. For them, and many religious orders, black symbolized austerity and morality, not evil. It represented public authority and emerging governance, serving as a sartorial badge of office and responsibility. By the mid-fourteenth century, long-robed clergy and academics had already adopted black as a status symbol distinct from the vibrant fashion of nobles.

The chapter "A Fashionable Color" extends this narrative by illustrating how



black's appeal spread to merchants, bankers, and men of finance after the plague. This shift is partly attributed to a move towards austerity and virtue, driven by the societal and economic aftermath of the plague. The wealthy urban elite, restricted by sumptuary laws that limited luxury to nobility, turned to black for its ability to convey understated elegance and challenge societal restrictions subtly. This demand prompted dyers to improve black dyes, achieving deep, brilliant blacks in fabrics like wool and silk by the late 14th century. Thus, black became a permanent fixture in fashion until the mid-seventeenth century.

Sumptuary laws, instrumental in this style evolution, enforced economic prudence, ethical behavior, and ideological segregation through dress. Intended to curb excessive spending on luxury items across all classes, these laws positioned black as a color associated with virtue and dignity, while limiting access to rich, colorful attire to the nobility. These laws also enforced social hierarchy by demanding certain colors for specific societal roles, often to prevent moral and cultural disruptions.

Contrary to misconceptions about color usage across the Christian world, there was no uniform system of color markers for the marginalized. Different cities and periods displayed significant variation in prescribed colors for outcasts like prostitutes, lepers, Jews, and others. Discriminatory colors often included five hues: white, black, red, green, and yellow, but blue was rare. These colors served as both ignominious marks of social



exclusion and dictates for upholding Christian morality and social order, highlighting clothing's central role in medieval identity and society.

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# Critical Thinking

**Key Point:** Black as a symbol of authority and virtue

**Critical Interpretation:** By looking to the past, you can understand how black—a color initially associated with austerity—evolved into a powerful symbol of authority and virtue. This knowledge offers inspiration to incorporate simplicity and modesty as symbols of strength and moral standing in your life. Just as historical figures chose black to reflect responsibility and morality, you can embrace similar principles in your choices, whether through attire or actions. In doing so, you may find a unique sense of empowerment and respect, transforming simplicity into a statement of personal integrity and resilience against societal pressures.

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## Chapter 19 Summary: The Luxury of Princes

The rise of black as a fashionable color during the mid-fourteenth century was a direct result of sumptuary laws and dress regulations that were prevalent during that era. These laws, which originated in Italy, targeted wealthy urban merchants who were affluent but not noble. They were prohibited from wearing lavish reds, like the Venetian scarlets, and intense blues, such as the “peacock” blues of Florence. In response, these merchants began to adopt black, a color that was not restricted by the laws and had previously been undervalued. Dyers, driven by demand, developed new shades of black that were richer and more appealing.

This fashion trend began as a way for the urban wealthy to circumvent restrictions while still abiding by the laws. Black became a means of showcasing wealth through its association with high-quality materials, such as precious furs, particularly sable, which were also black. Moreover, black attire was seen as austere and virtuous, satisfying both urban authorities and moralists. A Sicilian herald's treatise from 1430 highlights this trend, acknowledging black as a color of high standing and virtue, equating its value to other prestigious colors.

The adoption of black fashion spread beyond wealthy merchants to patricians and eventually the nobility. By the late fourteenth century, notable figures such as the duke of Milan and the count of Savoy were seen in black.





The trend expanded from Italy to other European courts, including France and England, facilitated by personal connections and marriages, such as Valentine Visconti's influence at the French court.

A pivotal moment in the history of black fashion occurred with Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy from 1419 to 1467, who made black a staple at his court. His commitment to wearing black, partly in mourning for his father, combined dynastic tradition, personal history, and political events, cementing black's status in the West. This set the stage for black to become the fashion of choice in royal courts throughout the fifteenth century and beyond, seen in silks, furs, and woolen cloths, often paired with white, gray, or purple.

The Hapsburgs of Austria and Spain later became the torchbearers of this style, integrating it into the renowned "Spanish etiquette" that dominated European courts until the mid-seventeenth century. Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and grandson of Maximilian of Hapsburg, revered black for its majesty and virtue, maintaining the tradition established by his ancestor, Philip the Good.

Philip II of Spain, his son, embraced black even more fervently, associating it with Christian virtues and using it as a symbol during Spain's "golden century." Black thus became synonymous with elegance, power, and piety throughout Europe's elite.



In Italy, especially following the strict regime of Savonarola in Florence, black continued to transition from an austere representation to a symbol of luxury for the wealthy. The sumptuary mandates gradually faded, allowing black to evolve into a color of opulence, reserved for the upper echelons of society.

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## Chapter 20: The Gray of Hope

### The Gray of Hope and The Birth of the World in Black and Whites

During the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, black became the fashionable color of princely courts, influencing the popularity of similar hues. While brown remained the color of peasants and humble artisans, gray and purple found their place among the nobility. Gray, traditionally associated with work clothes and the austere Franciscan monks, became a symbol of hope and joy. This shift from the symbolic mourning and despair traditionally linked with black was notable.

Purple, initially reserved for liturgical use and serving as a "sub-black," evolved in the 1400s. Initially created by dyeing fabrics with blue and black, its transformation in the dyeing world resulted in new variations. These newer purples, with their redder hues achieved through wood dyes from Ceylon and Java, captivated the princely circles despite their historical negative connotations, such as those associated with treachery in epic tales.

