

BOOK REVIEW: Yellow, the history of a color

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Michel Pastoureau: Giallo, storia di un colore, Ponte Alle Grazie, 2019.

Pastoureau, M. (2019) *Yellow: The History of a Color*. Translated by J. Gladding. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

The publishing house "Ponte alle Grazie", which for years has edited the Italian translation of the books on color by Michel Pastoureau - director in Paris of the "École pratique des Hautes études" and holder of the chair "History of symbolism in the West" - has published his fifth work on symbolism of colours: "YELLOW. History of a color" (€ 32). The book consists of the usual 240 pages in the cm. 23 x 23 format and stands out, as always, for the exceptional iconographic research. The text is divided into three large chronological chapters, subdivided in turn by subject, ranging from vocabulary to symbols, everyday life, social customs, scientific knowledge, technical applications, religious morals and artistic production. In the introduction, Pastoureau warns that yellow suffers from a limited number of documents on which to conduct research, which is why the book also includes gold and orange.

Chapter A Beneficial color (From the origins to the 5th century)

This chapter describes pigments, gold, dyes and the myths that described them.

In *The Ochres of the Palaeolithic*, he describes the procedures for preparing ochres by cave painters 30,000 years ago.

Gold occupies two sub-chapters:

In *The Blond Metal* he refers to the gold of the necropolises, bringing the prehistoric necropolis of Varna and the sarcophagus of Pharaoh Tutankhamun as examples.

In *The Mythologies of Gold* he recalls the Golden Age described by Hesiod; the myth of the conquest of Hercules' golden apples, that of Jason's Golden Fleece, that of King Midas who "represents the most ancient link between yellow, envy and avarice" and the legend of The Rhine Gold.

In *The Sun Cults*, he points out that the sun has always been associated with gold and, in its place, with yellow.

Turning to dyes, Pastoureau divides them into:

Dyeing yellow, in which he lists vegetable dyes, from saffron to reseda (which it is always translated as "guada") to safflower.

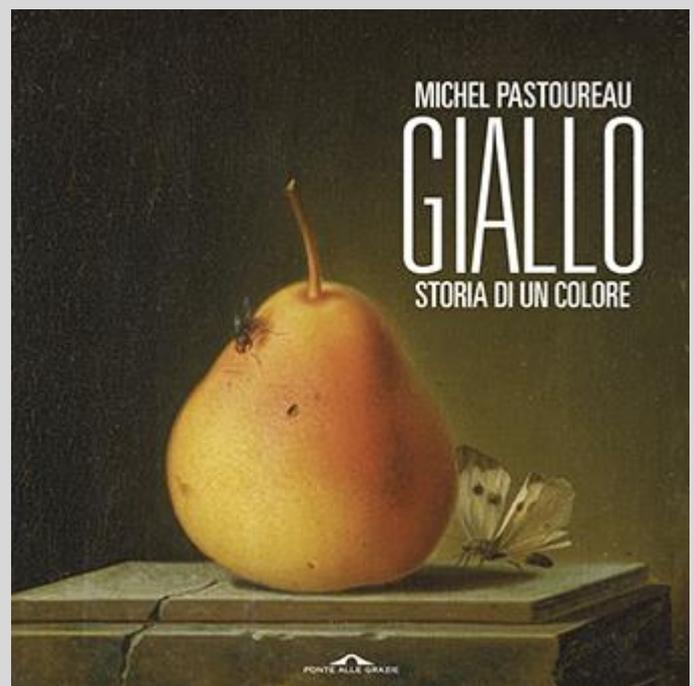
Wearing yellow in which he shows how until the late Middle Ages yellow in clothing was still appreciated.

The case of Clodius in which Cicero's mockery of Clodius is reported, describes him as a debauchee who wears yellow clothes, a purely feminine color.

The following conclude the chapter:

Lexicon teachings analyses Latin terms.

The silence of the Bible and of the Fathers of the Church where an abundance of gold does not correspond to a presence of yellow.



Chapter An equivocal color (6th-15th centuries)

From this century on yellow turns towards negative judgements.

The absence of yellow in Christian worship is linked to the previous sub-chapter by examining the liturgical code of colours established by Pope Innocent III.

In *Yellow in the Coat of Arms* Pastoureau, who is an expert in this field, examines heraldry.

In *An Ambivalent Symbology*, he makes the transition from the coat of arms to the robes of knights.

In *The Prestige of Blond Hair*, he describes how much they were appreciated in medieval courts.

In *Bile and Urine* he describes the medical practices of fluid analysis that charged yellow with filth and disease.

Envy, lies and betrayal develops the latter aspect, which by the end of the Middle Ages became the color of forgers, traitors and criminals.

The robes of Jan Hus and Judas shows how the yellow robe characterised traitors and became the symbol of Jewishness.

To the origins of the yellow star? Develops the theme of yellow in the representation of Judaism, while emphasising that there was no system of signs or colours common to the whole of Christianity.

Chapter **A little-loved color (16th-21st century)**

The chapter begins by noting how yellow is still a colour with a limited presence in Europe today and suggests that its decline stems from its instability in painting and dyeing.

Painters' Yellow is a section entirely dedicated to paintings and their reproduction.

Yellow of the scholars shows its diversified classification over the centuries.

Yellow in Everyday Life looks at the presence of yellow in painting, clothing and fabric samples.

Dictionaries and encyclopedias takes up the lexicological investigation of yellow from the first chapter, extending it to the 17th and 18th centuries in France.

Eastern trends attests to how the success of 'chinoiserie' in Europe briefly contributed to the fashion for yellow.

Discretion, transgression, modernity attests to how in the 19th century yellow denoted a series of negativities: from prostitutes to asylums known as 'the yellow houses' and more.

At the far reaches of yellow is Orange introduces this shade Pastoureau writes that it "began to distinguish itself from red at the end of the Middle Ages" and spread from the 14th century with the importation of new dyes: the "Campeche wood" from Central America (which in Italy we call "campeggio wood") and the pernambuco wood from South America (which in Italy we call "Brazil wood"). It concludes with the strong presence in contemporary signage.

Yellow in our time concludes the book, with the criticality that, for different reasons, yellow suffers in our society, where it is recovered for its visibility, for example in taxis, in post boxes, in the waistcoats of the eponymous political movement.

A book in which, alongside the historical seriousness of the text, the pleasure of the images predominates.