

SPECTRUM

AN EXPLORATION OF COLOUR

ARTWORK LABELS

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‘Colours should be understood as subjective cultural creations: you could no more meaningfully secure a precise universal definition for all the known shades than you could plot the coordinates of a dream.’

KASSIA ST CLAIR, AUTHOR OF *THE SECRET LIVES OF COLOUR*, 2016

Colour is central to the human experience. At a subliminal level, colour defines the way we perceive the world and the way we feel. Colour is innate to artistic practice and it has the power to evoke visceral responses. Artists have experimented with colour since the first pigments were extracted out of the earth. The manufacturing of colours and their natural or synthetic make-up, be it artists’ pigments, ceramic glazes or textile dyes, have evolved over time but the fundamental emotive power of colour remains. It resonates with our senses, visually, intellectually and emotionally.

Spectrum is an exploration of colour through the NGV Collection, taking Leonard French’s sparkling cut-glass ceiling of the Great Hall as its inspiration. The exhibition investigates the history, symbolism and artistic use of eleven different colours, and also considers the scientific nature of colour. Three breakout cases explore the mediums of oil paint, pastel and watercolour and the raw pigments used in their production.

The exhibition’s design and the installation *Coloured in*, 2020, have been conceived by Melbourne-based designer Danielle Brustman as part of the NGV Triennial 2020.

Coloured in, 2020, by Melbourne-based designer Danielle Brustman uses interior-design strategies – in dialogue with the NGV Collection exhibition *Spectrum: An Exploration of Colour* – to investigate the functional and affective qualities of colour, shining light on the role of colour in shaping human experience.

Brustman's interiors and furniture comprise harmonic and discordant colour combinations. The vibrant schema for *Coloured in* makes connections with the architecture of the NGV International building and works on display, incorporating the designer's Chromatic fantastic wall light, 2020, and five Chromatic fantastic modular cabinets, 2020, in an eight-metre-long display.

Brustman takes inspiration from Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier's colour theory espoused in his 1930 essay 'Architectural Polychromy', and accompanying colour tool *Claviers de couleurs* (colour keyboard), to compose her rich and idiosyncratic palette. Through her application of these ideas and approaches to design and colour, Brustman creates spaces which are both domestic and theatrical, bringing closer together our experience of art, design and life.

Oil painting in the fifteenth century

‘Grind some minium or cinnabar with this [linseed] oil on a stone without water, spread it with a brush on the doors or panels that you want to redden and dry them in the sun ... All the kinds of pigments can be ground with this same oil and laid on woodwork ...’

THEOPHILUS, BENEDICTINE MONK AND AUTHOR OF *DE DIVERSIS ANTIBUS* (ON DIVERSE ARTS), c. 1150

Experiments with oil paint are documented as far back as the twelfth century, but it was the virtuosic handling of this medium by Netherlandish painters in the early fifteenth century that was the turning point in oil paint becoming the pre-eminent painting medium for artists in sixteenth-century Europe. Jan van Eyck is credited with refining its use through the careful building up of thin transparent layers of paint (known as glazes) to achieve luminous, rich and stable colours, something that was not possible with egg tempera, the prevailing medium for artists at the time. Until this point, oil paint had been more a decorative technique for craftsmen rather than a medium for artists, but many Netherlandish painters began to employ van Eyck's techniques from the early fifteenth century onwards.

...continued overleaf

Oil paint is a combination of finely ground pigment with an oil binder, generally linseed, poppy or nut oils. When oil paint dries it forms a highly stable, water-resistant film that captures and preserves the glowing intensity of the colours. It was the workability of oil paint, which allowed application in thick layers or fine detail, combined with its slow drying time that offered Netherlandish artists the opportunity to paint extraordinarily detailed pictures with brilliant, jewel-like colours

Top to bottom, left to right

Simon Marmion

French c. 1425–89

The Virgin and Child

c. 1465–75

oil on wood panel

Felton Bequest, 1954

3079-4

Frame: reproduction, 2005

In this depiction of the Virgin and Child from the workshop of the Burgundian master Simon Marmion, the artist has chosen to represent the Virgin in a subtly glowing dark blue dress and matching cloak, the colour symbolic of Mary's role as the Queen of Heaven. The blue paint used was ultramarine, a pigment worth more than gold and derived from the natural rock, lapis lazuli whose blue mineral is lazurite. This pigment was highly costly to manufacture – only four grams of pigment was produced from every hundred grams of lapis – so ultramarine was reserved for the most significant subjects.

Lapis lazuli

Lapis lazuli has been mined for thousands of years from the Badakhshan mountains of Afghanistan, high up on the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush. Of all the naturally occurring mineral colours, ultramarine, produced from lapis lazuli, was the most expensive of them all and during the Medieval period its provenance and production were shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, despite its cost it was used frequently by illuminators and has been identified in manuscripts as early as the sixth century CE. The Italian Renaissance painter Cennino Cennini described it as 'a colour illustrious, beautiful, and most perfect, beyond all other colours'. The pigment's laborious and complicated extraction process was thought to derive from an early Arabic alchemical source.

Cinnabar and vermilion

Cinnabar is the opaque bright red pigment that is extracted from the naturally occurring mercuric sulphide ore of the same name. Vermilion is cinnabar's synthesised or powdered form. Known in China since the fourth century BCE, the recipe for producing vermilion did not arrive in Europe until the eighth century, believed to have come from an Arab alchemist. Referred to as the red jewel of the Medieval period, vermilion was as costly as gold and reigned supreme in illuminated manuscripts alongside gold leaf and ultramarine. Vermilion was less prized in oil painting, due to the pigment losing its vibrancy in oil paint, but it was used to great effect in lacquered works from Asia.

Kermes

Kermes are wingless scale insects that live on the kermes oak tree in southern and eastern Europe. In order to produce a red dye the insects are scraped from the branches and crushed, the resin encrusted female insects releasing a red dye, and then boiled in lye. Known since antiquity, for centuries kermes was the main red textile dye, producing a strong and lasting deep purplish-red colour. It was also the main source of pink lake pigments for manuscript illumination, tempera and oil painting prior to the introduction of cochineal from Central America in the early sixteenth century, which produced a more intense red colour and superseded kermes.

Malachite

Malachite is a copper carbonate mineral that is formed by the slow percolation of water through copper-rich rock strata. It is closely related to the blue mineral azurite with both having almost identical compositions. To be made into a pigment, malachite is crushed, ground and washed but coarsely ground to retain the brightest green colour. Malachite was used by ancient Egyptians as an early form of eye make-up. It is found in illuminated manuscripts from the eighth century and remained a particularly stable pigment in tempera and oil painting until the late-eighteenth century when it was superseded by more readily available synthetic options.

Verdigris

Verdigris is a pigment derived from the turquoise-green corrosion, or copper acetate, that forms from the reaction of copper-based metals with acetic acid fumes. The corrosion minerals are scraped from the metal and finely ground to form the pigment. Despite being a highly unstable colour, reacting dramatically with sulphurous pigments like ultramarine and yellow orpiment by turning dark brown, verdigris was the most intense green pigment available to artists from the Medieval period until the nineteenth century when synthetic green pigments like viridian and emerald green were introduced.

Red

‘Red is the great clarifier – bright and revealing. I can’t imagine becoming bored with red – it would be like becoming bored with the person you love.’

DIANA VREELAND, FORMER EDITOR OF *VOGUE U.S.*, c. 1979

Red is powerful: the colour of Catholic cardinals, royal authority, and the colour of blood and war – Roman generals, Japanese samurai and British redcoats. For Indigenous Australians, red is symbolic of the earth and their spiritual connection to the land. Red is also the symbol of revolution, socialism and communism, yet for many cultures red is symbolic of happiness, good fortune and protection. Chinese women traditionally marry in red and the gates (*torii*) of Japanese Shinto shrines are painted red to ward off evil and disaster.

Red is one of the first ochres to have been mined by humans. Red lead was the first manufactured pigment, produced by the ancient Greeks, and it remained the dominant pigment in Western art until the discovery of vermilion in the eighth century. Vermilion was based on the mercuric sulphide mineral cinnabar and for centuries offered artists brilliant shades of opaque red and scarlet. But it was not until the introduction of ‘lake’ pigments, derived from textile dyes from the cochineal, kermes and lac insects, along with vegetal dyes from the madder root, that translucent, glowing crimson and carmine pigments became available to artists.

Top to bottom, left to right

Robert Baines

Australian born 1949

Redline no. 2, neckpiece

2001

powder-coated silver

Purchased with funds from the Victorian Foundation for Living
Australian Artists, 2005

2005.497

Robert Baines is one of Australia's foremost contemporary jewellers, celebrated for his complex wire works using precious, often powder-coated, metals and incorporating found objects. Baines's work references many genres but he frequently uses red to engage with the symbolism of a work. His inspiration comes from a quote by the sculptor Claes Oldenburg on the colour red as well as graffiti he saw years ago on an art school door, 'If it doesn't work, make it bigger, if it still doesn't work, make it red'. *Redline no. 2, neckpiece* reflects Baines's interest in the power of colour to convey emotion.