Gray's ascension was remarkable. By the 1420s and 1430s, high-quality gray cloth was produced, often paired with colors like red, white, and black by nobility and esteemed by figures like Charles d'Orléans. Unlike black, which symbolized affliction, gray embodied optimism, a sentiment echoed



in literature of the time.

In the visual arts and fashion, the use of gray also surged, increasingly appreciated for its resemblance to silver in textile arts and pewter. By mid-century, gray horses became desirable in jousting, a reversal from

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## Chapter 21 Summary: Ink and Paper

The chapter titled "The Birth of the World in Black and White: Ink and Paper" delves into the transformative power of printing technology in Western Europe, which redefined both the aesthetic and practical landscape of book creation and distribution in the late Middle Ages. The chapter emphasizes the pivotal role of ink and paper in this revolution, explaining how new methods and materials enabled the evolution of printing from a laborious manual process to a more mechanized, efficient industry.

In Old and Middle French, various expressions existed to describe blackness, but with the advent of printing, "black as ink" became symbolic. This new association emerged from the development of a heavy, dark ink that contrasted with the pale, uneven inks of handwritten manuscripts. This ink, likely refined by early pioneers like Gutenberg or his assistant Peter Schoeffer, was crucial to the rapid success of printed books due to its dense, uniform, and durable quality.

Printing succeeded not merely because of ink, but also due to the introduction of movable metallic type, the mechanical press, and the widespread adoption of paper, all of which represented significant advances over previous manuscript and xylographic methods. Ink, however, occupied a particularly symbolically rich role, creating a world deeply connected to "blackness," both literally in the products of printing and metaphorically in





the societal perceptions of printers. Printer workshops were seen as infernal, covered in black ink that stained both the workers and the environment, and made printers figures of suspicion and fear, much like dyers and coalmen.

The chapter also highlights how paper—originally from China and introduced to the West by the Arabs—evolved alongside ink. Initially less white and more akin to yellow or beige, paper became crucial as printing required significant quantities. Over time, paper quality improved, becoming whiter and more stable, further accentuating the stark contrast with the black ink and changing Western color sensibility profoundly.

Moreover, the chapter touches on the cultural context of the period. During the late Middle Ages, themes of death and divine punishment were prevalent, often expressed through works like the "danse macabre" woodcuts, which emphasized societal equality in death. Printing thus contributed to a "black and white" imagination that persisted in the cultural consciousness.

Gutenberg's 42-Line Bible exemplifies this shift. Printed in the mid-15th century, it was the first book using movable type in Europe and had a significant impact. While early printed books sometimes retained colorful elements in typography and decoration, the trend moved towards a more monochrome aesthetic, as represented by the Gutenberg Bible's pages of very black ink on very white paper. This revolutionized the visual culture



and made printed books distinct from their handwritten predecessors.

Overall, the chapter underscores how the technical innovations of ink and paper, coupled with the rise of printing, created a new world of black and white that reshaped literary and visual culture and paved the way for modern publishing.

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## Chapter 22 Summary: Color in Black and White

The diffusion of engraved and printed images in Western culture marked a significant turning point in the perception and use of color, particularly during the mid-fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries. Before this pivotal era, medieval images were predominantly polychromatic, a term signifying the use of multiple colors. However, as the printing revolution gained traction, most circulated images transitioned to black and white, a shift that fundamentally altered how colors were perceived and understood. During the medieval period, black and white were considered full-fledged colors. By the late fifteenth century and even more so by the mid-sixteenth century, these two hues were increasingly seen as special, potentially even as non-colors, a notion that Isaac Newton would later scientifically endorse in the seventeenth century.

This transformation in the visual arts did not occur abruptly. It was not merely the result of the invention of xylography (woodcut printing) in the fourteenth century or the introduction of woodcut engravings in printed books during the 1460s. Initially, colored washes were often added to woodcut prints to mimic the illuminated manuscripts of handwritten books, a practice that continued into the 1520s and 1530s. However, numerous questions about the role of color in these woodcuts remain unresolved: when and where was the color applied, was it in the print shop, by the bookseller, or by the book's owner much later, and were all woodcuts intended to be



colored?

The application of color in woodcuts varied significantly. Some woodcuts were colored arbitrarily, with colors running outside the lines, while others displayed meticulous color application with consistent color usage across figures in books from the same workshop. Unfortunately, it remains unclear whether the colors used in historical woodcuts were contemporary with the wood's impression or added later, sometimes centuries afterward, influencing their market and documentary value. With time, uncolored engravings became more valuable to collectors and historians due to their capacity to convey more about the techniques and artistic intentions behind the images. Black-and-white images communicate light, brilliance, texture, contrast, and rhythm effectively.

Early engraving techniques involved experimenting with lines and patterns to create chromatic effects — imitating color values and saturation. For instance, engravers used various line qualities and patterns of dots or strokes to fill surfaces, distinguish areas, and create effects like shadow or movement. By the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, they had mastered creating color effects in black and white capable of sophisticated pictorial representations.

Engraving techniques attracted little attention from historians, yet they were of immense interest to artists of the time, such as the sixteenth and

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seventeenth-century painters. Artists, including Peter Paul Rubens, instructed engravers to respect color faithfully in their black-and-white reproductions, indicating how line, stroke, and dot should represent the original colors and pictorial effects. Rubens, a renowned colorist, often engaged in disputes with his skilled engraver Lucas Vorsterman regarding the translation of colors, highlighting the complexity and artistic sensitivity involved in replicating color through monochrome mediums.

This chapter elucidates how the revolution in image reproduction in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries gradually paved the way for new scientific and artistic perspectives on color, profoundly influencing Western art and its understanding.

