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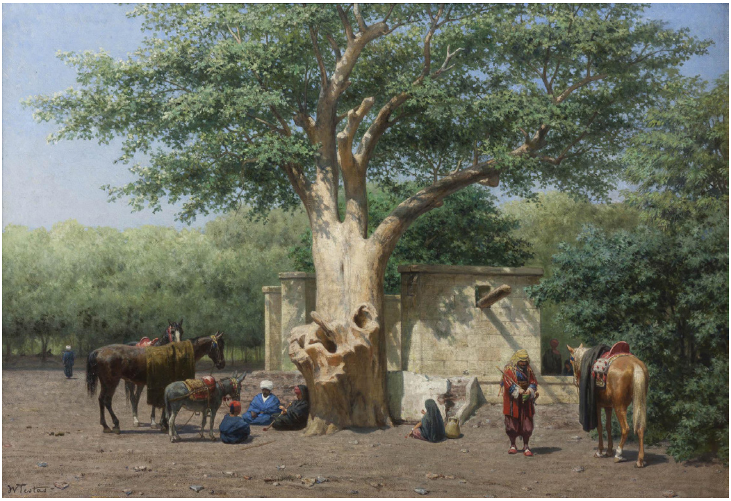
Willem de Famars Testas (1834–96) and the Colours of Islam

Teylers Genootschapslezing, 26 January 2025, Haarlem: Teylers Stichting, 2025

1. Chromophilia | Chromophobia

Willem de Famars Testas (1834-1896), the “only true Dutch Orientalist painter of the 19th century”,[1] brought colour to the Netherlands. That he did so was not to everyone’s taste. Reviews were mixed when in 1884, at Amsterdam’s Arti, Testas first exhibited the sun-drenched *Well and old sycamore on Ezbekiyeh square in Cairo* (fig. 1). A critic of the newspaper *Nieuws van de Dag*, though appreciative of Testas’ work in general, complained morosely that the “vivid bluish green” of the painting was “rather painful”.[2]



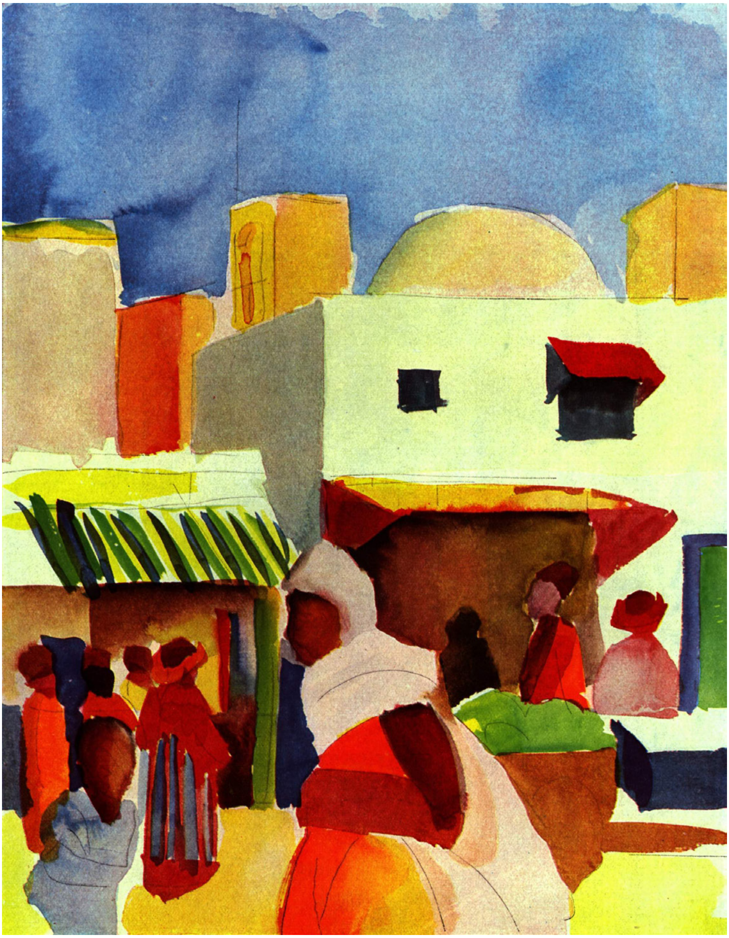
1 Willem de Famars Testas, *Well and old sycamore on Ezbekiyeh square in Cairo*, 1884 (Teylers Museum, KS 2011 001).

A strong current of chromophobia ran through 19th- and early-20th-century bourgeois society. Colour was belittled, eliminated, ignored in its complexity. Polychromy was dismissed as belonging to 'other' bodies and cultures, "usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological".[3] The motif is old. From Plato to Kant and later thinkers, western attitudes towards colours were informed by the fear that "the rational traditions of western culture were under threat from insidious non-western sensuality".[4] As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote,

