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978-0-521-11042-6 - Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome

Mark Bradley

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COLOUR AND MEANING IN ANCIENT ROME

The study of colour has become familiar territory in recent anthropology, linguistics, art history and archaeology. Classicists, however, have traditionally subordinated the study of colour to that of form. By drawing together evidence from contemporary philosophers, elegists, epic writers, historians and satirists, Mark Bradley reinstates colour as an essential informative unit for the classification and evaluation of the Roman world. He also demonstrates that the questions of what colour was and how it functioned – as well as how it could be misused and misunderstood – were topics of intellectual debate in early imperial Rome. Suggesting strategies for interpreting Roman expressions of colour in Latin texts, Dr Bradley offers new approaches to understanding the relationship between perception and knowledge in Roman elite thought. In doing so, he highlights the fundamental role that colour performed in the realms of communication and information, and its intellectual contribution to contemporary discussions of society, politics and morality.

MARK BRADLEY is Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of a number of articles in the field of Roman visual culture, and has also worked on aspects of ancient approaches to pollution and cleanliness, as well as the reception of classical antiquity during the British Empire.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Mary Beard

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	page ix
<i>Note on abbreviations</i>	xiii
Introduction	I
What colour is <i>flauus</i> ?	I
Modern literature	12
<i>Colour and meaning in ancient Rome</i> : objectives and methods	30
1 The rainbow	36
Greek philosophy	36
Latin prose	38
Latin verse	46
Conclusion: the rainbow from antiquity to modernity	51
2 Lucretius and the philosophy of <i>color</i>	56
Greek theories of colour	57
Lucretius	74
Summary	85
3 Pliny the Elder and the unnatural history of <i>color</i>	87
Marbles	89
Pigments	94
Gems	101
Neronian Rome	106
Summary	108
4 <i>Color</i> and rhetoric	III
Cicero	112
Dionysius, Seneca and Quintilian	120
Rhetorical <i>color</i> beyond rhetoric	124
Summary	126
	vii

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-11042-6 - Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome
 Mark Bradley
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CONTENTS

5	The natural body	128
	Medicine and physiognomy	130
	<i>Color</i> , origin and identity	137
	Blushing and blanching	150
	Summary	159
6	The unnatural body	161
	Cosmetics	162
	Hair	174
	Clothes	178
	Summary	187
7	Purple	189
	The colour purple	190
	Pliny on purple	193
	Politics and morality	197
	Pretend purples	201
	Porphyry	202
	Re-locating purple: the emperor's clothes	206
	Summary	208
	Conclusions: Colours triumphant	212
	<i>Envoi</i> : Aulus Gellius 2.26	229
	<i>Bibliography</i>	234
	<i>Index of ancient passages discussed</i>	256
	<i>General index</i>	263

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11042-6 - Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome

Mark Bradley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

This book revisits one of the oldest and most contested problems of classical philology – that of ancient colour perception and discrimination. The study of colour, and the senses in general, first attracted serious scholarly attention in the early nineteenth century with Goethe's theory of defective colour vision among the Greeks, an idea that was famously promoted in the wake of Darwinian theory by the British prime minister and Homeric scholar W. E. Gladstone and hotly debated by philologists and anthropologists well into the twentieth century. The issue of the poverty and imprecision of ancient colour vocabulary (or at least the difficulty in mapping it onto that of the modern West) has never been satisfactorily resolved, and the remainder of the twentieth century has continued to see a steady trickle of scholarship on the subject, mainly concerned with reinstating the perceptual sophistication of the ancients. In one of the most successful recent publications on the subject, Liz James (*Light and colour in Byzantine art*, 1995) drew together many of the ideas and approaches that had been adopted in the study of ancient colour and applied them to her own project on the interpretation of Byzantine art. The twenty-first century has thus far seen a modest revival of interest in ancient colour perception, with a spate of collaborative interdisciplinary conferences and publications concerned with the richness of Greco-Roman colour discrimination, the cultural specificity of ancient colour, and the complexity of literary and artistic engagement with vision and visual categories. In March 2001, M. Sassi (Pisa) organised a conference on *I colori nel mondo antico*, and in 2002, L. Villard (Rouen) edited a volume entitled *Couleurs et vision dans l'antiquité classique*. A major interdisciplinary conference on colour in the ancient world was hosted by Edinburgh University in September 2001, and was published as *Colour in the ancient Mediterranean world* by BAR in 2004 (edited by

Cambridge University Press

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Mark Bradley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

L. Cleland and K. Stears). In May 2003, I co-organised the Cambridge Laurence Seminar on ‘Sensory Perception’ in the Classics, an interdisciplinary colloquium which drew attention to the diversity of traditions and registers concerned with the senses. More recently, A. Rouveret, S. Dubel and V. Naas published a volume entitled *Couleurs et matières dans l’antiquité* (2006, Paris), whose contributions laid emphasis on the use of contemporary ekphrasis to understand the classification and evaluation of ancient material culture. Since 2003 there have also been a number of high-profile exhibitions and conferences in Europe and America concerned with ancient sculptural polychromy, which have helped to reinstate colour as an essential component of classical art.