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## Chapter 23 Summary: Hachures and Guillochures

The chapter "Hachures and Guillochures" explores the challenges of representing color in black-and-white engravings, focusing specifically on fields like heraldry that heavily rely on color for conveying information. Heraldry, which acts as a grammar of color, faces significant distortion risks when reduced to black and white, necessitating attempts to translate these colors through various means during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Initially, engravers and printers employed letters and symbols, drawing from handwritten book practices. However, these methods were flawed due to language variations and misinterpretations. In Germanic regions, the use of symbols such as stars or planets was coupled with colors, yet these also proved ineffective for faithfully translating heraldic colors.

This problem persisted until the early seventeenth century when engravers started using dot motifs and guilloche or hachure patterns for heraldry in maps and books. This marked a significant evolution from earlier symbol-based methods, as these patterns appeared directly within the figures they represented, offering clearer color coding in intricate images.

An Italian Jesuit priest and heraldry enthusiast, Silvestro Pietra Santa, proposed an influential system of hachures in the 1630s, detailed in his 1638



treatise "Tesserae gentilitiae." His system used different line patterns to represent colors: vertical lines for red, horizontal for blue, oblique for green, crosshatches for black, dots for yellow, and blank paper for white. While Pietra Santa claimed invention, similar systems had already appeared on maps from Flemish workshops between 1595 and 1625, suggesting Flemish engravers might deserve credit for this innovation.

France was the earliest adopter of this system of hachures, using it in their royal print shop by the mid-seventeenth century. Meanwhile, other countries gradually adopted the system, with England and the United Provinces adopting it by the century's end, and Germany, Italy, and Spain at the beginning of the next century. Interestingly, this system extended into metal arts like silver workings during the eighteenth century, despite being conceived for paper and graphic arts.

Overall, the chapter highlights the evolution of techniques for representing color without actual color, allowing disciplines like heraldry to convey vital information even in black and white media.



## Chapter 24: The Color War

The chapter "The Color War" delves into the historical transformation of color perception in Western culture, primarily influenced by religious and social factors between the late fifteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century. During this period, the proliferation of printed books and engraved images contributed to a shift where black and white emerged as distinct colors before eventually being recognized as noncolors. However, this transformation was not solely due to technological advancements in printing.

The Protestant Reformation played a significant role in redefining the use and perception of color, especially within religious and social contexts. Protestant reformers such as Zwingli, Calvin, Melanchthon, and Luther were critical of the Catholic Church's use of color, which they viewed as excessive and a symbol of luxury and sin. They advocated for a more austere aesthetic, favoring a black-gray-white chromatic axis and condemning the lavish use of colors like red, which was associated with papal extravagance and the infamous Whore of Babylon.

This "chromoclasm" or color purging manifested in several ways: churches were stripped of their vibrant paintings and stained glass, and rituals rich in color, such as the Mass, were targeted for their theatricality and perceived superficiality. The reformers argued that simplicity in worshiping spaces would enhance the purity of worship and the worshippers' souls.



In art, particularly painting, Protestant influences led to a distinctive tonal shift. Protestant painters developed a unique palette characterized by dark tones, monochromes, and a general aversion to bright colors. This shift reflected the reformers' calls for art that was not only secular but also morally instructive and reflective of divine creation rather than human vanity. Calvin, for instance, exhorted artists to balance form and tone, shunning gratuitous subjects, and drawing inspiration from nature itself.

The chapter also discusses the broader influence of this Protestant chromophobia on art beyond the Protestant realm, particularly among Catholic artists associated with the Jansenist movement in the seventeenth century. These artists, like their Protestant counterparts, gravitated towards a more restrained and somber palette, contributing to a continuing discourse on color as a symbol of artifice and luxury.

Despite its conservative leanings, the Protestant rejection of vivid colors prompted a counter-reaction within the Catholic Church, influencing the rise of Baroque art during the Counter-Reformation. In contrast to the stripped-down Protestant churches, Catholic sanctuaries embraced ostentatious displays of color, rich materials, and elaborate aesthetics, positioning the church as a symbol of heaven on earth.

Overall, the chapter outlines how religious movements and moral codes



profoundly affected artistic expressions and perceptions of color, influencing both Protestant and Catholic aesthetic traditions and contributing to a lasting legacy in Western art and culture.

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## Chapter 25 Summary: The Protestant Dress Code

The Reformation, a significant religious transformation in the early modern period, harnessed the power of engravings and prints to distribute its ideas widely, fundamentally altering cultural perceptions, particularly through promoting a stark, black-and-white aesthetic. This shift marked the beginning of reduced reliance on vibrant colors, influencing not only art and images but also societal norms, especially in terms of dress. The Protestant Reformation's impact on dress codes was profound; it fostered a cultural movement towards minimalist and austere clothing that reflected values of humility and contrition. Influential Protestant reformers like Zwingli, Calvin, and Melancthon championed a fashion sensibility that viewed luxury and flamboyance as sinful, encouraging believers to reject ostentatious attire in favor of simplicity.

Central to these codes was the aversion to luxury and ostentatious fashion expressed through bright colors and intricate designs. Instead, the Reformation prescribed stark, dark, and simple clothing, considering such attire as symbolic reminders of humanity's inherent sin and fall from grace. Vibrant colors such as red, yellow, and ornate patterns were deemed immodest and thus were largely replaced by blacks, grays, and browns. White was reserved for children's and sometimes women's clothing, seen as a symbol of purity, and blue was permissible if subdued. These stylistic choices mirrored the reformers' own dark and sober attire, which they also



immortalized in portraits and engravings, serving as visual representations of the stringent moral codes they advocated.

