

# On White

Since ancient times, colour has been one of the most powerful means of expressions, be it to signal strength, status, exclusivity or rarity. From emperors and monarchs to religious leaders and luxury brand founders, those who understood the power of visual language have always been adopting a specific palette. This is due to the fact that, more than just decorating, colour communicates. A signature hue can command reverence, provoke desire or convey belonging. And, among all colours, the one that has always been provoking the most debate, fascination, and contradiction, is white.

Surprisingly, white holds one of the longest and most enduring presences in human visual history. Its first appearance dates back to the Paleolithic Age as part of the cave paintings of Lascaux (southwestern France), where humans were used to depict animals, handprints and sacred symbols through natural pigments like chalk and calcite. These findings, dating back to over 17.000 years ago, testify white's place as one of the first colours ever used for artistic and communicative purposes.

Later on, among ancient civilisations, white continued to carry significant spiritual and societal weight. For the Ancient Greeks it symbolised divine light, sacredness and maternal nourishment, with reference to the colour of the milk. In Ancient Rome, a plain white garment called toga virilis was worn by male citizens on ceremonial occasions, while the so called toga candida - word that came to form the root of the modern term 'candidate' - was worn by public officers.

What's more, white's symbolic depth extended across nearly every major world religion. For early Christians, who adopted most of Romans' costumes, it has long represented purity, humility and virtue, whilst during the Middle Ages it became associated with martyrdom and mourning, often worn by widows as a sign of grief and devotion. In 1566, at the behest of Pope Pius V, the official colour of papal vestment became white, which from that moment came to be an emblem of sacrifice and sanctity in Roman Catholicism. In Islamic and Shinto religions, white is worn by pilgrims undertaking spiritual journeys, whereas in both Western and Japanese traditional weddings, white bridal attire symbolises purity and spiritual transformation. On the contrary, in many Asian and Indian cultures, white marks mourning, death and the passage to another realm.

Later on, white's fashion influence extended beyond religious practices, starting from the neoclassical revival of the 18th and 19th centuries, inspired by Greco-Roman aesthetics, which brought white garments to prominence especially among European aristocrats. Here men used to wear powdered white wigs and stockings, while women favoured flowing gowns in pale tones adorned with delicate embroidery. Between 1815 and 1830, white came to be adopted as a royal colour and became the flag of monarchist France, and it later symbolised anti-Bolshevik sentiment during the Russian Civil War, as the colour of the White Army.

But, beside political or religious statements, white has been massively used in domestic life as well, mainly for practical reasons. Particularly throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, it reigned as the colour of undergarments, bedsheets and nightwear, in that - contrary to what one might think - unlike dyed fabrics white linens could withstand repeated boiling and bleaching, in a way that they could be used multiple times.

# A Colour in Question

Despite its massive use among multiple fields and across a number of countries, white's very identity as a colour has often been contested by scientists, artists and philosophers, and the answer depends on the frame of reference.

From a scientific standpoint, white is indeed a colour, formed by the combination of all wavelengths in the visible spectrum. In simple terms, when red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet light overlap, they result into what is perceived as white, which is therefore considered as the sum of all the visible colours. Reflecting and scattering all visible light, white is in a direct opposition to black, which conversely absorbs it.

In pigment and print, however, white functions differently. Because it cannot result from the combination of other hues, it is usually perceived as a blank surface, that is, the absence of colour rather than its totality. For this reason, it does not appear on the traditional colour wheel and is classified as achromatic.

This ambiguity lies at the core of white's striking duality, which I like to refer to as its 'dark side': spiritual enlightenment and renewal on one hand, identity erasure and rebirth on the other. More than perhaps any other hue, white operates as a mirror, reflecting the beliefs, values, and anxieties of the cultures, institutions, and individuals that embrace it.

With that being said, the aim of this book is to show that, across centuries and continents, white has been anything but neutral, it that its meanings have shaped identities, rituals and revolutions, and continues to do so.

**ROYGBIV (red orange yellow green blue indigo violet)**