Bernard Moore designer

English 1853–1935

Bernard Moore Factory, Stoke-on-Trent manufacturer

English 1905–15

Covered jar

c. 1910

porcelain

Gift of Professor and Mrs R. R. Andrew, 1981

D118.a-b-1981

The taste for decorative ceramics or 'art pottery' in early twentieth-century England was deeply influenced by Chinese and Japanese art. The atmospheric underwater scene that envelops this covered jar is Japanese in inspiration but the glowing red and gold flambé glazes are directly inspired by eighteenth-century Chinese porcelains. Bernard Moore was a highly respected glaze chemist before establishing his own kilns and ceramic decorating workshop in 1905. He perfected the difficult technique of flambé, or transmutation, glazes, which were derived from mineral oxides that produced unpredictable yet beautiful red and blue glazes with golden and iridescent flashes.

Odawara Nobuko

Japanese born 1943

Red vase with handle

Shunuri Tetsuki Kaki

c. 1989

lacquer on wood

Presented by Sir Roderick Carnegie AC through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program, 2014

2014.2312

Japanese artists and artisans have been producing lacquered wooden objects since Neolithic times (c. 10,000 BCE). Lacquer is a resin, or natural plastic, that is made from the highly poisonous sap from the Japanese sumac (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*) tree. Lacquer was traditionally pigmented with cinnabar to create a lustrous red colour, an auspicious colour in Japan. Odawara Nobuko is part of a new generation of artists using traditional techniques to produce innovative, contemporary works. This vase with handle would have been used for flower arrangements, the tea ceremony or simply as a decorative object.

Egypt, Matmar, grave 3005

Jar

Predynastic period, Naqada II, 3500–3200 BCE

Nile silt clay

Presented by Guy Brunton on behalf of the
British Museum, 1932

3354B-D3

This jar and bowl are some of the oldest works in the NGV Collection. They are hand built and decorated with red slip made from a clay slurry pigmented with red ochre powder. These vessels were highly valued objects and were buried with their owners for use in the afterlife. Despite being functional, both works exhibit aesthetic attributes. The jar has an elegant form and subtly burnished surface and the bowl features a tapered rim and decorative slip over the interior. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the clumsiness of the potter whose fingers inadvertently smeared red slip over the exterior, leaving his own thumbprint.

Egypt, Diospolis Parva, Cemetery B, grave 398

Bowl

Predynastic period, Naqada II, 3500–3200 BCE
marl clay

Presented by the Committee of the
Egypt Exploration Fund, 1899

D174-1982

Pink

‘I gave to pink, the nerve of the red, a neon pink, an unreal pink.’

ELSA SCHIAPARELLI, FASHION DESIGNER, c. 1936

Erotic, kitsch, feminine and political, pink has assumed a range of contradictory guises throughout history. Essentially a paler tint of red, pink did not assume its own identity until the late-seventeenth century when it appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, associated with the flowers *Dianthus plumarius*, also known as ‘pinkes’. Pink became highly fashionable in the mid-eighteenth century among men and women of the European aristocracy, and was a symbol of luxury and status under the influence of the French court of Louis XV and his mistress Madame de Pompadour. Associated with red, pink was also identified with the military and masculinity, making it a popular choice for boys’ clothing.

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The Western feminisation of pink emerged in the mid-nineteenth century when the colour became associated with female delicacy, frivolity and sexual allure, in contrast to the more sober tones of men's fashion at the time. By the turn of the twentieth century with industrialisation in full swing, pink's image had shifted again: the garish, industrially manufactured shades of pink becoming widely available and associated with the working classes and prostitution. Throughout the twentieth century, pink's appeal has waxed and waned although it has been obsessively embraced by the urban youth subcultures of Japan. Now, in the twenty-first century, pink is having a resurgence and has taken on a hip, androgynous image with strong political associations.

Top to bottom, left to right

G. F. Folingsby

Irish 1828–91, lived in Germany 1852–79, arrived Australia 1879

Study of pink silk

1860s

oil on paper

Purchased, 1891

p.393.20-1

George Frederick Folingsby established himself as a history and portrait painter in Munich before moving to Melbourne in 1878, stating that he would be prepared to settle in the colony if 'sufficient inducement' were offered. He quickly established himself as a portrait painter before being appointed Director of the National Gallery of Victoria and Master of the School of Art in 1882. This work, which captures a particularly feminine and genteel shade of pink, is one of a number of textile studies Folingsby undertook in Munich, undoubtedly related to his work as a portrait painter.

Frame: reproduction, 2008, based on original frame contemporary with the painting

Sèvres Porcelain Factory, Sèvres

manufacturer

French est. 1756

Saucer

1775

porcelain (soft paste)

Collection of Christopher Begg, Melbourne

The French porcelain manufactory Sèvres is famous for its eighteenth-century production of brilliant coloured-ground glazes. In 1758, the year after it moved to Sèvres en route to Versailles, the factory introduced a pink ground colour called *fond rose*. The colour became highly fashionable and was a particular favourite of Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV's mistress, whose château was adjacent to the factory. In the 1760s the English termed the colour 'Rose Pompadour' but this was more a crimson or claret colour than the Sèvres pink. Regardless, the colour has forever after become known as 'Pompadour Pink'.

W. T. Copeland and Sons, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire

manufacturer
English 1867–1932

Covered vase

c. 1879

porcelain (bone china)

Presented by W. T. Copeland and Sons, 1880

362.c-d-D1M

By the later nineteenth century the Copeland manufactory had become one of the leading porcelain manufactories in England. This *Covered vase*, one of a pair, was inspired in form and decoration by Sèvres porcelain of the eighteenth century, the pink ground colour inspired by the *fond rose* or *rose du Barry* pink ground, as it was later known, in honour of Louis XV's last mistress, Madame du Barry. Copeland and other English porcelain firms specialised in catering to the taste for eighteenth-century French porcelain. The intense, sugary colours used for works like this *Covered vase* were made from synthetic colourants newly available to manufacturers.

England, South Staffordshire manufacturer

Vase

c. 1770

copper, enamel

Collection of Kenneth Reed AM, Sydney

By the mid-eighteenth century enamelled toys, snuff boxes and decorative vases had become highly fashionable in England. The South Staffordshire enamelling industry began with an influx of craftsmen from France who established a number of small family workshops. Many objects like this vase were produced using early production line processes with transfer printing and over-painting carried out by larger workshops, often on blank objects executed by smaller workshops. The classical form of this vase and its pink ground are directly inspired by Sèvres porcelain, which had become the leading porcelain manufacturer in Europe by the mid-eighteenth century and set the standards for taste.

Robert Foster designer

Australian 1962–2016

F!NK & Co. Queanbeyan, NSW

manufacturer

Australian est. 1993

F!NK water jug – satin pink

1993 designed, 2013 manufacturer

anodised aluminium, powder-coated aluminium

Purchased, NGV Supporters of Decorative Arts, 2013

2013.88

Robert Foster was one of Australia's leading contemporary designers in metalsmithing. In 1993 he established the design company F!NK & Co. to design and produce contemporary, innovative tableware and household objects. The name F!NK has become synonymous with spirited and distinctive Australian design. The water jug was F!NK's first work produced in 1994 and has been in continual production ever since. It was originally commissioned for the Canberra restaurant The Republic, and is now found in restaurants and collections around the world. The pink colour is achieved by dyeing the aluminium jug, which has been artificially corroded – or anodized – to make the surface porous.

Orange

‘Red brought nearer to humanity by yellow.’

WASSILY KANDINSKY, ARTIST, 1910

Sandwiched between red and yellow, orange was first recognised as a colour in the late-fifteenth century when the fruit, from which the English word derives, was introduced to Europe from Asia.

Historically, orange is recognised for its royal and religious associations, including the House of Orange, the ruling Dutch royal dynasty since the mid-sixteenth century, and the protestants of Northern Ireland, referred to as Orangemen. As a colour on the Western artist’s palette, however, orange was largely inconspicuous, but one genre where it featured prominently was in the exquisite watercolours produced by Indian court painters of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries.

Declared ‘too brilliant to be elegant’ in Victorian England, it was not until the French Impressionists paired orange with dazzling blues – its colour wheel opposite – to create shimmering contrasts, that the power of orange in Western art was recognised. By the 1920s orange featured on neon-lit signs and across the covers of Vogue. The boldness of orange was fully embraced in the post–Second World War decades, becoming a signature colour of the 1960s and 1970s. In this era of plastics, new technologies and the space age, the vitality of orange was adopted in all aspects of life including fashion, interior design and homewares.

Top to bottom, left to right

Courrèges, Paris fashion house

French est. 1961

André Courrèges designer

French 1923–2016

Trouser suit

1972

polyurethane, cotton, acrylic, metal, acetate, wool

Purchased, 1995

1995.780

French designer André Courrèges worked as an assistant to Cristóbal Balenciaga before opening his own couture house in 1961. His crisply tailored designs responded to the energy of the youthquake, manifesting in streamlined silhouettes, new synthetic fabrics and block colour, as seen in this trouser suit. Against a background of technological change, Courrèges's futuristic aesthetic exploited the easy-to-maintain nature and cheaper cost of synthetic materials and dyes to introduce a bold and monochromatic palette to fashion.

