

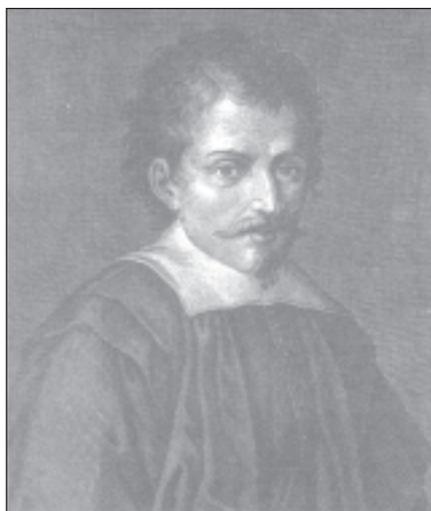
Latin terms for pigments and dye-colours

There is often considerable confusion about the precise meaning of colour terms that appear in various Latin texts. Roy Osborne discusses here an often neglected but invaluable reference source, written by the Renaissance poet Antonio Telesio, which specifies the appearance of a surprisingly comprehensive range of colour-related terms, a number of which identify the colours of various pigments and dyes

In Venice, in 1528, a remarkable 'little book on colour' first appeared in print. The author of this text, entitled *Libellus de coloribus*, was a prominent classical scholar and poet, Antonio Telesio (1482–1534), otherwise known as Antonius Thylesius (pictured). His book represented the first comprehensive dictionary of colour terms, and was written not for artists, as he was keen to emphasise, but for fellow writers who wanted greater precision in their Latin poetry and prose.

Telesio was born in Calabria, near the southern tip of Italy. His academic education, and the legacy of Greek colonisation in his homeland, instilled within him a passion for ancient literature. By 1517 he was teaching classics at the University of Milan, moving south when the threat of invasion by the Imperial army grew too great. Caught up in the devastating Sack of Rome of 1527, he fled onward to Venice, and it was soon after his arrival here that his *Booklet on Colours* was first published.

In an alphabetical index, Telesio listed 115 terms, ten of which might be



Antonio Telesio of Cosenza, ca. 1525
(drawn by Paolo Girgenh and engraved
by Raphael Aloja)

described as textural rather than chromatic, such as *maculosus* (spotted) and *spumeus* (foamy). In fact, a total of 150 colour-related terms are included in his 4000-word Latin text, extracted from the works of numerous classical authors, notably Cicero, Horace, Terence and Virgil. Over 30 of these, mostly grouped in the final chapter, relate to the colours of pigments, dyes and textiles.

Mineral colours

Though Pliny the Elder is not mentioned by name, Telesio follows him closely, for instance, by dividing artists' colours into two categories: the austere versus the florid. The former refers specifically to the four-colour or tetrachrome palette of ancient Greece, used primarily for depicting human complexion. Hence Telesio writes, 'This is the concern of painters, who formerly used only the clay from Melos, which is white, silaceous,...Sinoper, a type of red pigment, and black pigment'. Respectively, in Latin, *Melinum* refers to white earth from the Cycladic island of Milo, *silaceum* to a silica-based yellow ochre, and *Sinopsis* to red ochre from Sinop, on the Black Sea; *atramentum* is given as a general term for black paint, probably (in this context) peach black or ivory black.

The florid colours are listed as *minium*, *purpurissum*, *cinnabarum*, *armenium*, *chrysocolla* and *Indicum*. *Minium* refers to orange lead oxide, and *purpurissum* to white chalk saturated with Tyrian-purple dye, used as a lake or glaze, and as a cosmetic-rouge. *Cinnabarum* refers to cinnabar or vermilion, *armenium* to azurite or blue bice, and *chrysocolla* to malachite or green bice. *Indicum* refers to indigo, from the Greek *'Indikós* (*'Ινδικός*, 'of India'), the deep-blue dye obtained from anil leaves.

Organic colours

Telesio's section on organic colours and clothing is worth quoting as written (Box 1).