The reformers were preceded by figures like Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican friar who governed Florence as a de facto dictator in the late 15th century, advocating for moral reform and austere clothing. His influence anticipated similar sentiments expressed during the Protestant Reformation. Despite the Latin roots of this movement in Italy, it echoed across Europe as sects such as the Puritans and Pietists continued to emphasize uniformity and simplicity in dress, seeing it as a bulwark against worldly vanities.

Interestingly, the Protestant dress code had counterparts in the Catholic Church, where the Counter-Reformation delineated a strict boundary between the ecclesiastical world—rich in colors and ceremony—and lay society, which was to exhibit discretion and sobriety. Figures like Charles V embodied this duality; his choice of black clothing could signify either regal opulence inherited from Burgundian traditions or an austere commitment to religious humility. Both Protestant and Catholic ethics thus converged around these somber chromatic values, with black becoming a universally preferred color by the mid-sixteenth century.

Ultimately, the Protestant Reformation, by championing a visual culture of restraint and simplicity, not only reshaped personal attire but also influenced broader cultural paradigms. This reformulation of dress norms signified a



deeper connection between external appearances and spiritual values, a legacy that endured well beyond the sixteenth century, shaping Western sensibilities and societal expectations for decades to follow.

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## Chapter 26 Summary: A Very Somber Century

The seventeenth century, despite its remarkable achievements in arts, literature, and science, is remembered as a particularly dark era both literally and metaphorically. This period, dominated by figures such as Louis XIV and the grandeur of Versailles, was paradoxically marked by widespread misery and hardship across Europe. Historians often argue that the societal conditions of the seventeenth century—characterized by barbarism, intolerance, and rampant crime—were comparably harsh to those of the Middle Ages.

During this era, life expectancy was startlingly low, and the population suffered from a slew of calamities, including war, religious strife, oppressive taxation, climatic disruptions, and epidemics. The omnipresence of death cast a long shadow, significantly affecting European societies. The overall climate of despair and adversity was further exacerbated by a demographic crisis and the persistent threat of famine, leading to an era dominated by the color black.

In the religious sphere, the century was noted for its bleakness and Puritanical austerity. Protestant Europe clung to a strict chromatic code, with black clothing becoming almost uniform for men, particularly in regions like Scandinavia and the United Provinces. The Puritan rule in England under Oliver Cromwell further entrenched this somber sartorial style by imposing



a moral code that eschewed bright colors in favor of black, gray, and brown.

Catholic Europe, influenced by the Baroque artistic movement, used vibrant colors for ecclesiastical purposes, yet the average person was expected to mirror the Protestants in choosing somber attire. Clergy from differing religious movements, such as Jesuits and Jansenists, enforced a moral code where black clothing symbolized piety and penitence. Even newly established religious orders embraced dark garments, and black became synonymous with holiness and devotion.

The starkness of people's attire extended into their homes, especially among the affluent. Wealthier homes saw less daylight due to thickened and decorated window glass, multiplying the darkness within smaller, more secluded spaces that were used for clandestine activities. This preference for darker environments was matched by heavy, dark-colored furniture which, together with filthy living conditions and inadequate lighting among the poor, reinforced a pervasive gloom. In some cities, emerging industrial pollution exacerbated this environment, compounding the decline in living standards.

The culture of mourning took a significant turn during this century as well. While mourning rituals had previously been the purview of the elite, mostly in southern Europe, the seventeenth century saw black become the universal color of mourning across western Europe. This custom expanded to include



not only aristocrats but also sections of the middle class, emphasizing black as the dominant color for funerals. Previously, other dark shades such as gray, dark blue, or purple might have been used, and some royal figures even adorned themselves in bright colors during mourning. However, by the century's close, black had secured its role as the color of mourning, setting the stage for further codification of mourning customs in the subsequent centuries.

In essence, the seventeenth century, a time often celebrated for its cultural and intellectual advancements, was overshadowed by a pervasive somberness that reflected the dark realities of life for the people of that era. The color black, synonymous with mourning and austerity, encapsulated the profound challenges and pervasive gloom experienced during this tumultuous period.

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# Chapter 27 Summary: The Return of the Devil

## The Return of the Devil

During the second half of the sixteenth century, societies across Europe experienced a resurgence of beliefs centered on demonic forces and witchcraft. This period, spanning roughly from 1550 to 1660, saw an increase in witch trials and a heightened focus on eradicating what was perceived as heretical or demonic behavior. Contrary to the common belief that witch trials were a relic of the medieval past, they were notably more prevalent during this time. This surge in witchcraft persecution coincided with the Protestant Reformation, which, while promoting new religious ideals, also contributed to the spread of fear about supernatural forces. The notion that individuals could ally with dark forces for personal gain—such as casting spells or harming livestock—became widespread.

The dissemination of these ideas was significantly aided by the emergence of print media. Books and pamphlets discussing spells and demonology became popular, with readers eager to learn about these mystical and terrifying subjects. Among these texts was Jean Bodin's 1580 publication, *\*De la démonomanie des sorciers\**. Bodin, a philosopher and jurist, was known for his modern ideas about law and politics, yet he also firmly believed in malevolent supernatural powers and the criminal nature of





witchcraft. His work detailed various crimes supposedly committed by witches, including child sacrifice and demonic pacts, and he advocated for severe punishments.

The majority of those accused were women, often blamed for having connections with the devil. This period saw widespread witch hunts, especially in regions like Germany, France, and England, with Protestant factions sometimes being more aggressive than their Catholic counterparts.

