

FLAUNT

HUGH SCOTT-DOUGLAS: "The Meteoric Rise of Blue"

Written by Dr. James Fox

September 6, 2013



We like to think that color is a matter of personal taste, but one of them is worshipped above all others. Blue is the world's best-loved hue by a stretch, and it's been top of the pile for quite some time. A survey recently found that 40 percent of people call blue their favorite color. And it's ranked number one in every country on the planet.

But blue isn't just popular. It exerts a strange hold over us too. Scientists have proven that it can increase creativity. Psychologists have found that we're more likely to trust companies with blue logos. And market researchers say Google's links are blue because that color makes it hard for us to resist clicking them.

With all this evidence it's difficult to deny that blue has conquered our world. But it wasn't always that way. Remarkably, blue was the last major color to get a name. Languages around the world did not think of a word for blue things for a surprisingly long time. The ancient Greeks are perhaps the most noticeable. You can, for instance, read every line of Homer and never come across 'blue.' Despite all that

Hugh Scott-Douglas, "Untitled," Cyanotype on line, 2011

wonderful Greek weather, he thought the sea was 'wine dark' and the sky was 'bronze.'

It may be because blue is uniquely enigmatic. It's all around us, but it feels forever out of reach. Because you can't touch the blueness of the sky; you can't bottle the blueness of the sea; and no matter how far you travel, you can never reach the blue horizon. And if something's forever unattainable, you don't really need a word for it.

But if blue was unattainable, how can it now be everywhere? When did it first enter our lives? And where did our love affair with it first begin?

The answer is in northern Afghanistan. There, beneath the mountains, is one of the oldest mines in the world. For millennia it has produced a mysterious blue stone called lapis lazuli. With a lot of strength, skill and patience, lapis lazuli was converted into a legendary blue pigment. The pigment was called 'ultramarine,' which means 'across the seas'—because that's where the lapis lazuli originated.

Ultramarine soon became a Medieval sensation. Artists, craftsmen and tailors were desperate to get hold of it. The demand was so intense that it became more expensive than gold. In fact, it was deemed to be so extravagant that governments across Europe prohibited citizens from wearing clothes in the color.

By 1500 only one person was special enough to wear ultramarine: the Virgin Mary. If you've gone to any major museum, or bought lots of Christmas cards, you'll probably have noticed that the Madonna is nearly always swathed in beautiful blue robes. It was a remarkable transformation: from almost nowhere, blue had become Europe's most sacred color. Maybe that's why Hercule Poirot always said 'sacre bleu.'

But that was only the first step in blue's journey into the center of our lives. The second moment came a few hundred years later, in 1800. And believe it or not, it was all because one young boy couldn't get to sleep. The boy was Heinrich von Ofterdingen, and he was the eponymous hero of a novel by the German writer Novalis.

Heinrich couldn't sleep because he was obsessed with a mysterious blue flower. So he embarked on a quest to find it. With that quest, blue lodged itself in the Romantic imagination, and it profoundly transformed the meaning of the color. Because from that point on, blue became the color of our deepest desires and most unsettling feelings.

For those of you who've had the blues, listened to the blues, or ever felt a bit blue, and thus connected that color to a dark emotional state, you're probably indebted, in part, to Heinrich's little flower. But no one plumbed the emotional depths of the color quite like Pablo Picasso.

Picasso's famed blue period began in 1901 when his best friend shot himself after an argument with his girlfriend. The suicide shook the young Picasso to his core, and before long blue crept into his paintings. We all know them. And with them Picasso did more than anyone to cement blue's status as the color of fear, loneliness, and despair.

But it wasn't all depressing. There was one more stage in blue's meteoric rise. It was December 1968 and the crew of Apollo 8 became the first humans to leave the Earth's orbit. They'd gone to see the moon but they made their most extraordinary discovery when they looked back. Because they saw, to their amazement, that they were looking at a blue planet—the color of our beautiful but fragile home.