To examine each reference in turn: Punicean, Tyrian and Sarranian are all dyes from *purpura* or *murex* sea-whelks, said earlier by Telesio 'to glow like a flaming violet'. Punicean relates to Carthage, and Sarra was the Arabic name for Tyre, another Phœnician seaport from which famous purple-dyed goods were exported far and wide. Ten thousand whelks yielded a mere gram of dye, so that Tyrian purple, or *Tyrios* (*Τυριός*) in Greek, became the most coveted colour of the ancient world. It was believed to protect those who wore it from harm, and hence was worn by Roman magistrates and priests, and by emperors and popes; it was also used to stain the hem of the 'bordered robe' (the *toga prætexta*) worn by youths and unmarried women.

Indigo, Sinoper and Melian have been identified already. Earlier in the text, Hispanian (*Hispanus*), Bætican (*Bæticus*) and Modenese (*Mutinensis*) are described as *pullus*, from the Greek *pellós* (*πελλός*), meaning dark-grey (drab or earth-coloured), and 'tinted with no other colour than its own'. Specifically,

'Still more colours are named after places, such as Puniceus, and Tyrius or Sarranus, all from purpura dye; also Indicus, Sinopis, Melinus, Hispanus, Bæticus, and Mutinensis, all mentioned before. Colossinus is named after the Trojan city of Colossæ, where wool is dyed in a way that recalls the cyclamen flower.... Others still have taken their names from plants: besides phœniceus from the date palm, and xerampelinus, there is buxeus, taken to mean pallid, since boxwood is paler than anything else. There is roseus, and also hyacinthinus, which is darker than purpura. Hysginus comes from the hysge shrub: as with coccinus, it is similar to sandycinus. There is violaceus and ianthinus, from which comes Tyrianthinus, which, as its name suggests, is made by combining purpura and violet dyes. Add to these croceus, from which derives the crocotula, a type of robe, just as the calthula comes from the marigold; and fine byss linen produces the byssina; these all look luteus, but the byssina shines like gold. In use also was a garment called the citrosa, from its likeness to citron-wood. And things were papaver-bleached pure-white in colour.... The galbina is a light-coloured garment derived from galbanum. From the colour of tiny mallow flowers comes molochinus, and from pomegranate flowers comes balaustinus. Furthermore, from the word for leek leaves, as I said before, comes prasinus. Many others have been named after animals, such as cervinus and murinus.... To these we add ostrinus, conchyliatus, muriceus and purpureus, first discovered by Hercules, according to fable.'

Box 1

the terms refer to undyed and unbleached wool from Bæza in southern Spain, and Mutina (Modena) in Italy. Colossian (*Colossinus*), as Telesio explains, refers to wool dyed cyclamen-pink from Colossæ (the Phrygian city reputedly visited by St Paul).

Phœniceus (phœniceous or phœnix-coloured), from the Greek *phoinikeos* (φοινικεος), refers to the rusty-red appearance of fruit of the phœnix date palm. The tree itself symbolised victory, owing to its resilience despite all types of hazard, even including fire. *Xerampelinus* is another Latin word taken directly from the Greek: meaning 'dried-vine', *xerampélinos* (ξηραμπελίνος) refers to vine leaves that turn deep red in autumn, a colour Telesio also describes as *rosa secca* ('dried-rose'). *Buxeus* (buxeous or buxine in English) refers to the pale brown of boxwood, a material much utilised by ancients. Its close-grained wood symbolised perseverance, and as an evergreen it also symbolised immortality. *Roseus* (roseous or rose-coloured) is earlier likened to the youthful, untanned complexion: 'Thus the poets call the mouth, neck, breasts and fingers roseous', a colour otherwise called *incarnatus* (incarnate). Of *hyacinthinus* (blue-violet hyacinthine), from the Greek *hyakínthinos* (ὑακινθίνος), we are told that it is a purple darker than purpura-dye.