Christian Louboutin, Paris shoemaker

French est. 1991

Christian Louboutin designer

French born 1964

Pigalle stiletto

2013

leather, plastic

Gift of Olga Kononchuk through the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program, 2020

2020.535.a-b

At age eighteen, Christian Louboutin learnt his craft working for famed shoe designer Charles Jourdan. In 1991, after freelancing for a number of French couture houses, Louboutin established his own label, trademarking his famous red sole a year later. Today Louboutin's characteristically flamboyant designs and towering stiletto heels have achieved a mythic status in popular culture. His *Pigalle stiletto* are one of Louboutin's most iconic styles, named after one of the designer's favourite Parisian neighbourhoods. The design was first introduced in black patent leather in 2004, but continues to be reimagined each year in different colours and materials.

New acquisition

Yellow

‘There are painters who transform the sun into a yellow spot, but there are others who transform a yellow spot into the sun.’

PABLO PICASSO, ARTIST, 1957

Yellow is the most luminous colour in the spectrum. It is symbolic of optimism, the sun and enlightenment, and for the ancient Egyptians, gold – yellow’s metallic incarnation – represented the skin of the gods. For many cultures yellow is associated with the earth. Over thousands of years Indigenous Australians have employed yellow ochres in their art and body adornment, depicting their Dreamtime stories as part of a continuum of knowledge sharing. In traditional Chinese culture, yellow represents the earth, a stabilising energy that speaks to the balance of the opposing forces of Yin and Yang. Yet yellow also has many negative associations, being the colour of cowardice, deceit and exclusion. Prostitutes in the Roman period were required to dye their hair yellow and in the twentieth century the Nazi Party revived the colour as a symbol of exclusion, forcing Jews to wear the yellow Star of David.

Yellow ochres were some of the first pigments used by humans but by Roman times, lead-based yellow was being manufactured. In the Middle Ages, Indian yellow and gamboge were imported from Asia and lead-tin yellow became one of the most important pigments for artists. By the nineteenth century, synthetic yellows had been developed and by the end of the century these stable, bright colours were revolutionising artists’ palettes.

Top to bottom, left to right

Lucie Rie

Austrian 1902–95, English

Bowl

1960s

porcelain

Presented through the NGV Foundation from the Bequest of Kenneth Hood,
Founder Benefactor, 2003

2003.124

Lucie Rie is one of the most renowned potters of the twentieth century. Born in Vienna, she studied ceramics at the Kunstgewerbeschule (School for Arts and Crafts) but in 1938 she moved to London and established the Albion Mews Pottery. Rie went on to develop an international career, exhibiting across England, Europe and the United States. In 1991 she was made a Dame of the British Empire for her services to the arts. Rie was profoundly influenced by the beauty and form of Asian ceramics and her works exhibit their own quiet strength of purpose, embodying a mastery of technique and material, as seen in this bowl.

Ann Geroe

English 1934–2015, arrived Australia 1949

Imperial yellow glaze bowl

2002

porcelain

Gift of Louise Smith, 2008

2008.257

Anne Geroe began pottery classes with Castlemaine potter Barry Singleton in the early 1970s while completing a philosophy degree as a mature age student. Having studied and admired the NGV's collection of Chinese ceramics, Geroe developed a deep interest in the celadon-glazed stonewares (translucent blue-green glazed wares) of the Southern Song dynasty and monochrome-glazed porcelains of the Ming and Qing dynasties. By 1979 Geroe was potting professionally from her studio in Castlemaine. Her work, as revealed in this bowl, was informed and inspired by a purity of form, as well as the oxblood, celadon and imperial yellow glazes of Chinese ceramics.

Chinese

Bowl

Ming dynasty, Zhengde period, 1506–21
porcelain (Imperial yellow glaze)

Gift of H. W. Kent, 1938

3732-D3

In Chinese culture, yellow is considered one of the most beautiful and prestigious colours. Closely associated with the emperor since the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), yellow was used to decorate royal palaces and temples, and was the colour used for imperial clothing. From the Ming dynasty onwards, emperors favoured yellow porcelain ware, such as this bowl, for its vivid beauty and the imperial power it represented. Yellow glazes, derived from iron oxides, have been produced at the porcelain kilns of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province since the fifteenth century. During the early eighteenth century a more intense yellow glaze was created with the addition of the metal alloy lead antimony.

possibly England

Coif

early 17th century

linen, silk (thread), silver (spangles), silver (thread), silver-gilt (thread)

Purchased, 1977

D152-1977

For centuries head coverings – worn indoors and outdoors – have been customary for men and women. Between the 1590s and 1620s embroidered coifs – informal cloth caps for women – were fashionable among the upper classes. They would have been worn alone indoors or with a hat in public. This particularly fine coif is decorated with silver-gilt thread and yellow floss silk applied in a variety of stitches to create a repeat pattern of roses and borage. The yellow dye is most likely derived from the weld plant, a tall growing relative of the mignonette plant. Weld was valued for the intense yellow colour it produced and is still cultivated in France today.

possibly Italy

Guipure lace

17th century

linen, silk, silver-gilt (wire), silver-gilt (thread)

Purchased, 1908

818-D2

In the late 1500s lace was prized as a fashionable adornment for clothing. Up until the nineteenth century, handmade lace was differentiated by two main techniques, needle and bobbin lace. Italian bobbin lace dates back to the sixteenth century and was produced in the centres of Genoa, Milan and Venice. Guipure lace is a type of bobbin lace that uses plaited bars, instead of mesh, to connect the motifs. This work shows an informal design comprising flowers, leaves and possibly also a bee. The combination of the yellow silk thread, most likely dyed using the weld plant, silver gilt thread and the scatter of silver gilt wire coils creates a rich, dazzling effect. Such a piece would have most likely been intended as a clothing embellishment, possibly as part of a bodice, a cravat or a cuff.

Minton, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire

manufacturer

English est. 1793

Pair of candlesticks

1897

earthenware (majolica)

The Dr Robert Wilson Collection. Gift
of Dr Robert Wilson, 2006

2006.474.a-b

Majolica is earthenware decorated with bold, richly coloured lead glazes. It was popular in mid-nineteenth-century England, reflecting the Victorian taste for lavishness and decorative effect. It represented a new ceramic art form, which satisfied the English public's voracious desire for art objects and decoration. These candlesticks represent the three wise monkeys that hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil. Originally a Japanese motif, the monkeys were popular in Britain and this example may be referencing Charles Darwin's theories of human evolution outlined in his book *On the Origin of Species* (1859), with the monkeys being portrayed in an obviously supportive role.

Chinese

Pair of parrots

Qing dynasty, Kangxi period, 1662–1722

porcelain, enamel

Gift of H. W. Kent, 1938

3756.a-b-D3

Parrots were introduced to China from Indonesia during the first and second centuries. They were highly valued for their exoticism and purported ability to speak Chinese. Parrots were known to live for many years and were a symbol of good luck and longevity. When represented in a pair they symbolised a happy and loving relationship. Parrots became common pets within the imperial palace and the Jingdezhen imperial porcelain kilns produced innumerable versions of them in a range of bright colours, including imperial yellow. This work is an example of the more intense yellow glaze created during the early eighteenth century through the addition of lead antimony, a metal alloy.

Burmantofts, Leeds, Yorkshire
manufacturer
English 1882–1904

Bull-frog vase
c. 1885–91
earthenware (majolica)

Gift of Mrs Susan Altmann, 1994

D66-1994

Anthony Bennett

English born 1949

Yellow reptile-man, bowl

c. 1979

earthenware

Purchased with the assistance of the Crafts Board of the Australia
Council, 1981

D161-1981

This unusual work is by the British studio ceramicist Anthony Bennett. The unglazed matt surface gives the bowl a slightly unnerving tactility, and the friendly, benign reptilian face is strangely disarming. The bowl's vibrant, acid yellow colour was achieved through the addition of a synthetic ceramic pigment, or colourant, to the clay.

Green

‘Green is the prime colour of the world, and that from which its loveliness arises.’

PEDRO CALDERÓN DE LA BARCA, SPANISH SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PLAYWRIGHT

Green is the colour of nature, the life-giving force that governs the rhythms of the world. The ancient Egyptian hieroglyph for green was a papyrus stalk, a plant that grew abundantly along the banks of the Nile River. In Islam green is a sacred colour, representing paradise. In the West green is associated with the coming of spring, renewal and with youth. The expression ‘to be green’, or inexperienced, dates back to at least medieval times.

Throughout the centuries, green pigments were notoriously unstable. Green ochres, or earths, were naturally dull in hue and green plant-based dyes lacked lightfastness. Ground malachite was more successful and was frequently used in illuminated manuscripts. Verdigris, a synthetic copper-based green, was highly unstable, corrupting surrounding colours but its luminous chroma encouraged artists to persevere with it. The seventeenth-century artist Samuel van Hoogstraten complained, ‘I wish that we had a green pigment as good as a red or yellow. Green earth is too weak, Spanish green [verdigris] too crude and ashes [verditer] not sufficiently durable’. It was not until the nineteenth century that stable, luminous greens such as viridian and cobalt green became available and were widely used by artists, despite being laced with toxicity.

