
This collection of papers about various aspects of colour in Antiquity are not the result of a round table, but collected by the editors, apparently choosing specific authors for specific themes. Most texts are very dense and require a high degree of concentration. According to the title, they should range from analyses of text to archaeological material, but the first aspect gets more attention. The few colour illustrations will frustrate the editors as they do the readers: these images are not trustworthy in any way!

I did not find it easy to find a red thread, despite the clear introduction by Agnès Rouveret, known from her own studies on the intersection of theory, texts and material culture. According to her, the collection of papers aims at discussing new research on colour, pigments, and technique from various points of view. She distinguishes two periods: classical-early Hellenistic and republican-high Empire. There are three sections. (I will not resume all papers; the book contains short resumes at its end.) Rouveret opens the first section on colours in painting and tries to describe the experience of people in the classical era with colours. Poseidippus’ epigrams furnish new data and express, between the lines, criticism at the actual use of colours. Colours should enhance the veracity of the art object and its plasticity, which matches the wont of realism in classical art. Apparently, in Poseidippus’ time that was no longer the case. This must have led to changes in the perception of colours in the subsequent period. Rouveret’s essay matches with that by Charikleia Brecoulaki, who tackles an old question: the *colores austeres et floridi*, the famous four colours that great masters like Apelles and Nicomachus worked with. The Greek equivalents were *αὐστηρός* and *ἀνθηρός*, meaning ‘severe’ and ‘agreeable’, but not in painting only. Brecoulaki does not arrive at a clear conclusion: all grades of wealth and soberness could be meant. Paintings in the Hellenistic tombs in Macedonia might provide an idea of the use of this four-colours palette. We will not immediately think of the colour of the skin as a fixing point in the esthetics of colour, but Laurence Villard makes clear that many texts in the fourth century BC take *χρώς* and *χρῶμα* as starting points. They are good standards for the already mentioned wish of realism: if you are invited to touch a painting’s rendering of skin, it is a good work—according to ancient opinion. The first section is closed by a hyper-specialistic essay by Richard Crescenzo on the translation of terms for colour in Philostratus’ *Imagines* by Blaise de Vignère from 1578. I fail to see the relevance of this paper for the study of ancient approaches in painting towards colour.

The second section is on colours on (“sur”) materials, i.e. the polychromy of metal statues, marbles and so on, not only reached by the use of pigments, but also
by the insertion of elements in other metals (silver teeth and copper nipples on the 
statues of Riace) or in other stone. The patina of bronzes and their ‘blackness’ is 
discussed by Sophie Descamps-Lequime, and again the examples we have at hand 
are subaltern to the texts. A similar topic is the colours of bronze in the paper by 
Marion Muller-Defeu, who relies on texts only. Valérie Maugan-Chemin analyses 
passages in Pliny the Elder, Martial and Statius on marble and its natural colour, 
from white to yellow, red and blue. Strikingly, the ‘dry’ encyclopédiste Pliny does 
not differ much from the poets in the way he is subjective in praising or loathing 
colours. In all authors marble is like a living being; it can bleed, weep, is moved or 
moves and changes colour in doing any of these things. The qualities or precious-
ness partly depend on this performance. Little about colour, but much about 
material is contained in the essay by Evelyne Prioux on Hellenistic and early-
Roman epigrams: the ekphraseis tell a lot about the materiality, often superfluously, 
as the object is speaking itself. Poseidippus’ book on lithica, however, has a pun on 
colour. Smaller topics are the Shield of Achilles and the bronze tables in Taxila 
discussed by Sandrine Dubel: the bronze objects are like paintings and the lan-
guage used by Homer and his successors to describe the reliefs forged by Hephaes-
tus and others seems to be that of painting technique.

The third section is on Latin literature: inter alia color in rhetorics (Carlos 
Lévy), mineralogy and colours in Pliny the Elder (Véronique Naas) and colour in 
nature as described by Latin authors from Lucretius through the Flavians by Jean 
Trinquier. Like the previous sections, all essays contain an extremely high amount 
of close readings of texts and the discussion promised in the blurb on the back of 
the book, about the encounter with new archaeological finds, is not made at all. 
The essays demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the texts/authors discussed, but 
do not surpass the limits of philology. I really miss an essay on practical aspects 
and/or the application of colours from an archaeological or art-historical point of 
view. Surely, the ancients were less specialist in their interests, but the authors 
played with the notions of art more than artists did with texts, and that is one of 
the biases of using texts to reconstruct a world of artists and their practices. The 
nature of the many treatises written from the fourth century BC onwards is different 
from our modern manuals: they would not be read by artists at all but form part 
of the learned realm of the elite. All in all, from the subtitle ‘textes’ are paramount, 
the other two are stepchildren fostered from a purely literary point of view.