Other reds and purples follow. The term *hysginus* (hysgine), from *hysginóeis* (ὑσγινοεις), describes a deep red or

scarlet from an obscure dye-source possibly similar to kermes. From kermes itself, called *coccum* or *granum* in Latin (meaning 'berry' or 'grain'), and *qirmiz* ('worm') in Arabic, comes *coccinus*, *kókkinos* (κοκκίνος) in Greek, meaning crimson-dyed, though mordanting could render the same dye scarlet. *Sandycinus*, from *sandúkinos* (σανδύκινος), means sandyx-dyed, that is, infused with red-sandalwood resin. This is also scarlet in colour, though perhaps its most famous usage was to dye translucent, flesh-coloured robes in Lydia. Later on, the term *sandaracinus* is included, from *sandarákinos* (σανδαράκινος), more likely referring to the orange-red of realgar than the pale orange of gum-sandarac. *Violaceus* (violaceous), the colour of violets, is similar to *ianthinus* (ianthine), from *'iánthinos* (ἰανθίνος), from which came violet-coloured garments. *Tyrianthinus* (Tyrianthine), we are told, is obtained by 'double-dyeing' a fabric, first with purpura and then with violet-dye. Strangely absent from this grouping is a direct reference to madder, widely used by the ancients, though unsuited to dyeing wool. In an earlier chapter on orange-reds, Telesio includes the term *rubeus* to describe the colour of red grapes, though it is not clear whether this derives from *rubus* meaning blackberry, or *rubia* meaning madder.

Of a range of yellow dyes and garments, *croceus* (croceous), from the Greek *krokoeis* (κροκοεις), describes the saffron-coloured *crocotula*, a tunic worn

by Roman women at festivals in honour of Bacchus, with whom this colour was associated. Earlier we are told that saffron was also used to dye the *flameus* robe of the wife of the flamen priest, who shared with him responsibility for tending the sacrificial fires. Additionally, the *calthula* was a woman's yellow undergarment derived from the *caltha* or marigold. Golden-yellow in colour was the *byssinum*, a fine linen robe worn by men of high rank (and symbolic of moral purity), infused with dye extracted from fine filaments secreted by species of pinna mussel. The related colour-term is *byssinus*, byssine in English, and *bússinos* (βυσσίνος) in Greek. *Luteus* (luteous), a general term for yellow, refers specifically to weld-yellow, a common dye-colour which we are earlier told is seen in the flowers of marigolds and broom, and in yolks of eggs. (One specific use of weld was to dye the *flammeum*, a large veil worn by Roman brides on their wedding day.) A greenish-yellow garment called the *citrosa* is also listed; and textiles can be 'poppy-bleached' (*papaveratus*) with an agent made from poppy-seed. *Galbanus* (galbane), or *galbánoeis* (γαλβανοεις) in Greek, describes the colour of the *galbina*, a robe dyed pale greenish-yellow with resin from the ferula plant. Juvenal in his *Satires* (2.97) implies that the wearing of this colour by men was considered effeminate.

Molochinus, from the Greek *molóchinus* (μολοχίνος), describes the

While Hercules' dog wandered hungrily by the shore,
 He chanced to see purpura-whelks, floating in the foam.
 Fiercely he approached, snatching their flesh in his teeth,
 And returned, well-fed, but staining the grass blood-red.
 When the lovely Tyro, for she was the hero's companion,
 Saw its pale jaws, dripping with such roseous colours,
 She said to Alcides: 'I will not go on to follow you,
 Unless I am given a robe which is reddened like this.
 Just as with your plunder from those terrifying beasts,
 The invincible strength of your arm and sounding arrows,
 Not unknown to birds that dart through the heavens,
 Can give this to me (as you can do anything): neither sea
 Nor swamp deterred you from stealing the golden fruit
 Of the Hesperides'. Pleading thus, the impudent nymph
 Wound her arms tightly around his strong neck.
 Out of love, Amphitryon's son fell to her flattery,
 And, gathering the lifeless purpura, spat out by the sea,
 He was first to dye white wool with Tyrian murices.