Top to bottom, left to right

Hirokatsu Hijikata

Japanese born 1941

Let's empty our warehouses of arms and pack our silos with grain

1980s

colour screenprint

Gift of Jacqui Thomas, 2019

2019.792

In 1983 the Japan Graphic Designers Association (JAGDA) sponsored the first annual exhibition of poster design by its members around the theme of 'peace', titled the *JAGDA Peace Posters Exhibition*. Six years later JAGDA broadened the brief to include environmental issues, with particular focuses on water use, as well as the AIDS epidemic. The posters feature intense, saturated colours and bold, graphic imagery with short punchy slogans to inspire non-violent, environmental activism. Hirokatsu Hijikata's poster uses the colour green to highlight injustices around the high expenditure on war and world famine, as poignantly illustrated in this poster with the ear of wheat growing out of a soldier's helmet.

Josef Hoffmann designer

Austrian 1870–1956

Wiener Werkstätte, Vienna retailer

Austrian 1903–32

Meyr's Neffe, Adolfov manufacturer

Bohemian est. 1816

Vase, from the Gallia collection

c. 1915

glass (uranium)

Samuel E. Wills Bequest, 1976

D176-1976

Josef Hoffmann was one of the leading designers in early twentieth-century Vienna. He was a founding member of the Vienna Secession and the Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshops), two progressive organisations for artists and designers concerned with promulgating a modern design aesthetic. Colour was central to their approach and Hoffmann's interiors and objects are renowned for their striking use of colour. Hoffmann designed numerous examples of faceted glass vases in vibrant shades of green, blue and yellow. The bright green colour of this vase is due to uranium being added to the glass body, which gives it a particularly vivid intensity.

Eastern Mediterranean / Italy manufacturer

Pillar-moulded shallow bowl

25–75 CE

glass

Gift of the Australian Institute of Archaeology, 1967

D12-1971

Glassmaking was an important industry that developed across the Roman Empire from the mid-first century BCE, in particular with the invention of glassblowing. This bowl was made using a technique known as 'pillar-moulded' in which molten glass was cast over a mould and worked to shape the ribs around the bowl's exterior. The interior of the bowl and the rim exterior were ground and polished after cooling and the exterior was fire-polished. Glassmakers added minerals to colour their works, but the pale green colour of this bowl derives from the natural iron impurities in the glass.

Guerrero, West Mexico

Necklace

Middle formative, 800–300 BCE

jade, greenstone

Presented anonymously, 1980

PC37-1980

Deposits of greenstone, or metadiorite, and green jadeite occur widely across the state of Guerrero in south-western Mexico. The indigenous Mezcala culture of the first millennium BCE produced a range of ritualistic objects in these green hard stones, including bowls, vessels, standing figures, personal ornaments and jewellery, like this necklace, which were buried as mortuary offerings. The craftsperson would have used sand, water and a thin piece of wood to cut the stone to its approximate shape before using a small hand drill with sand as an abrasive to perforate the beads and then a finer sand to polish the surfaces.

Chinese

Wine vessel (*Jue*)

Shang dynasty 11th century BCE
bronze

Gift of H. W. Kent, 1938

3663B-D3

The complex form and intricate decoration on this wine vessel exemplifies the technological advances in Chinese bronze casting during the second millennium BCE. Such a vessel would have been used for offerings in sacrificial rituals undertaken by the ruler. It would then have been buried with the dead, together with earthly provisions. This *Wine vessel*, which would have originally had a polished bronze surface, is now covered with a thick encrustation of turquoise-green corrosion that developed from it being buried for centuries. Although not part of the original concept for this vessel, the green corrosion is now highly valued by connoisseurs.

...continued overleaf

Chinese

Teapot

Ming dynasty 1368–1644

jade

Felton Bequest, 1923

2519.a-b-D3

The carving of hardstones is one of the oldest crafts in China and jade is considered the most highly esteemed of all hardstones. True jade, or nephrite, has been used since the Neolithic period and occurs in shades of green, yellow and white. It is treasured for its hardness, translucency and range of colours. These are characteristics that are seen as symbolic of virtuous behaviour, protection and immortality. Traditionally, jade objects have also been representative of supernatural powers and wealth. This teapot features floral motifs that have been carved over the body and cover, while the spout and handle are ornamented with dragon heads and tails.

Blue

‘I had left the visible, physical blue at the door, outside, in the street. The real blue was inside, the blue of the profundity of space, the blue of my kingdom, of our kingdom!’

YVES KLEIN, ARTIST, 1958

Throughout history, blue has held deep symbolic and spiritual significance. For the ancient Egyptians it represented fertility, bounty and protection – the ceilings of royal tombs were painted blue to embody the protective heavens. For Hindus, blue is associated with the god Vishnu who is coloured blue. In China, blue is one of the five colours used to visualise world order and signifies the natural world, springtime, youth and immortality. In Christianity, blue is associated with the Virgin Mary.

Ancient Egyptians produced the first synthesised blue pigment, known as Egyptian blue. Cobalt has been used as a colouring agent in glass and ceramic glazes since the seventh century, but it was not until the thirteenth century that blue became a prominent colour in Western art with the arrival of ultramarine. Derived from lapis lazuli in Afghanistan, ultramarine was more expensive than gold and became a symbol of wealth and prestige. Azurite was frequently employed as a cheaper alternative, but with the introduction of Prussian blue in the early eighteenth century, followed by cobalt blue, cerulean and synthetic ultramarine, the monopoly of true ultramarine began to diminish. These advances elevated blue on the twentieth-century artist's palette, highlighted by artist Yves Klein and his International Klein Blue, a shade of pure ultramarine that Klein claimed to have invented and trademarked.

Top to bottom, left to right

Katsushika Hokusai

Japanese 1760–1849

In the Totomi Mountains

from the *Thirty-six Views of Mt Fuji* series c. 1830

c. 1830

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

427-2

This print is an example of an *aizuri-e* woodblock print, a style that emerged in Japan in the 1830s in response to the introduction of Prussian blue, the first artificially manufactured colour. *Aizuri-e* refers to works printed entirely or predominantly in blue. Prior to this Japanese artists had used only organic inks including indigo and dayflower blue. However, the range of hues that Prussian blue offered and its ability to represent light and shade offered printmakers a new means of rendering spatial depth. This, together with its stability and light fastness, made the colour highly attractive and artists, including Hiroshige and Hokusai, celebrated its introduction to the artist's palette.

Persian

Tile

13th century – 14th century

earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue, lustre glaze

Felton Bequest, 1906

601-D2

Cobalt has long been used as the primary blue colourant in glass and ceramic glazes. Blue glass first appeared in the second millennium BCE, and the first examples of blue-glazed ceramics emerged in Babylonia from the sixth century BCE where rich cobalt deposits were known to exist. High-quality cobalt deposits were also found on the Iranian plateau and it was predominately those mines that supplied cobalt to the early Chinese ceramic industry in the thirteenth century. This tile is decorated with a combination of underglaze cobalt blue and metallic lustre glazes. The blue background around the calligraphy emphasises the importance of script in Islamic art.

De Grieksche A Pottery (Samuel Van Eenhoorn), Delft manufacturer

Dutch 1674–85

Bottle

1674–85

earthenware

Felton Bequest, 1939

4563-D3

Cobalt-coloured glazes first appeared in Europe in the fifteenth century with the development of tin-glazed earthenwares in Italy. The importation of Chinese porcelain into Europe from the sixteenth century, due to the opening up of sea trading routes, led to a widespread craze for blue and white porcelain. Attempts began immediately to imitate these wares and during the seventeenth-century Dutch workshops specialised in blue and white tin-glazed earthenwares, which they called *Delffse porceleyne*, the cobalt coming from Saxon mines. The decoration on this bottle is taken from Chinese porcelain but its form ultimately derives from Persian metalwares.

Egypt, Saqqara

Ushabti figure of Psamtek - Mery - Ptah

Late period, 570–526 BCE

faience

Purchased, 1888

49-D1A

Egypt

Ushabti figure

Late period, Dynasty XXX, 380–343 BCE

faience

Gift of Mr P. Chaldjian, 1996

1996.462

Egyptian faience is a human-made ceramic material with a siliceous body and bright blue glaze. The colour of the glaze was determined by the addition of metallic colourants with the blue and sometimes green colours created through copper additives. The first evidence of faience manufacture dates to the fifth millennium BCE and the Egyptians produced it continually, creating a broad range of jewellery, vessels, sculptures and ritual objects, all imbued with magical powers. The colour blue was associated with fertility, and protection. Ushabti figures, like this one, were intended to help the tomb owner with manual work in the afterlife, from which no-one was exempt, not even the king.

Chinese

Dish

Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573–1620
porcelain (blue and white ware)

Gift of H. W. Kent, 1938

3745-D3

Since at least the thirteenth century Persian cobalt was traded across the Islamic world, Asia and the Mediterranean and was used at all the major ceramic centres including China, Egypt, Iznik and Islamic Spain. It was the preferred source of colourant used in Chinese ceramic workshops, as Chinese cobalt was unable to deliver the same vibrant result. Cobalt first appeared in lustrous glazes on Tang dynasty (618–907) stonewares, but the earliest Chinese porcelain decorated with the underglaze cobalt blue appears to have been produced for the Persian market in the early thirteenth century. It became popular in China during the Yuan dynasty (1278–1368), after which large quantities were exported across Asia and the Middle East. Blue and white porcelain of the Ming dynasty, such as this dish, represents some of the most highly prized Chinese porcelain.