## **Witches and the Color Black**

The re-emergence of witches in public consciousness was propelled by visual and printed media. Engravings and books vividly depicted witches' activities, often cloaked in black, engaging in nocturnal sabbats surrounded by the dark arts. These gatherings were thought to take place in secluded, sinister locales—forests or ruins—under the cloak of darkness. Participants typically dressed in soot-covered clothes, which they shed during blasphemous rituals and orgies. The devil was believed to appear as a black animal, accompanied by an entourage of similarly black creatures, reinforcing the connotation of black with evil and misfortune.

This association with black extended beyond folklore into everyday superstition, with black animals like cats and crows seen as omens of bad



luck. The fear of black animals was deeply ingrained, with traditions warning against crossing paths with black cats or hearing a black rooster crow at odd times.

## **Black and Legal Systems**

Black was symbolically potent in the world of law and punishment as well. Legal proceedings, inquisitions, and executions were draped in black to invoke fear and awe. Those involved in witch trials—judges and executioners—often wore black, a stark contrast to the usual red, except at the stake, where flames introduced a touch of color. In certain cases, lenient judges allowed condemned witches to don white, perhaps as a symbolic gesture of redemption.

Overall, the period marked a significant intertwining of superstition, color symbolism, and societal fear, creating a tapestry where black represented malevolence, danger, and the ultimate unknown, both in the supernatural realm and in the harsh realities of human justice.



## Chapter 28: New Speculations, New Classifications

In the seventeenth century, despite ongoing religious intolerance and beliefs in witchcraft, there was a significant rise in scientific inquiry and discovery. This era, known for advancing many scientific disciplines, notably transformed understandings of optics—specifically color theory, which had seen little progress since the thirteenth century. During this period, intense speculation began around light and color, impacting both scientific and artistic fields. Artists empirically developed classifications of primary and complementary colors, setting the stage for future theories by figures like Newton and the eventual discovery of the light spectrum.

Historically, theories of color perception were predominantly based on ancient beliefs. For instance, some scientists adhered to Pythagorean views that perceived visual rays emitting from the eyes to detect color, while Platonic ideas suggested color resulted from visual "fires" interacting with particles emitted by objects. Aristotle's theories added complexity by considering the material environment and the observer. However, these notions persisted until questioned by pioneers like Kepler, who argued that color perception occurred within the eye, particularly at the retina, and not from external particles or light surfaces.

Regarding color's nature, many thinkers, influenced by Aristotelian concepts, posited that color derived from light that darkened as it passed



through different materials. Thus, colors were envisioned along an axis between black and white. In this medieval perspective, black and white were true colors, with an order of colors—white, yellow, red, green, blue, black—dominating, without the spectrum's nuanced understanding. Attempts at symbolism added purple into this lineup, incorrectly believed as a mix of blue and black, rather than red and blue blend.

As the seventeenth century progress, scientific advancement grew alongside, informed by empirical practices of painters and craftsmen. Individuals like Louis Savot and Anselme De Boodt began adopting artistic insights into scientific classifications. One notable influencer, François d'Aguilon, provided a framework distinguishing "extreme," "medium," and "mixed" colors, paving influential methodologies for color theory.

The era also sparked concepts of color as movement, resonant with contemporary thought, viewing color perception as an active interplay of light, objects, and vision. This shifted from the Aristotelian notion that incorporated elemental interaction to one more aligned with present understandings. Innovators like Kepler even suggested that unseen colors effectively did not exist, a precursor to ideas the likes of Goethe would elaborate on.

Arrangements like the color circle proposed by figures including Robert Fludd symbolized evolutions in color classification, departing from linear



models to circular arrangements, prefiguring Newton's color theory. While they maintained traditional concepts (black and white as full colors), the circular view signified a step towards modern spectrums and interactions between colors, with innovative diagrams by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher echoing this departure from linear models.

Overall, the seventeenth century marked a pivotal moment in evolving color science, where both artist's experimentation and scientific inquiry began to redefine centuries-old perceptions, leading to new classifications and theories underpinning the modern understanding of color.

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## Chapter 29 Summary: A New Order of Colors

In the chapters "A New Order of Colors" and "All the Colors of Black," the text delves into the evolution of color theory from the 17th century onwards, culminating in the groundbreaking work of Isaac Newton. Historically, scholars and artists had long speculated about colors, notably in the context of rainbows, which fascinated thinkers like Galileo, Descartes, and Huygens. These researchers revisited ancient texts and theories from Aristotle, Alhazen, and medieval scholars such as Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon. Their focus shifted from symbolic and metaphysical interpretations to rigorous scientific inquiry into the physical and optical nature of rainbows, particularly the phenomena of light reflection and refraction.

Isaac Newton emerged as a pivotal figure in color theory during the mid-17th century. While spending time away from Cambridge due to the plague, Newton made numerous discoveries, most notably the dispersion of white light into a spectrum of colors. He conducted extensive prism experiments that demonstrated how light could be broken down into a series of distinct colors—violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange, and red—creating a new chromatic order. This discovery not only identified the spectrum but also showed how these colors could be recomposed to form white light, challenging previous conceptions that colors resulted from the weakening of light.



Newton's revolutionary ideas, detailed in his 1704 work on optics, fundamentally changed the way color was understood. He proposed that colors were inherent in light itself, which could be objectively measured and controlled. This shift from treating colors as subjective experiences linked to perception to viewing them as quantifiable phenomena had a lasting impact on both scientific and artistic fields. Newton's classification excluded black and white from being true colors, categorizing them instead as the absence of color and the presence of all colors, respectively.

