

A History of the Colour Purple

Hannah Foskett

Between vibrant red and calm blue sits 'royal' purple. You may call it mauve or violet, and it may not always be accompanied by a catchy preliminary adjective, but the colour purple was the most sought after in history, and has roots in mythology, piety, art and royalty.

The most refracted colour when light passes through a prism, purple is at the far end of the visible colour spectrum, and is the hardest colour for the eye to discriminate. The words 'mysterious' and 'sensual' spring to mind—and so should the word 'snails'.

Origin

Hard to imagine today is the likelihood that our prehistoric ancestors never saw a purple fruit, flower or animal. Purple is relatively rare in nature, and the exotic colour has accordingly been considered sacred.

The word actually derives from the name of the Tyrian purple dye manufactured from mucus secreted by the spiny dye-murex snail. The dye came from the Phoenician trading city of Tyre, now in modern-day Lebanon. An incredible amount of mucus was needed to yield a tiny amount of dye and sate the craving of emperors and kings.

If you were to turn to mythology, you'd learn that it was actually Hercules' dog that discovered the colour, after picking up a murex snail from the beach and developing purple drool.

Royalty

It is no wonder then that this rare hue has been one of the most coveted and expensive colours throughout history—a consistent indication of wealth and power.

From the imperial classes of Rome, Egypt and Persia, began a widespread reverence for the colour. Purple came to represent spirituality because the ancient leaders that donned it were widely considered to be descendants of the gods.

In the Byzantine Empire, empresses gave birth in the 'Purple Chamber' and honourable emperors were 'born to the purple' as a way to separate them from those who won or seized their title.

Laws were actually introduced to protect the colour's use. Kings and emperors allowed senators to have togas with a stripe of purple, but that was it.

In 1547, when Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, was tried for high treason against Henry VIII, the evidence against him included that he had been seen wearing purple, which only the king was allowed to wear.

This exclusivity extended to the Elizabethan era, during which the people in England were to abide by Queen Elizabeth I's sumptuary laws that strictly regulated what colours, fabrics and clothes were allowed to be worn by different classes within society. The laws forbade anyone but close relatives of the royal family to wear purple.

Over time, the hue became less costly and complex, and consequently more accessible to lower classes in society.

In 1856, 18-year-old English chemist William Henry Perkin accidentally created a synthetic purple compound while attempting to synthesise quinine, an anti-malaria drug. Recognising that the compound could be used to dye fabrics, he patented the dye and manufactured it under the names aniline purple and Tyrian purple. The colour's name was later changed to 'mauve'; based on the French name for the purple mallow flower.

Art

The colour purple is said to have first appeared in art during the Neolithic era. The prehistoric artists in France used sticks of manganese and hematite powder to draw and paint animals and outlines on the walls of their caves. These works have been dated back to between 16,000 and 25,000 BC.

Purple hues were especially popular with the pre-Raphaelite painters in Britain. Their characteristic purple was made from mixing cobalt blue with madder, and notably enhanced Arthur Hughes' bold, romantic scenes.

Gustav Klimt would also take a liking to the colour, flooding his pictures with sensual purples and bright violets.

For many, purple is considered tiring for the eyes and can cause a sense of frustration—often symbolising lust or sorrow in major artworks.

Social Change

While purple had its regal comeback in the 20th century—worn by George VI in his official portrait and featuring as the prominent colour used for the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953—it was also becoming associated with social change.

Specifically, the Women's Suffrage movement used the colours purple, green and white in the battle to win the right to vote for women.

Lavender Menace, a New York faction of radical activists who protested the National Organisation of Women's exclusion of lesbians during the late 1960s, were given their name by Betty Friedan—president of NOW. The name took the colour most associated with LGBT issues at the time and transformed it into one of power and progression.

Purple was also associated with the psychedelic drug culture of the 1960s and 70s. Jimi Hendrix's ambiguous 1967 song *Purple Haze* is often interpreted as referring to a psychedelic experience and constitutes a time of social, musical and artistic change.

Indeed, the Pantone Color of the Year for 2018 was ultraviolet.

'Enigmatic purples have long been symbolic of counterculture, unconventionality, and artistic brilliance. Musical icons Prince, David Bowie, and Jimi Hendrix brought shades of Ultra Violet to the forefront of western pop culture as personal expressions of individuality.'

Politics

Today, we see the dominance of the purple necktie. A phenomenon of modern politics, the colour combines the assertiveness of a red tie with the compassion of a blue one.

While purple—a literal mix of red and blue—seems to offer a commitment to partnership, its long association with wealth, status, and power makes it a very fitting hue in modern politics.

The colour purple

For some (pop idol Prince included), purple is the colour most associated with extravagance and individualism. For others, it simply represents ambiguity—an undecided combination of two primary colours. In different interpretations of the seven deadly sins, purple is aligned with vanity, greed and pride.

The colour has also commonly been linked to piety, is referenced in the Bible, and has been worn by many religious leaders throughout history. Alice Walker's celebrated epistolary novel *The Colour Purple* (1982) uses the colour to compliment a character's religious awakening. It seems the colour purple has certainly been on a remarkable journey.