France, Moustiers manufacturer

Dish

c. 1730

earthenware

Felton Bequest, 1939

4560-D3

This early eighteenth-century dish is decorated with 'grotesque' ornament, a style of decoration derived from ancient Roman art. The name comes from the grottoes of Nero's palace complex where painted wall decorations were first rediscovered in the late-fifteenth century. Grotesque ornament comprises symmetrical arrangements of scrolling plant forms and garlands combined with architectural elements and animal and human figures. Often the vegetal elements morph into human or animal forms. The Baroque-inspired decoration was pioneered by the seventeenth-century artist Jean Berain and the blue and white palette evokes imported Asian porcelains, which were fashionable at the time.

Worcester Porcelain, Worcester manufacturer

English c. 1751–1852

Plate

c. 1770

porcelain (soft-paste)

Felton Bequest, 1938

3800D-D3

The secret of making true hard-paste porcelain was discovered at Meissen, Germany, in 1709 and the manufactory was established one year later. Prior to this true porcelain had only been available in Europe via the importation of Chinese and Japanese wares. For much of the first half of the eighteenth century decoration was inspired by blue and white Chinese porcelain but some English manufactories like Worcester continued this taste for oriental decoration into the later eighteenth century. The dragon motif on this plate, which was also used by several English factories, is imitating a Chinese dish intended for the domestic market where the dragon was an imperial symbol. It is executed in cobalt blue imported from Saxony.

Pastel painting in the eighteenth century

‘... pastel can save many young people from the tedium of solitude. This kind of painting has so many attractions that nothing is better suited to offering them resources against idleness, the source of so many lapses.’

ANONYMOUS, *TREATISE ON PASTEL PAINTING*, PARIS, 1788

Pastels are recognised for their luminosity of colour and ability to capture subtle nuances of detail and surface texture. The golden age of pastel painting in mid-eighteenth-century Europe saw the medium achieve new heights in the rendering of textiles, the lustre of skin tones and the atmospheric depth of portrait backgrounds.

Pastels are made from dried powdered pigments that are mixed with a binder, usually gum arabic, and shaped into sticks and dried. They are particularly friable and their coloured powder adheres loosely to paper, which is often textured in advance with ground marble dust or pumice. In the eighteenth century, pastels were believed to be more robust than oil paint as their vibrant colours were thought to be less prone to fading. Pastels were often painted on grey-blue paper to provide a depth of tone in the colours, which were applied directly with a pastel stick or rubbed into the paper with fingers or stumps made from leather or paper. It was not uncommon for pastel artists to employ hundreds of pastels to work up the tonal complexity of a work. Each tone required a separate stick of colour, unlike oil paint where many colours could be mixed from a basic palette of colours.

Top to bottom, left to right

Maurice-Quentin de La Tour

French 1704–88

Abbé Pommyer

1763

pastel

Everard Studley Miller Bequest, 1966

1620-5

The Abbé François-Emmanuel Pommyer was a great patron of the arts and a personal friend of the artist Maurice-Quentin de La Tour. Pommyer was a prominent intellectual and one of the leading personalities of eighteenth-century France, prior to the revolution. This portrait shows him in his ecclesiastical robes in an informal pose, emphasised by the wig powder over his shoulders and his slight smile, which suggests a man of wit and good humour. La Tour was one of the greatest pastellists of the period and said of his portraits, 'I penetrate into the depths of my subjects without their knowing it, and capture them whole'.

Bologna chalk

In antiquity, before the invention of lead white, natural chalk was the most readily available white pigment. Chalk is a soft calcareous mineral that is formed from the fossilised remains of microscopic phytoplankton algae whose extensive deposits are found in ancient seabeds. Chalk beds are located in numerous places across Europe, and names such as 'Bologna chalk' reflect their place of origin. Natural chalk was employed by artists from the early Renaissance period to produce gesso grounds for panel paintings. With the introduction of canvas however, the use of chalk for this purpose was diminished and it was instead used as an extender for other pigments and as the main component in soft pastels.

Madder roots, madder lake, rose madder and alizarin crimson

Madder lake, rose madder and alizarin crimson are red-tinted pigments derived from the roots of the madder plant (*Rubia tinctorum*). This plant has been cultivated across Europe since the thirteenth century and is still grown in some areas for dyeing rugs and textiles. The roots of the madder plant were used for centuries to create a stable red textile dye, but it was not until the seventeenth century that the alchemy of creating red pigments from the dye was discovered.

The process of extracting the dye and converting it to pigments was time consuming and complicated. The madder plant takes at least three years to develop the dye properties, after which time the older roots are cut off, dried and boiled or fermented in an alkaline solution, while the plant is re-planted to continue growing. Depending on the chemical selection, temperature and length of the fermentation, a broad range of coloured dyes or pigments can be achieved, from pinks to reds and vibrant crimsons. The most well known of these are rose madder and alizarin crimson. The extraction of pseudopurpurin, a natural chemical compound in the root, is the basis for the delicate rose madder pink, while the extraction of alizarin produced a deep crimson pigment that was highly translucent in nature.

Vine charcoal

The charring of dried grapevine stems and shoots produces a deep, intense blue-black that is the most prized of all charcoals. It has been used extensively by artists from the Medieval period up until the present day. The bark is stripped from the stems, which are packed tightly into iron tubes and sealed to prevent oxygen entering. The tins are then roasted for several hours to ensure the stems become fully carbonised, which ensures colour and textural consistency. The resulting charcoal can be used for drawing or ground to make a pigment for ink, paint or pastel.

Pigments courtesy of the Chromatopia Museum and Langridge Artist Colours, Melbourne

Indigo

'You ain't never been blue; no, no, no,
You ain't never been blue,
Till you've had that mood indigo.
That feelin' goes stealin' down to my shoes
While I just sit here and sigh, "Go 'long blues".'

IRVING MILLS, LYRICS FOR DUKE ELLINGTON'S JAZZ SONG *MOOD INDIGO*, 1930

Indigo has been one of the most highly prized pigments in history. It has been cultivated in India for at least 5000 years and has long been thought to offer medicinal benefits, acting as a natural insecticide and having prophylactic and healing properties. There are many different plants that produce the indigo dye but the most common is *Indigofera tinctoria*, which produces a particularly high concentration of the dye. In Europe, prior to the seventeenth century, woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) was the main source for indigo but this industry was ultimately replaced by the importation of Indian indigo. In 1631, seven Dutch ships brought back more than thirteen tonnes of indigo from the East, equivalent in value to five tonnes of gold, illustrating the voracious demand for this 'blue gold'.

...continued overleaf

Indigo is primarily a textile dye but was dried and used as a pigment in medieval illuminated manuscripts and in Japanese woodblock prints prior to the early nineteenth century. From being a marker of great social status in historical textiles, indigo became the colour of workers' uniforms in the twentieth century with blue jeans, its most enduring legacy, now a staple in the global wardrobe.

Indonesian

Man's cloth

Hinggi

20th century

cotton, dye, warp *ikat*

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Michael Abbott, Founder
Benefactor, 1984

AS37-1984

The colour and patterns of Sumbanese textiles were once indicators of social rank. Sumbanese cloths incorporating red dye were traditionally reserved for nobility and indigo blue cloths were worn by commoners. This cloth has been dyed using the *ikat* technique, where threads are resist dyed before they are woven, the coating of threads in areas to resist the blue dye producing a white pattern on a blue ground. The composition on this cloth of confronting paired animal motifs is derived from European coins and medallions and has been applied to other imported motifs, such as rampant crowned lions, as well as local Indonesian imagery, including prawns and stags.

Purple

‘The Tyrian colour is most appreciated when it is the colour of clotted blood, dark by reflected and brilliant by transmitted light.’

PLINY, ROMAN PHILOSOPHER AND AUTHOR OF *HISTORIA NATURALIS* (NATURAL HISTORY), 77 CE

Since Classical antiquity purple has been a highly valued colour, directly linked to royalty and power. According to ancient Greek myth, Tyrian purple was discovered by the hero Herakles whose dog's drool turned purple after the dog ingested a murex sea snail. The mollusc was native to the ancient town of Tyre and each snail yielded just one drop of dye, thus requiring at least 250,000 snails to produce a single ounce. In Imperial Rome, purple was reserved for the emperor who was referred to as 'The Purple'.

During the Byzantine period empresses gave birth in the 'Purple Chamber' and emperors were referred to as having been 'born in the purple' (*Porphyrogenitus*) if they took the throne through birth rather than by force. In sixteenth-century Elizabethan England, strict sumptuary laws governing what people could wear dictated that only those closest to the royal family were permitted to wear purple. In Japan, purple has traditionally symbolised position and wealth, and in China it was the colour of the aristocracy. In mid-nineteenth century England, purple was suddenly democratised through the chance discovery of a synthetic dye, named 'mauveine', an electric colour that set in train a revolution in the production of synthetic colourants.

Top to bottom, left to right

David Bielander

Swiss born 1968, worked in Germany 1995–

Blue python, necklace ***Würgeschlange***

2011

anodised titanium, silver

Purchased NGV Foundation, 2012

2012.35

David Bielander's 2.2-metre long python necklace weighs just 200 grams. Made from a single strip of titanium, the repeating pattern was laser cut and then linked and folded to form the snake. The anodisation process involves the electrical generation of an artificial corrosion layer, the colour of which is determined by the thickness of the corrosion. Bielander stated, 'A two and a half metre python is surely a ripsnorter, so long as she is a piece of jewellery. It took nearly five years to get her right: how to transform a lifesize python into a necklace? Her movement, snuggling around your neck, her weight, her colour'.