Despite initial resistance due to the complex vocabulary Newton used and misunderstandings about the number of colors in the spectrum, his ideas gained dominance. Artists and scientists began to adopt new methods to categorize and utilize color, leading to the development of colorimetry in the 18th and 19th centuries. The transformation in color theory prompted a shift in societal attitudes towards color, affecting philosophers, theologians, and everyday practitioners.

Goethe, a notable figure from the Enlightenment era, challenged Newton's dispersion theory in his "Theory of Colors," advocating for a different perspective on color perception. Nonetheless, Newton's contributions remained pivotal, laying the groundwork for contemporary color science and reshaping how color was perceived and employed across various disciplines.





This new understanding of color as a measurable and reproducible property influenced technological and creative practices and marked a significant turning point in the history of knowledge, transitioning color from mystical and symbolic realms into the empirical and experimental domains. As such, Newton's work in color theory represented a major leap forward in how humans comprehend and engage with the visual world.

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# Chapter 30 Summary: The Triumph of Color

## Chapter Summary: The Triumph of Color

The debate over the primacy of drawing versus color in art, which spanned centuries, culminated in the eventual triumph of color. This longstanding controversy, originating in the 14th century, pitted advocates of form and line against those of color within the plastic arts. Initially, the introduction of grisaille—a technique involving shades of black, white, and gray—in illuminated manuscripts marked a shift toward a more restrained color palette. Grisaille was considered dignified, moral, and especially suitable for religious artworks during certain liturgical periods.

Artists and theorists, particularly during the Renaissance in Italy, revisited the question of whether drawing or color more effectively conveyed truth. Florentine practitioners, influenced by Neoplatonic ideals, prioritized precise line work as representing intellectual superiority. In contrast, Venetian artists celebrated color for its expressiveness and emotional resonance, championing its ability to convey life's vibrance and complexity, best exemplified by the works of Titian.

The question persisted into the 17th century, particularly within the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Critics argued that color was



superficial, appealing to the senses rather than the intellect, thus lacking in moral and aesthetic virtue. Proponents of color countered with its indispensable role in delineating forms, illustrating scientific phenomena, and capturing the essence of life.

The 18th century heralded color's ascendancy, influenced by scientific advances like Newton's theories and innovations in color printing by figures like Jakob Christoffel Le Blon. Le Blon developed a method using three primary colors—red, blue, and yellow (plus black)—to produce a full spectrum in engravings, anticipating the theory of primary and complementary colors. These technological and theoretical breakthroughs redefined color's place in the cultural hierarchy, marginalizing older systems that relied on a more limited palette of basic hues, such as the six-color system of the Middle Ages.

Thus, by the early 18th century, the shift from a binary debate to an appreciation of color's complexity marked a pivotal moment in the history of art. Color gained scientific measurability and artistic legitimacy, permanently altering its role and significance in artistic and intellectual discourse. The victory of color reshaped artistic priorities and methodologies, influencing all spheres of cultural and intellectual life.



## Chapter 31 Summary: The Age of Enlightenment

During the Age of Enlightenment, a cultural and intellectual movement across Europe spanning the late 17th to the late 18th century, significant transformations in art, fashion, and societal norms unfolded. This period is depicted as a bright interlude between two darker centuries, symbolized by a notable shift away from somber browns, blacks, and crimsons towards lighter and more playful hues. Reflecting the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, science, and progressive thought, urban and elite circles favored pastel colors—soft blues, pinks, yellows, and grays—that came to define the era's aesthetic.

Significant changes also occurred in the realm of textiles and dyes, propelled by scientific advancements. The importation of American indigo revitalized the color blue, previously less popular, and cities involved in the production of traditional woad dye suffered economic repercussions. Alongside blues, greens gained popularity due to breakthroughs that mixed yellow and blue effectively, thanks in part to the discovery of Prussian blue by the Berlin pharmacist Dippel in 1709. Grays, once considered drab, emerged in vibrant fashions with silk and cotton, contributing to a sophisticated wardrobe.

This colorful transformation overshadowed the previously dominant black, which faced decline in favor as it was associated with older forms of apparel. The purveyance of vivid tones was so pronounced in France that it attracted



travelers and epitomized Paris as a hub of elegance and dynamism until the revolution began to pivot society back toward darker shades.

In art, the departure from black mirrored broader shifts. Baroque and Rococo artists like Guardi and Canaletto embraced lighter palettes, withdrawing from the deep shadows and contrasts favored by predecessors like Caravaggio and Rembrandt. This aesthetic shift extended to theater where, in a reversal from the past, black costumes were rejected due to superstitious associations with bad fortune.

As society shifted away from black, so did its symbolism. The Enlightenment bred different interests and preoccupations, notably reflected in Europe's expansionist and imperial activities. The European slave trade peaked during this century, with millions forcibly displaced from Africa to the Americas. While the horrors faced by the enslaved were primarily overlooked in popular culture, the image of the black individual reached the European imagination, often romanticized in art and literature of the time, underscoring an exotified yet paternalistic portrayal.

Despite its apparent decline, the color black, linked to complex social dynamics, lingered in certain courtly conventions and eventually returned in the late century as European societies grappled with the Enlightenment's legacies and the impending challenges of the revolutionary era. As such, this age of vibrant palettes couldn't entirely extinguish the pervasive, existential



depth embodied by black, which persisted in cultural and symbolic memory, serving as a prelude to subsequent refinements in the societal fabric.

