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.

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, silicium to a silica-based yellow ochre, and Sinopis 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.

Organic colours

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

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 described as textual 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.

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 Ἰνδικός (‘IndikoV, ‘of India’), the deep-blue dye obtained from anil leaves.

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

Phœnicicus (phœnecious or phœnix-coloured), from the Greek phoinikeos (φοινίκεος), 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. Xeram-pelinus is another Latin word taken directly from the Greek: meaning ‘dried- vine’, xerampelinos (ξηραμπέλινος) refers to vine leaves that turn deep red in autumn, a colour Tellesio 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 youthful, untanned complexion: ‘Thus the colours (coloured) is earlier likened to the palm, and xerampelinus, there is buxeus, taken to mean pallid, since boxwood is paler than anything else. There is roseous, and also hyacinthinus, which is darker than purpura. Hysginus comes from the hysge shrub: as with coccinus, it is similar to sandycinus. There is violaceous and ianthinus, from which comes Tyrianthineus, 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-pale 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.’
mauve of the wild mallow flower, and balaustinus, from balustinos (βαλαυστίνος), the red of the wild pomegranate flower. (The molochina was a garment woven from mallow fibre; and malachites (μαλαχίτης), referring to mallow-leaf green, is the origin of the word malachite.) Finally in this section on plants, prasinus (prasinous), from prásinos (πράσινος), 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 following cervinus (cervine), meaning tine of foliage. odes’, and often used in general description. After with the tunics and banners of the Circus-factions that competed in the great Roman chariot races. These are also called blavius (pale-blue), albus (matt-white), prasinus (leek-green) and roseus (rosy), perhaps a misprint for russeus (rusty). It was said that blue represented the coolness of autumn, while the snows of winter, green the new shoots of spring, and russet the heat of summer.) Latinised from leukóphaios (λευκόφαιος), leucophaeus 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 caeruleus 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), ferruginous (rusty) and pullus. In Ovid’s Metamorphoses (Books 10 and 11), Hyacinthus’ floral tribute is ferruginous in colour, and pullus toads (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’.

Box 2

While Hercules’ dog wandered hungrily by the shore, He chanced to see purpura-whels, 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.

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 blavius (pale-blue), albus (matt-white), prasinus (leek-green) and roseus (rosy), perhaps a misprint for russeus (rusty). It was said that blue represented the coolness of autumn, while the snows of winter, green the new shoots of spring, and russet the heat of summer.) Latinised from leukóphaios (λευκόφαιος), leucophaeus 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.

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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)].