La Granja de San Ildefonso, **San Ildefonso** manufacturer

Spanish est. 1728

Covered tankard

c. 1785

glass (wheel-engraved, gold leaf)

Purchased, 1969

D93.a-b-1969

During the eighteenth century the Spanish began producing fine crystal table glass that was often embellished with wheel-engraved decoration and gilding. This production is particularly associated with the La Granja de San Ildefonso manufactory, founded under royal patronage near Madrid. The factory developed a reputation for finely engraved table glass in imitation of high-quality Bohemian engraving and in the later eighteenth century coloured glasses, such as this tankard, were introduced to the repertoire along with further refinements to the gilded engraving.

...continued overleaf

England manufacturer

Bottle

c. 1690

glass (nipt diamond waies, applied decoration)

William and Margaret Morgan Endowment, 1973

D169.a-1973

Until the development of synthetic colourants in the nineteenth century, the techniques of colouring glass had changed little from the Medieval period. A range of colours was able to be achieved through the addition of metal oxides to the original, uncoloured glass batch. The deep violet colour seen in these glasses was most likely derived from the addition of manganese which produced an intense, glowing colour. The decorative modelling over the bottle's body, known as 'nipt diamond waies', was created by manipulating adjacent vertical ribs with pincers to form a diamond pattern.

England, Bristol manufacturer

Goblet

late 18th century

glass

Purchased, 1953

1298-D4

possibly England

Stockings

1860s

silk

Gift of Krystyna Campbell-Pretty AM and Family
through the Australian Government's Cultural
Gift's Program, 2020

2020.609.a-b

With his accidental discovery of aniline purple (later named mauveine) in 1856, William Henry Perkin prompted the establishment of a low-cost, artificial dyestuff industry that replaced traditional organic dyes and transformed women's fashion forever. Within a decade, silk textiles saturated with the gaudy chemical hues of magenta, fuchsia, violet, methyl blue and malachite green were in widespread use. These purple stockings were made by Victorian framework-knitters. They were 'fashioned' by tapering the knitting on a flat surface, creating a selvage along each edge. After adding a knitted heel and toe section, each leg was seamed carefully up the back on a leg-shaped board.

New acquisition

Black

‘With all their damned talk of modern painting, I’ve been forty years discovering that the queen of all colours was black.’

PIERRE-AUGUSTE RENOIR, ARTIST, c. 1900

Black is symbolic of many significant yet conflicting phenomena. It is associated with death and mourning, magic, evil, darkness and subversion, but also with elegance, wealth, sexual allure and power. Black was one of the first pigments used by humans, and charcoal remains a fundamental drawing medium for artists today. Black has always been the primary colour for printing and script. From ancient Egyptian ostraca (inscribed potsherds), illuminated manuscripts from the sixth century, Korean and Japanese block printing from the eighth century, Chinese ink wash painting in the Tang dynasty (618–907), and the invention of the European printing press around 1450, black ink has played a fundamental role in the development of art and literature.

Black in fashion is full of contradictions. In twelfth-century France, Benedictine monks wore black as a sign of humility and repentance but by the fourteenth century Italian bankers were wearing black as a sign of wealth and importance. In 1528 the courtier and diplomat Baldassare Castiglione noted in his 'how to' guide for aspiring Renaissance courtiers, 'Black is more pleasing in clothing than any other colour'. From Victorian-era mourning clothing, to Coco Chanel's sophisticated little black dress, to the twenty-first century's urban embrace of black, the enduring appeal of black remains.

Top to bottom, left to right

Max Klinger

German 1857–1920

Night *Nacht*

plate 1 from *Vom Tode I (On Death I)*, Opus XI, 1st edition 1889

1889

etching and aquatint

3rd of 6 states

Purchased, 1891

p.187.5-1

Max Klinger was a German painter, sculptor and printmaker who was celebrated for his cycles of prints produced early on in his career that were highly influential for many artists, including Edvard Munch. Klinger believed that the black and white medium of etching was suited to exploring humankind's darker side of life and that, while painting should reflect the beauty of the visible world, prints should express the deepest convictions and emotions of the artist and evoke 'associations' of ideas in the mind of the viewer, as poetry or music might. In *Night*, the landscape seems to be an extension of the man's melancholy thoughts, a landscape of the mind.

Prince Rupert

German 1619–82

Head of the executioner

1662

mezzotint

Gift of E. Makower, 1925

1397-3

The seventeenth-century English-German prince, Prince Rupert of the Rhine is credited with revolutionising the mezzotint technique. Prince Rupert developed the 'rocker' tool, a curved saw edge that roughens the printing plate to give it its dark tone when inked. The deep shadowy tones of this work emphasise the darkness of the subject matter, which is full of its own irony, being a portrait of an executioner.

Frank Short

English 1857–1945

Sunrise, Ramsgate

1904

mezzotint

Gift of Brigadier W.E. Clark, 1957

1383.79-5

Mezzotint was a popular printmaking technique in eighteenth-century England for reproducing paintings. Publishers favoured it for its rich tonal range, nearer to that of a painting than the more linear technique of engraving. Beginning with a copper plate roughened with a spiked tool, which prints as a rich black, the image is 'revealed' through a process of gradually smoothing roughened areas of the plate to create light and shade. Sir Frank Short was a British printmaker known for his revival of the practices of mezzotint and pure aquatint. In this soft, atmospheric print of the moment before dawn, Short exploited the qualities of mezzotint to capture a brooding, velvety stillness before the light.

possibly England manufacturer

Mourning locket

c. 1870

plastic, metal, glass, paper (photograph), hair

Gift of Mrs Vera Donaldson, 1978

D72-1978

In Victorian England the practice of mourning became highly formalised in response to Queen Victoria's prolonged period of mourning over the death of her husband, Prince Albert in 1861. The increasing rigidity around mourning conventions gave rise to the manufacture of black jewellery; in particular, that made from jet, an indigenous black stone mined in the area of Whitby in Yorkshire. Locketts were fashionable items of jewellery from about 1860 to 1880 and have remained popular ever since. This mourning locket, carrying photographs of a man and a woman inside, is made from an early form of plastic in imitation of jet.

England manufacturer

Mourning locket

1860s

enamel, gold, diamond

Purchased, 1976

D233-1976

England manufacturer

Mourning ring

1750

gold, crystal, enamel, gouache, ivory

Gift of Mr Kurt Albrecht, 1987

D81-1987

From the early seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, people left money in their wills to have rings made with commemorative inscriptions to be distributed to their friends and families. Simple bands enamelled in black or white with the name and life dates of the deceased were often created and were sometimes set with a gemstone, or a bezel set with a rock crystal covering a symbol. This ring carries the inscription around the band, 'RICH. STOCKER MITCHEL DI:FEB:2·1750. AE:15' and the central cut glass crystal bears the image of a skull painted on ivory set underneath it..

England manufacturer

Mourning ring

1776

gold, enamel, glass, hair, ivory

Gift of E. Howitt, 1893

874-D1M

Prue Venables

English born 1954, arrived Australia 1956, lived in England 1976–89

Black oval

2013

porcelain

Purchased with funds donated by
Professor Barbara van Ernst AM, 2014

2014.668.2

Prue Venables is one of Australia's leading contemporary ceramicists with a demonstrated mastery of the porcelain medium. Her work explores the significance of everyday objects through the quiet contemplation of form, surface texture and colour. Venables typically uses a restrained, monochromatic palette, often a distinct matt black, and the imperfection of her forms creates a calming, meditative effect. Her deceptively simple organic vessels mask a laborious production process. As Venables says, 'A search for simplicity and quietness, an essential stillness, motivates my work'.

Suganuma Michiko

Japanese born 1940

Metacinnabar tray

Kuroshinsha kukei moriki

1975–2000

lacquer on wood

Gift of the artist, 2011

2011.443

Suganuma Michiko has become one of the leading practitioners of *Kamakura bori* (Kamakura woodcarving and lacquering). The technique dates back to at least the Heian period (794–1185) when objects were made exclusively for the imperial court and Buddhist temples. The production of lacquerware is a time-consuming and exacting process and it can take years to complete a single object. This tray, with its flat rim and rounded profiles to catch the light, is lacquered in lustrous deep black and took the artist twenty-five years to complete. It forms a pair with a vermilion lacquered tray, also in the Collection.

Grey

‘Grey which is the colour of the sky in France, is also the colour of truth itself.’

JACQUES DE BIEZ, FRENCH JOURNALIST AND ART CRITIC, 1889

Grey is a neutral or achromatic colour made from black and white, both neutral ‘colours’. On its own grey can be either calming or oppressive, depending on its shade, but in many contexts grey is an important support, as a soothing foil for intense, vibrant colours or to enhance the quiet effect of softer colours. Grey is neither completely dark nor completely light and has often had negative associations. It is linked with conservatism, ageing, negative emotions and the grey business suit – a symbol of conformity. However, in recent years, grey has experienced a revival in popularity. No longer seen as fusty and conservative, grey has taken on an understated elegance, a cool chicness and has become a go-to colour for interior designers.