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## Chapter 32: The Poetics of Melancholy

### All the Colors of Black: The Poetics of Melancholy

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Europe experienced a profound shift in artistic and literary sensibilities, often mirroring broader cultural changes. Initially, the Western interest in Africans and their colonies introduced new conversations around the color black, but it wasn't until the Romantic era took hold that this color regained its erstwhile prestige, albeit gradually. This transformation unfolded in phases, with early Romantics captivated more by nature and dreams than the night and macabre, as evidenced by their preference for colors like green and blue.

In the late 18th century, nature became synonymous with vegetation, contrasting earlier associations with the elemental forces of air, water, earth, and fire. This newfound appreciation was popularized by thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who praised the serenity and metaphysical values of the countryside over urban life. Green and blue, representing nature and dreams, became favorite colors of this period. Novalis's "blue flower" in his unfinished novel "Heinrich von Ofterdingen" symbolizes this quest for the unattainable, while Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther" contributed to "Werthermania," inspiring a fashion trend centered around the blue coat worn by the protagonist.



As Romanticism evolved, black emerged as a dominant color, representing the melancholic and emotional intensity that began to characterize the era. Gothic literature, epitomized by works like Horace Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto" and Goethe's "Faust," steeped themselves in themes of death, mystery, and the supernatural, elements that redefined black as a symbol of night, death, and the fantastical. This period saw poets like Victor Hugo celebrate emotions such as sadness and doom with fervor, transforming them into almost virtuous traits.

The archetypal Romantic artist was often portrayed in black clothing, exhibiting a melancholic demeanor that communicated suffering and depth. Icons like Mephistopheles from "Faust" embodied dark themes, as artists and poets gravitated toward the tragic and mysterious. Works like Novalis's "Hymns to the Night" and Musset's "Nuits" further explored these somber musings, reflected musically in Chopin's Nocturnes.

Melancholy became a defining characteristic of poets, seen as a requisite for artistic purity. This evolved into a cultural trend where young Romantic poets, including Byron, Keats, and Shelley, often met early deaths, embodying the tragic ideals they romanticized. Gérard de Nerval's sonnet "El Desdichado" famously encapsulated this era with the metaphor of the "Black Sun of Melancholia," replacing Novalis's "blue flower" as the emblem of a generation consumed by morbid fascination.





By the 19th century, a fascination with the fantastic—emphasizing the strange, occult, and satanic—became prevalent. This dark allure was manifested in secret societies, occultism, and literature that reveled in the macabre, such as Joris Karl Huysmans' novel "À rebours" which depicted

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# Chapter 33 Summary: The Age of Coal and Factories

## The Age of Coal and Factories: A Transformation of Society and Industry

By the mid-19th century, the widespread use of the color black transcended its traditional associations with fashion and poetry to symbolize a broader societal transformation. This period marked the beginning of the second industrial revolution in Europe and America, characterized by a significant reliance on coal. Coal became emblematic of this new industrial era, driving unprecedented production and transforming the landscape through pollution and grime. In 1858, global coal production was 172 million tons, escalating to 928 million tons by 1905, a staggering increase reflecting the intense industrial growth.

The industrial age brought about profound changes in cities and rural landscapes. Urban environments became dominated by factories and railways, creating a stark contrast between affluent and impoverished neighborhoods. The coal mines symbolized the center of industrial change and were fraught with danger, while subterranean infrastructures like subways altered urban transportation, debuting in London in 1863 and Paris in 1900. Simultaneously, the societal perception of light and skin color evolved along with these changes. As industry-driven urban life developed, spending time outdoors became a luxury.

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The concept of tanning illustrates these evolving social attitudes. Initially, pale skin was a mark of aristocracy, separating the elite from sun-tanned peasants. However, as workers became the primary labor force, often unseen beneath the earth, pale skin began to symbolize their indoor work environment and lower status. This led the wealthy to pursue tans, signaling leisure and distinction from the working class. By the 20th century, accessible vacations democratized tanning, causing the elite to once again favor pale complexions.

Black also defined the industrial cityscape, with grimy soot covering urban environments and dictating fashion choices. Men's clothing, especially in business and government, leaned toward black to express seriousness and authority. Despite objections from artists and poets who critiqued black as uninspired and oppressive, it remained a staple due to the Protestant work ethic that viewed vibrant colors as immodest. This chromophobic ethos influenced mass production, with black, white, gray, and brown dominating consumer goods despite the availability of diverse colors.

Throughout this era, significant industrial and financial enterprises were controlled by Protestant values, influencing marketing practices and contributing to a largely monochromatic palette. This standardization persisted into the 20th century, evidenced by Henry Ford, the automobile magnate who restricted his Model T cars to black, upholding his puritanical



principles despite public demand for colorful options.

In summary, the age of coal and factories not only reshaped the physical and economic landscapes but also profoundly influenced social norms, fashion, and color perceptions. This era reflected a complex interplay of industrial progress, social stratification, and value systems that defined the character of late 19th and early 20th-century Western society.

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## Chapter 34 Summary: Regarding Images

In the chapters titled "Regarding Images" and "Black," the narrative delves into the evolution of color use in art and its philosophical underpinnings, reflecting the transformation of perceptions in both painting and photography throughout history.

### Regarding Images:

The shift in color philosophy began with a rebellion against the dominance of black in art. By the Romantic period, artists were advocating for a lighter palette and a shift towards the colors of nature—greens, yellows, and oranges. This transition was significantly advanced by the Impressionists, who largely abandoned traditional black in favor of brighter, outdoor scenes filled with luminous colors. Central to this transition was the influence of Eugène Chevreul, a chemist whose theories on color contrasts shaped artistic practices for generations. Chevreul's principles detailed how colors altered when placed in proximity to others, and how these interactions could negate the need for certain conventional artistic techniques, such as strict adherence to drawing and lighting.