Evening's Wrap – Violet and Mauve

By Dian Parker

Dusk is a near-ineffable color somewhere between gray and blue, like twilight – an in between color. Consider it violet, lilac, or mauve. The color is soft and dreamy, like the smell of lavender, like a summer's evening. In winter, on a sundrenched day, the shadows of trees on snow appear ultramarine violet. In any season, hills in the distance at dawn and dusk are delicate mauve, with tinges of alizarin red. "What is violet? Clouds are violet in the summer twilight," wrote Christina Rossetti.

Violet has the shortest wavelength and the highest frequency of visible light. Behind it lies invisible ultraviolet. Makes sense that the color comes and goes like a will-o'-the-wisp. Catch it if you can. The color is iridescent opal and moonstone, the mother of pearl shell. It is the color underneath the blue jays' wing, only seen when the feathers catch the light.

Mauve was a happy accident. In the mid-19th century, malaria was killing soldiers in the tropics where the all-mighty British Empire was adding colonies. The only remedy was quinine; extremely expensive. A teenager, William Henry Perkin, was attempting to synthesize quinine in a laboratory. He didn't succeed but the leftover precipitate had a purplish hue. Accidentally he had made the first synthetic dye, named mauveine, or Perkin's mallow. Since Roman times, the only way to make mauve clothing had been to harvest 12,000 sea snails, whose mucus yielded only 1.5 grams of pure dye.

At 21, Perkin became a millionaire and today, because of his discovery, we have artificial dyes and a way to color cells, critical for chemotherapy research. His dye discovery led to the *Mauve Decade* in 1890. The color was identified with artificiality and decadence. No Victorian matron would dare be seen dressed in mauve. Opium was considered the mauve drug. Today, mauve saves lives.

Impressionist painters created violet shadows during this time. Monet's haystacks are awash with violets and pinks in the sunset. Matisse bathed his painting *Woman with a Green Parasol on a Balcony* in violet skies, her dress and chair, beside a slash of Prussian blue shutter. Violet chaplets were sold in the market. Even Pliny had a terrace of sweet-scented violets. The violet flower is in the *viola* genus – the largest genus with over 500 species.

Violet purple is the petals of asters. Lavender purple, composed of blue, red, a bit of brown and gray, is visible on Porcelain Jasper, dried lavender flowers, and in the spots of the Peacock Butterfly's upper wings. Lilac has a pink tint. Lavender is tinted blue. Mauve Pink is pale and purplish, redder and deeper than Orchid Tint. The mallow flower is mauve as a neutral, pale purple with a gray tint. Dying fabric with violet or mauve, on a sunny day, turns out blue. On a cloudy day, purple.

"Violet is red withdrawn from humanity by blue," Kandinsky wrote.

Susan G. Scott's *Where Water Grows Still* is an oil on canvas. Speaking about violet colors, Scott said, "When I am outdoors, working from observation, which is the source of all my large-scale oil paintings, I use Daniel Smith's watercolor Naphthamide Maroon. Later, working on the oils in my studio, I use Windsor Newton's Purple Lake."



Susan G. Scott "Where Water Grows Still" oil on canvas, 6' x 10'

Indigo is halfway between blue and violet. Violet is halfway between blue and purple. Indigo is one-third purple and three-quarters blue. Helen Frankenthaler's *Almost August*, acrylic on paper, uses Mars Violet; a deep bluish red. The short purple slash in the lower left brings out the subtle tones of violet throughout.

In Japan, violet is the color of victory, the color in which Shinto priests wrap their most precious objects of the temple, and the color of the costume of the highest-ranking Sumo referee. The 2022 Pantone color of the year is called *Very Peri*, a misnomer to be sure. Periwinkle is a lavender blue. *Very Peri* is definitely purple. Pantone states, "Encompassing the qualities of the blues, yet at the same time possessing a violet-red undertone. The Hero Shade," whatever that means. Just goes to show that describing violet colors is a slippery slope, like dusk.

Talk about violet and mauve! There is Rose Foncé, Ultramarine Pink, Manganese Violet, Violet de Cobalt, Alizarin Violet, Magenta, Murex Shell, Tyrian Purple, Madder Lake, Cobalt Violet, Cerise, Hibiscus Violet, Fandango Violet, Royal Violet, Helio Violet, Amethyst Violet, and on and on.

Paynes Grey is a dark blue-grey color, often used instead of black. It is a mixture of ultramarine and black, or ultramarine and burnt sienna. Paintings can look grey-violet, just like the sky in the evening, using Paynes Grey. My bedroom is painted this cool grey. I finally bought thin grey curtains for the room. When my four-year-old charge was taking his nap, I closed the curtains for the first time. The midday light hit the grey, turning the curtains deep Phoenician purple, billowing like Cleopatra's sails on her barge.

"I have finally discovered the true color of the atmosphere," Monet once said. "It is violet. Fresh air is violet." Dusky violet.