Grey is the colour most associated with urbanism and the built environment due to the dominance of grey materials in the city landscape – concrete, timber, bitumen, steel, aluminium, tin and zinc. In fact, with the exception of copper and gold, all pure (non-alloyed) metals appear grey due to the similarity of their atomic make-up, which determines the wavelengths of their re-emitted light and thus how we perceive them.

Top to bottom, left to right

Frank Hurley

Australian 1890–1962

Locked in the polar ice, April 1915

1915

gelatin silver photograph

Purchased, 1977

PH91-1977

In 1914, Australian photographer Frank Hurley was invited to join the British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton on his Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Hurley's role as official photographer was to document both the voyage south and Shackleton's proposed crossing of Antarctica. Tragically the expedition met with disaster when their ship, *Endurance*, became trapped in pack ice. For Hurley, the broken ship and the crew's precarious situation provided an enthralling subject to photograph as he poetically described, '... she never looked quite so beautiful as when the moonlight etched her in inky silhouette, transforming her into a fairyland vessel'.

Frank Hurley

Australian 1890–1962

The Endurance hove out in the pressure

1916

gelatin silver photograph

Purchased, 1977

PH94-1977

‘Gelatin silver photograph’, the museum term for a black and white photograph, is so called because the paper on which the photograph is printed is coated with light sensitive silver salts suspended in a gelatin emulsion. Photographs made using these papers can have a remarkable tonal range that includes black, white and a seemingly endless array of grey in between. The shades of grey can be warm, cool or neutral, as determined by the photographic paper selected and the chemical processes of developing and toning the image. The selective use of toning can subtly change a photograph enabling the photographer to create atmospheric and evocative images.

Indian

Bracelet

c. 1880

lead, pewter

Purchased, 1881

833-D1A

Mari Funaki

Japanese 1950–2010, arrived Australia 1979

Bracelet

2008

heat coloured mild steel

Yvonne Pettengell Bequest, 2014

2014.265

Mari Funaki was one of Australia's leading contemporary jewellers and metalsmiths, known for her distinctive jewellery and sculptural works in blackened mild steel. Rings, containers and bracelets were central to her practice and she continually honed her vision around their line, volume and form. In Funaki's work the empty space is as important as the form, and this dialogue imbues her work with a sculptural dimension. As the artist stated, 'I like to make my forms stir people's emotions or imagination. As an object maker I have always been interested in the interplay and dialogue between negative and positive, between volume and space, between inside and outside'.

Lucy Sarneel

Dutch born 1961

Grey Beady, brooch

2014

zinc, acrylic paint, varnish

Purchased with funds donated by Susan Hosken, 2014

2014.163

Dutch jeweller Lucy Sarneel's preferred material is zinc. As she describes it, 'The "carrying material" of my work is zinc, representing the blue-grey sky and sea, the subconscious, dreaming away in the distance, the reassuring domestic world of rainpipes, buckets and washtubs, architectural "jewels" like little towers and dormer windows in old European cities and the protective quality of preventing steel from rusting. Traditions and spiritual, symbolic values are a driving force. I am looking for fields of tension, both in form and material as a metaphor for life in the quest for balance between forces which we are governed by'.

Arne Jacobsen designer

Danish 1902–71

Stelton, Copenhagen manufacturer

Danish est. 1960

Cylinda-line, coffee pot

c. 1965

stainless steel, opaque synthetic polymer resin

Presented by Incorporated Agencies Pty Ltd, 1972

D63.a-b-1972

Alongside plastics, stainless steel is one of the revolutionary materials of the twentieth century. Now ubiquitous, the low carbon, high chromium alloy was first developed in the nineteenth century but did not go into commercial production until the late 1920s, and stainless steel did not appear in domestic contexts until the late 1940s. By this time, following rapid technological advancements during the Second World War, stainless steel emerged as eminently suitable for food handling, storage and cutlery. The alloy's resistance to corrosion and staining, its biologically inert surface and its easy-to-clean, low-maintenance robustness made it a highly desirable metal for designers and manufacturers including Stelton whose *Cylinda-line* tablewares have become synonymous with minimalist, functional design.

possibly Germany manufacturer

Krug

c. 1880

pewter

Purchased, 1881

955-D1M

Pewter is a malleable metal alloy comprised predominantly of tin and small amounts of copper, antimony or lead to strengthen it. It is known to have been used by the ancient Egyptians and later by the Romans but came into widespread use in Europe from the Medieval period onwards. For centuries it was the main material used for tablewares, cutlery and a large variety of household objects until the mass production of glass, earthenwares and porcelain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries replaced it. This *Krug*, in the neo-Renaissance style, is an example of nineteenth-century historical revivalism – the renewed interest in historical styles, with its typical nineteenth-century over use of ornament.

Simon Pantin II, London manufacturer

English 1729–33

Coffee pot

1732–33

silver, ivory

Bequest of an anonymous donor, 1980

D23-1980

The earliest known silver objects date back to around 4000 BCE. As a pure metal silver is too soft to be worked on its own and is generally alloyed with copper to increase its hardness and durability. Due to its value as a precious metal and its highly reflective surface, silver has been used throughout history to produce jewellery, high quality tablewares and a broad range of domestic objects and furniture. This coffee pot is an example of the rise in fashion for coffee in Europe during the eighteenth century. Early examples like this one were based upon Turkish coffee pots with tapering, cylindrical forms and high domed lids.

White

‘If colours were people, it [white] would be admired, but it probably wouldn’t be popular: it is just a little too exclusive, autocratic and neurotic.’

KASSIA ST CLAIR, AUTHOR OF *THE SECRET LIVES OF COLOUR*, 2016

The subject of constant debate as to whether it is a colour or not, white has nevertheless featured prominently throughout history. Unable to be produced from mixing pigments, white has always symbolised purity, particularly in marital and religious contexts. Today it is still associated with cleanliness in the form of whitegoods, lab coats and table linen. In 1925 the avant-garde architect Le Corbusier argued that all interior walls should be whitewashed, to act as a moral and spiritual cleansing for society. In Chinese culture white is identified with death and mourning, as it is for Indigenous Australians. Yet white has also had long associations with wealth and power. Historically, white cloth, whether cotton or wool, required significant processing to appear white and was only affordable for the wealthiest members of society.

For artists, lead white was the only white pigment available for centuries, despite knowledge of its deadly toxicity. Since antiquity men and women have applied white, lead-based cosmetics to their skin in the pursuit of a fashionable appearance regardless of the lead poisoning, which induced skin reactions, hair loss, infertility, madness and death. The ‘dead white’ look, fashionable from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, took on a whole new meaning.

Top to bottom, left to right

Jonathan Jones

Kamilaroi/Wiradjuri born 1978

untitled (white poles) 2

2004

embossed paper

ed. 20/20

Gift of the artist, 2014

2014.234.2

Kamilaroi/Wiradjuri artist Jonathan Jones explores relationships between community and the individual, the personal and the public. The subtle shadows in his embossed white paper works *untitled (white poles) 1–3* quietly probe the relationship between light and shadow and question encounters between white and Indigenous cultures. The motifs that inform his work often come from markings on customary shields, Pukumani poles, possum skin cloaks, carved trees, contemporary Indigenous paintings and photographs. The subtly embossed figurative elements of the white poles prompt us as the viewer to find a position that allows reflected light to reveal the image, to catch an embossed edge and so reveal the contours of overlapping poles.

Titania Henderson

Dutch born 1945, arrived Australia 1956

Untitled 9

2006

porcelain (bone china)

Kenneth Hood Bequest Fund, 2007

2007.742.a-c

Titania Henderson is a Melbourne-based artist whose work explores the medium of porcelain with its qualities of fragility and strength, qualities also inherent to human nature. Henderson's work is deeply emotional. Her rounded forms, which nestle into each other, create dialogues between life, nature and artistic expression. The chalky, milky whiteness of the unglazed porcelain and the gentle, even ridges create a subtle play of light and shadow that enliven the forms' surfaces. Their beautifully finished edges, subtle, even corrugations and highly resolved shapes reflect the artist's finely tuned eye and sensibility.

Chantilly Porcelain Factory, Chantilly

manufacturer
French c. 1730–92

Crouching Venus and The knife-grinder

1740–45
porcelain (soft-paste)

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of Mr Peter Wynne Morris,
Governor, 1997

1997.325.1-2

These porcelain works are copies of ancient Greek marble sculptures, which were copied by the Romans and then reproduced throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods in marble and bronze. Their rendering in white porcelain is illustrative of the eighteenth-century taste for classical sculpture in white marble and reflects the misunderstanding that classical sculpture and architecture was white. In fact they were not but were painted in a range of bright, gaudy colours. Over the years many scholars have refused to believe it and the sculptor Auguste Rodin is understood to have beat his chest in sorrow claiming, 'I feel it here that they were never coloured'

What is colour?

‘Light is therefore colour, and shadow the privation of it.’