Box 2

mauve of the wild mallow flower, and *balaustinus*, from *balaústinos* (βαλαυστινος), the red of the wild pomegranate flower. (The *molochina* was a garment woven from mallow fibre; and *malachites* (μαλαχίτες), referring to mallow-leaf green, is the origin of the word malachite.) Finally in this section on plants, *prasinus* (prasinous), from *prásinos* (πρασινος), means leek-leaf green, a colour 'praised highly in many odes', and often used in general descriptions of foliage.

Moving on to animal coloration, following *cervinus* (cervine), meaning deer-coloured or fawn, and *murinus* (murine), mouse-grey or mousy, come terms describing the weasel, oriole, swan and crow. Telesio then lists several other variations of Tyrian purple: *ostrinus* (oysterous) from the oyster, *conchyliaius* (conchylious), meaning conch-dyed, *muriceus* from murex-whelks, and *purpureus* from the purpura, though 'purpureous' seems to have been used to refer to almost anything deep-red in colour. All have Greek origins, namely, 'ostrínos' (ὄστρινος), *konchylíos* (κονχυλίος), *múax* (μυαξ) and *porphúreos* (πορφύρεος). 'The fleeces of Miletus, steeped in Tyrian' are mentioned by Virgil in the *Georgics* (3.306), Miletus being an Ionian seaport (now Söke in Turkey) once famous for its sumptuous woollen goods. Hence the term *Milesius* (Milesian), elsewhere given by Telesio,

may be added to various other terms describing Tyrian colorants.

Regarding the fabled origin of this dye, and before concluding with colours named after 'other different things', Telesio offers a short poem of his own invention (Box 2).

Colours of celebration and sadness

Regarding the emblematic role of colour in ancient dress, in the first chapter of his *Libellus*, Telesio lists colours associated with the tunics and banners of the Circus-factions that competed in the great Roman chariot races. These are given as *venetus* (venet or sea-blue), also called *blavus* (pale-blue), *albus* (matt-white), *prasinus* (leek-green) and *roseus* (rosy), perhaps a misprint for *russeus* (russet). (It was said that blue represented the coolness of autumn, white the snows of winter, green the new shoots of spring, and russet the heat of summer.) Latinised from *leukóphaios* (λευκοφαίος), *leucophæus* or ash-coloured is described as 'like a sheep painted as it were by nature herself', and refers for example to the suitably modest colour of habits worn by the Franciscan monks or Grey Friars.

Finally, a number of colours are given as appropriate for mourning. These are *cæruleus* and *cyaneus* (both sky-blue),

worn to symbolise the heavens into which souls depart, *albus*-white, worn by women 'to call to mind the colour of those they brought to the grave', and *ater* (matt-black), *ferrugineus* (rusty) and *pullus*. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Books 10 and 11), Hyacinthus' floral tribute is ferruginous in colour, and pullous togas (of undyed, earth-dark wool) are worn to mourn the death of Orpheus. Telesio also lists *sordidus* (filthy or shabby) as being appropriate, and quotes from the *Æneid* (6.299) that 'The mantle of Charon was shown to be like this by Virgil, when he recounted: *His shabby cloak hangs by a knot from his shoulders*'.

Telesio's legacy and influence

Telesio's informative little book on colour was reprinted in 1529 and bound with *The Golden Shower*, a short mythological tragedy, considered so masterly that the Venetian Council offered its author a fee of 100 gold pieces to supervise the training of the Scribes of the Republic. Telesio spent only two years in this post, however, returning home to Cosenza, where not long after, and unable to find patronage in Naples, he met an untimely death, aged 51. Five other editions of the *Booklet on Colour* were published in Basle (1529–45), and ten in Paris (1529–1670). The text was also translated into Italian by Lodovico Dolce, apparently without crediting its author, and included in his second *Dialogue* of 1565. The significance of Telesio's lexicon was acknowledged however by J W von Goethe, who included it verbatim in the historical section of his *Theory of Colour*, published in 1810, together with a short biography. The first complete English translation of the text, by Don Pavey, founder of the Royal College of Art Colour Reference Library, has recently been published in the United States [D Pavey, *Antonio Telesio's Book on Colours* (New York: Universal Publications, 2000)].

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