This evolution was not universally adopted among artists, but most were nonetheless influenced by Chevreul's ideas in varying degrees. His work,





along with developments in the classification of colors and the rejection of black as a true color, led to a period where painting prioritized color over the monochromatic scales. Paul Gauguin, for example, famously shunned black and gray, opting to create "near-blacks" from a mixture of vibrant pigments, embracing rich and varied hues.

### **Chiaroscuro and The Paved Streets of Paris:**

A few notable artists, such as Édouard Manet, experimented with chiaroscuro—a stark contrast between light and dark reminiscent of Velázquez and Rembrandt—to evoke emotion and drama. Yet, Manet's works were considered tributes to the older traditions, nostalgically reflecting on the tonal contrasts that were gradually being abandoned in favor of color exploration.

### **Photographic Influence:**

The advent of photography ushered in a profound transformation in the artistic world. With this new medium, artists could now explore subjects as surfaces to discover novel optical effects, emphasizing the contrast between black and white and color. Though early photography was dominated by black and white due to technical limitations, it stirred artistic



experimentation, profoundly affecting artists' approach to capturing reality. The limitations of early photography in capturing true blacks and whites created a pervasive atmosphere where black-and-white images dominated public perception and aesthetic sensibilities, albeit color photography began to gain more acceptance mid-20th century.

Through many decades, black and white maintained its stronghold in documentation and official imagery, as color was perceived to be less reliable and more prone to distortion. Historians, too, were reluctant to embrace color as a serious subject of study until the latter part of the 20th century. This reluctance delayed the recognition of color's role in art, dress, and everyday life. Despite the longstanding tradition of monochromatic images through engraving and photography, the latter half of the 20th century slowly saw a belated appreciation of color's complex history and role in artistic endeavors.

Overall, these chapters underscore the dynamic tension between black, white, and color throughout art history, portraying a gradual departure from strict monochrome traditions toward a more vibrant, diverse visual representation that captured the changing realities and perceptions of the modern age.





## Chapter 35 Summary: A Modern Color

The development and implementation of color in cinema and art throughout history have been multifaceted and complex. In the late 1800s, the introduction of cinema by the Lumière brothers marked a significant milestone as they presented moving images to the public, albeit initially in black and white. As the 20th century began, the dominance of black and white in imagery, including photography and cinema, came under scrutiny. Despite early technical experiments with color film, such as hand-coloring frames and using color filters, these methods remained rudimentary and did not achieve significant commercial success until much later.

The Technicolor process, devised as early as 1915 and perfected by the mid-1930s, eventually paved the way for the iconic color films like "Gone with the Wind" and "The Adventures of Robin Hood" before WWII. However, the delay in using color cinema in the mainstream wasn't solely technical or financial. Puritanical views from influential capitalists of the 1915–1920 era considered animated color images a step too far into frivolous or indecent territory, thus slowing down its adoption.

After World War II, color films became more prevalent but did not outnumber black and white films until the end of the 1960s. Some critics saw color as detracting from the artistic nature of films, while others noted the public's preference for colorful visuals. The practice of coloring old



black-and-white films in the 1980s and 1990s further illustrated this preference, sparking debates about artistic integrity and historical accuracy.

In parallel with cinema's developments, the art world experienced its revolutions. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, painters began restoring black as a valued color, further catalyzed by movements like Russian Suprematism. Artists like Pierre Soulages pioneered explorations into the depths of black, culminating in his concept of "outrenoir"—a move beyond traditional black that highlighted light interaction with the color.

Black also found its place in the design world, moving beyond its historical associations to become a symbol of modernity and elegance. Fashion designers like Coco Chanel re-introduced black as chic and sophisticated, solidifying its place in the modern wardrobe with creations like the "little black dress." This trend extended to various professions, where black became synonymous with creativity and power.

Thus, black and color in cinema and art symbolize a long-standing cultural evolution reflecting societal attitudes, technological advancements, and aesthetic preferences. Despite changes in public taste and artistic expression, black's profound impact as a color endures across both visual and social landscapes.

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## Chapter 36: A Dangerous Color?

In the chapter titled "A Dangerous Color?", the text explores the multifaceted symbolism and historical significance of the color black. Throughout history, black has been associated with rebellion and transgression, as evident in movements like the Black Panthers and rockers, with their choice of black attire symbolizing defiance. This rebellious use of black has ancient roots, such as the pirate flags of the Mediterranean, evolving into the infamous Jolly Roger with its skull and crossbones motif. Despite being non-existent in some historical uprisings, the black flag eventually gained prominence, especially during France's 1968 student protests, overshadowing the traditional revolutionary red flag.

Politically, the chapter distinguishes between various interpretations of black, including the conservative black of the clergy's garb, and the ominous black of Fascist and Nazi uniforms. These disparate uses of black might blend extreme ideologies under a shared symbolism, highlighting the Western tendency to align extremes. Today, however, wearing black as a form of rebellion seems outdated, with even adolescents no longer attracting attention by sporting black with piercings and provocative behavior.

The normalization of black extends to fashion and personal items, such as women's underwear. Once limited to whites or light colors due to moral and hygienic reasons, the shift in cultural perceptions allowed black to become a



popular, even preferred, choice for undergarments, reflecting broader changes in societal values.

Despite its diminished association with danger or transgression, black retains certain negative connotations in language and superstition. Expressions

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