JOSEPH MALLORD WILLIAM TURNER, ARTIST, 1818

Colour is fundamental to our perception of the world. But what is it that we are actually seeing? Essentially, colour is the reflection of light. Our understanding of colour is based upon experiments conducted by the physicist Sir Isaac Newton in the 1660s. By directing sunlight through glass prisms, Newton demonstrated that white light comprised seven visible colours – the ‘visible spectrum’, or the colours of the rainbow. The visible spectrum is the small band that is perceived by the human eye within the electromagnetic spectrum. The rod and cone cells in our eye’s retina are sensitive to the wavelengths of the visible spectrum and allow us to perceive these colours. Objects absorb some wavelengths of the visible spectrum, while other wavelengths are reflected, determining the colours that we see. Darker colours absorb light while lighter colours reflect light.

Iridescence is the phenomenon when an object’s physical structure causes light waves to combine with each other so that the peaks and troughs of the light waves line up to reinforce some wavelengths and lengthen others, giving colour to the reflected light. This is known as colour interference and may be both human-made, or naturally occurring, as seen in the pearlescence of shells.

Top to bottom, left to right

Peter Tully

Australian 1947–92

Early flight attendants vest

1990

retrospectra graphic plastic, lamé, metallic thread, cotton

Purchased from Admission Funds, 1991

CT1-1991

Trained as a jeweller, Peter Tully's practice was a broad amalgam of art, craft, gay politics and fashion. Spurning precious metals in favour of plastics, trinkets, found items and handcrafted materials, Tully's aesthetic questioned notions of taste and adornment, and high and popular culture. As artistic director of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras from 1982 to 1986, Tully was attuned to dance floor culture as a performance arena. This tiled vest, from his *Treasures of the Last Future* exhibition, 1990, references these colourful and liberating spaces for manifestations of gay sexuality and transgressive display.

Corrie Fullard

Palawa born 1931

Necklace

2000

pink-tipped kelp shells (*Phasianotrochus rutilus*), cotton thread

Gift of Catherine Allen, 2001

2001.287

Corrie Fullard is a respected elder of the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. She was born on Flinders Island in the Furneaux Islands group off the north-east coast of Tasmania and learned the tradition of shell stringing from her mother, which has been passed down through generations of her family. Shell stringing is a valued Palawa tradition that has been practised continually since before colonisation. Traditionally, necklaces were made as adornment for ceremonies, the natural pearlescence of the shells shimmering in the firelight, and as trade objects with other tribes. Today, Fullard is regarded as one of the senior custodians of the tradition.

Greg Daly

Australian born 1954

Morning mist, pivot vase

2015

stoneware

Purchased with funds donated by
Professor Barbara van Ernst AM, 2017

2016.1035

Greg Daly is an Australian ceramicist internationally regarded for his vessels that explore rich glaze effects. The artist explains, 'Throughout the year, I see light through mist, rain, dust, smoke, heat haze and cloud. Moonlight, first light, fading light, sunset and that instant, just as the sun goes down, an afterglow that for a moment changes the land and sky. This is what has inspired me to explore lustre glazes. And across all this, the light. Light falling on, reflecting off and diffusing through all that surrounds me, emphasising textures and, most importantly, bringing with it colour'.

Jiro Kamata

Japanese born 1978

Bi – 12 colour, necklace

2015

oxidised silver, dichroic mirror

Purchased NGV Foundation, 2020

Jiro Kamata's work explores optical phenomena through the use of sunglass and camera lenses as well as dichroic mirrors. Kamata transforms these materials into highly refined jewellery that explores 'experienced memory' through their play on reflection, light and colour. His *Bi – 12 colour, necklace* comprises ten disks of cut dichroic mirror, or glass with a reflective dichroic coating, fitted into oxidised silver surrounds. Kamata sources the dichroic mirror from Thor Labs in Munich where it is used for splitting laser beams of different colour. The dichroic coating creates an array of colours through reflectivity and prismatic activity.

New acquisition

Watercolour in Indian court paintings

‘Here they listened to the tale of the bard, and slept off their noonday opiate amidst the cool breezes of the lake, wafting delicious odours from the myriads of the lotus-flowers which cover the surface of the waters.’

**JAMES TOD, OFFICER OF THE BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY AND
AUTHOR OF *ANNALS AND ANTIQUITIES OF RAJASTHAN*, 1829**

From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, exquisite watercolours were produced by workshops of the Rajput and Mughal courts for the delight of their rulers. These jewel-like paintings depict a world of splendour and fantasy through their use of brilliant colour, bold design and astonishing detail. Following the Mughal invasion of Indian kingdoms from the early 1500s, a blending of Hindu and Muslim cultures developed, with individual states pursuing their own courtly painting styles. Works from the Rajput courts portrayed idealised imagery that used bold patterning, vibrant colours and spatial foreshortening to create an illusion of depth whereas paintings from the Mughal courts depicted historical events and court life imbued with naturalism and a deep sense of perspective.

These paintings were produced on a laminated paperboard prepared with a highly polished chalk white ground layer. The design was outlined in red or black and the solid colours blocked in before more translucent colours were added. The technique is known as 'opaque watercolour'. The paints used for these paintings were made of water, gum binders and ground mineral pigments, including azurite, malachite, ochres and cinnabar (vermilion). Plant- and insect-based colours, such as indigo and red lake pigments were used over the solid colours to add highlights and modelling, as well as diaphanous layers to create illusionistic depth and shading.

Top to bottom, left to right

Ala Bagas, son of Pyara

Indian active 1751–56

Maharana Raj Singh II riding

1755

opaque watercolour and gold paint on paper

Felton Bequest, 1980

AS167-1980

Powerful horses were the pride of emperors and kings, and paintings of the Mughal and Rajput rulers on prancing steeds were one of the most popular forms of portraiture. Immaculately groomed horses displaying powerful physiques, beautiful markings and pedigree lineage were a symbol of the Rajputs' nobility, and stables of pedigree horses were a feature of their palaces. In this scene of great pageantry, the Rajput Maharana rides among attendants bearing regalia in the form of the *chauri* (yak-tail fly whisk), *kirnia* (parasol) and *changi* (a royal standard in the form of a black disc with a gold emblem of the sun).

Indian

Raja Rai Singh

late 17th century

opaque watercolour and gold paint on paper

Felton Bequest, 1980

AS57-1980

Raja Rai Singh rose to become an army general at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. His successful exploits, which involved winning half of the Mewar kingdom, won him accolades and rewards and he was given the lands of Gujarat and Burhanpur. Under the patronage of Mughal rulers, artists specialising in portraiture captured the individual personalities of their subjects with a level of intimacy not seen before in Indian painting, as seen in the details of this portrait, despite its unfinished state. Akbar consolidated this style by establishing an atelier of local Indian artists under Persian mentorship, combining the refinement and skill of Persian painting with the vitality of Hindu epic painting.

Gamboge

Gamboge is a resin sourced from the *Garcinia* tree in South-East Asia. An incision is made in the trunk of the tree and a bamboo tube placed beneath it to capture the milky yellow resin. The resin is then roasted in the bamboo tube to evaporate the moisture and, once dried, the solid cylinder of resin is removed. This is then ground finely to produce a bright yellow pigment. Gamboge was used in Asian inks from the eighth century and in the seventeenth century it was imported into Europe where its warm, transparent colour was most appreciated in the watercolour medium.

Indigo

Indigo is a molecule that is extracted from the leaves of indigo plants. The process of indigo dyeing occurs in stages. Firstly, leaves are boiled with the addition of substances to promote bacterial activity, which extracts the water-soluble, colourless dye component indoxyl. Next, the leaves are removed and an alkali is added to stabilise the acidity and hydrolyse the dye molecules. Finally, cloth immersed in the dye becomes blue when raised into the air, causing the colourless dye indoxyl to oxidise to the blue colourant indigotin. Successive dyeing and airing produces increasingly deeper shades of blue. To create a pigment the dye is reduced to a paste, dried and formed into cakes.

Azurite

Azurite is a blue mineral found in deposits of copper ore across Europe. Until the arrival of ultramarine in the sixth century, derived from lapis lazuli, azurite was the leading blue pigment used in European painting and illuminated manuscripts. Even afterwards, the exorbitant cost of ultramarine meant that azurite was still the most commonly used blue pigment throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods. To make a pigment the mineral was pulverised then washed and sieved. When finely ground, azurite becomes pale blue but when it is more coarsely ground the colour is deeper although more translucent. Many coats of coarse azurite were needed to create an opaque colour.

Indian yellow

Indian yellow has been known in India since the fifteenth century, but for centuries its ingredients and production were shrouded in mystery to those outside India. It was not until 1883 that the extraordinary process was documented by a Bengali civil servant who informed the British authorities. The pigment was made from the urine of cows who had been fed exclusively on mango leaves. The urine was collected, reduced, then strained and the sediment collected and formed into balls and dried. The poor state of health of the cows led to production being banned in the nineteenth century. The samples on display here are reproductions of original pigment balls.

Shell gold

Shell gold is made from finely ground gold mixed with a binder of gum arabic, egg white or fish glue. It was traditionally mixed and stored within a seashell, hence its name. Shell gold is water soluble and when dry may be burnished to enhance the lustre of the gold. In Europe the precious pigment was mainly used in manuscript illumination and across the Islamic world shell gold was employed in early book illustration of the thirteenth century. By the fifteenth century the use of gold had reached a level of unprecedented refinement in Persian miniature painting, which in turn inspired jewel-like gold embellishments in Indian watercolour paintings.

Pigments courtesy of the Chromatopia Museum and Langridge Artist Colours, Melbourne