My work on concepts of colour in early imperial Rome targets something of an intellectual black hole in classical perception studies, bridging the gap between several important studies of colour in Classical Greece, and James’ study of Byzantine perception. My book opens up a window onto elite uses of and debates about colour and perception in the early Empire, but it also operates as a critical response to other studies of perception in antiquity, and proposes an intellectual alternative to the traditional (and problematic) approach that favours the ancient prioritisation of light and luminosity over hue. My work develops as its central argument the line that Roman uses and discussions of *color* were principally concerned with the relationship between categories of visual perception and the inherent nature of the perceived object, and so between vision and knowledge. *Color* – the basic unit of perception into which the Romans divided the world – was a source of information and understanding, a tool for accurately understanding and evaluating the object of vision. Uses of *color* that seemed divorced from the material world, or phenomena that invited abstract categories (such as the rainbow), were often treated with considerable difficulty and caution by ancient thinkers. This basic principle of perception appears to have guided most Roman exploitation and interpretation of colour. As well as observing and exploring general patterns in the relationship between colour and meaning in Roman cultural history, this book will also argue that the discrimination and interpretation of colours could be formulated quite differently across the diverse registers and genres of the

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

literate, highly educated male metropolitan perspectives that survive to us, and this study will explore several distinct but overlapping windows onto the deployment and evaluation of colour in early imperial Rome. Colour was not, and is not, a static, objective *thing*: it was a fluid, subjective, interactive unit of value and meaning.

It is no easy thing in the twenty-first century to find a book about colour that is not illuminated with page after page of colour illustration. *Colour and meaning in ancient Rome*, however, contains not a single image. For this I make no apologies: this book studies elite literary and philosophical perspectives about Roman visual culture, rather than Roman visual culture itself, and its emphasis is on the ancient classification, description and evaluation of colour. This is not to say that one cannot deploy classical art as a means of approaching ancient perception and theories of colour: I have attempted precisely this in two articles about classical marbles and sculpture, ‘Colour and marble in early imperial Rome’ (2006) and ‘The importance of colour on ancient marble sculpture’ (2009). Both of these articles were adapted from sections of my my doctoral thesis ‘Concepts of colour in ancient Rome’ (University of Cambridge, 1999–2004), which studied ancient discourses of colour in both literary and visual media, and which formed the intellectual platform for this book. The study of colour in classical literature (what the ancients themselves said about their visual culture) and the study of the visual culture itself, however, are rather different – if overlapping – exercises.

Just as colourful as the topic of this book have been the ten years of education and intellectual development that have led to its completion. Above all, I am indebted to my PhD supervisor, Mary Beard, for her intellectual and personal support, for her extraordinary patience, and for convincing me that a finished thesis was better than a good idea. I also owe thanks to Rolf Schneider, who supervised my thesis for a year and convinced me that visual arts had an important place in my work, and who has always been a source of support and inspiration. Along with Mary Beard, David Sedley was designated Cambridge University Press’s reader for *Colour and meaning in ancient Rome*, and has been a mine of support in refining the philosophical sections of the book. I am also indebted in lots of

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978-0-521-11042-6 - Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome

Mark Bradley

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

different ways to Ashley Clements, Catharine Edwards, Christopher Kelly, Geoffrey Lloyd, Paul Millett, Robin Osborne, Emma Reisz, John Rich and Caroline Vout for their support and input during the long years that have led to the completion of this book. Financial assistance for the project was received from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Isaac Newton Trust, the Craven Studentship and the Jebb Fund. The Faculty of Classics at Cambridge and the University of Nottingham also provided funds to allow me to travel to and speak at various conferences and events.

Finally, it remains to thank my parents, who have always encouraged and supported me, Aidyn, Samuel and Ryan who helped me through the long months of work on this project, and all my friends who have helped keep life colourful and stimulating.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11042-6 - Colour and Meaning in Ancient Rome

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS

Texts and periodicals are cited according to the abbreviations listed in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd edition). All other references are listed in full.