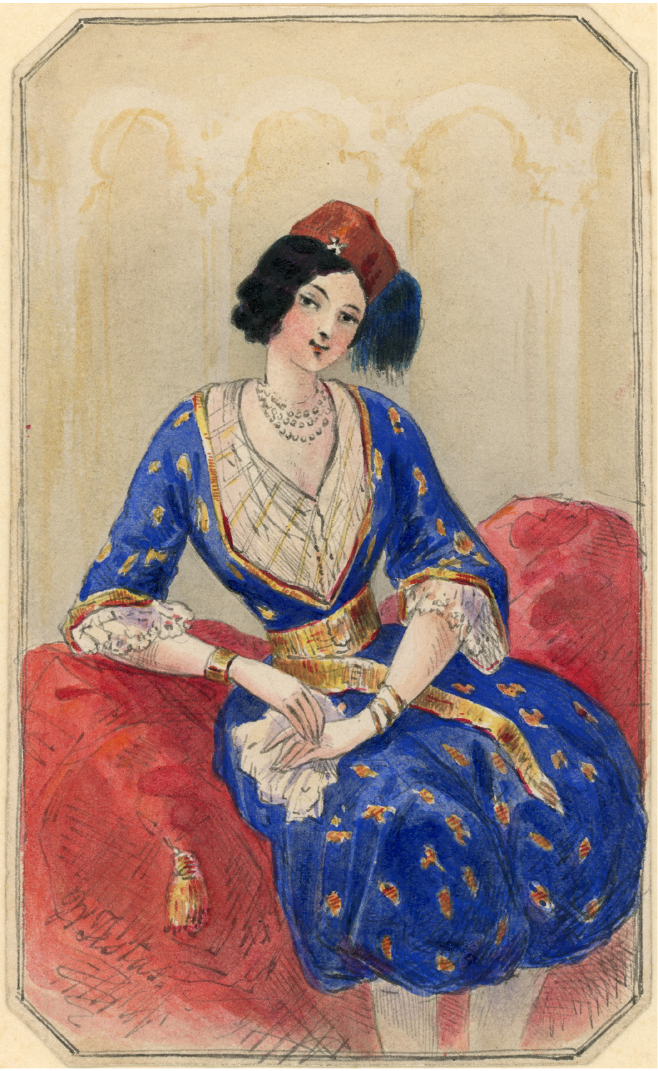
> savages, uncivilised peoples and children have a penchant for the colourful [...] Educated people have an aversion against colours. This may result partly from feebleness of the organ [of perception], partly from an insecurity of taste, which likes to take refuge in total negation. These days, women almost exclusively wear white and men black.[5]

Working against this feebleness and insecurity, European artists – one only need to think of the impressionists – regularly challenged and subverted bourgeois chromophobia, seeking, like Testas did, an escape from their supposedly colourless surroundings, often in a literal, territorial sense. Thus, August Macke, Paul Klee and Louis Moilliet, inspired by their journey to Tunis in 1914, developed an innovative visual aesthetics in which colour was paramount (fig. 2). As Paul Klee noted in his diary, having spent a happy hour together with his friends in a street café in Tunis, contemplating "a gently but starkly coloured evening", he suddenly felt he had become a true artist: "It penetrates me so deeply and so mildly, I feel it and become so self-assured [...] Colour has me [...] I and colour are one. I'm a painter."[6]

And yet... chromophobia remains ingrained among European and North American publics. In the fall of 2022, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York showed an exhibition entitled *Chroma: Ancient Sculpture in Color*, demonstrating how the white marbles of the Greeks and the Romans had not been white at all, but polychrome. Amidst original Greek and Roman



2 August Macke, *Market in Tunis*, 1914 (public domain).



3 Willem de Famars Testas, *Algerian lady in national costume at Café Belvédère in The Hague* (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, dossier F 1989/1).

works stood brightly coloured replicas of masterpieces from the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic periods. Walking through the exhibition on a rainy, gray September afternoon, feeling pleasantly alienated, it struck me how Western polite society still harbours a stigma of colour, or in any case, a stigma of *too much* colour. Look at how we dress in formal or semi-formal contexts, how uneasy especially men feel about colour. Modern Western men, writes anthropologist Michael Taussig, “tiptoe around the colour danger zone”. Colours are permitted to them only in spurts, as a sort of “licensed transgression”: a bright tie here, but not too crass, a Hawaii shirt there, but only on weekends or on vacation. For strict limits remain in place: “A vividly colored tie is okay when the man is wearing a grey or dark suit, but if it’s the other way round, watch out!”[7]

Chromophobia and chromophilia are the two extremes of our oddly bipolar relationship with colour. Testas provides a perfect illustration. On 14 January 1868, after setting foot on land at Alexandria, he wrote in his diary that “just like all European travellers who arrive in Egypt, we felt the same delight looking at this new world, which presented itself to us in such varied colours and with such pittoresque forms”. Two days later, in Cairo, he described Egypt as “a world... that constrasts strongly with our cold, pale and ugly existence in Europe”.[8] In fact, already *before* he first saw Egypt, Testas was intrigued by the colours of the Arabs, as can be seen in a sketch he made in the early 1850s, of an Algerian lady, dressed in national costume, in a café in The Hague (fig. 3).

There is little point in blaming Testas or, indeed, anybody for expressing admiration for the colours of the material cultures and landscapes of North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. The light there, and hence the perception of colours, *are* different. But is it possible, I wonder, that we overestimate the polychromy and chromophilia of these parts of the world because we are so hung up with our own chromophobia? To what an extent is our notion of a luminous Orient full of colours anchored in reality, and to what an extent is it a cliché? By celebrating the colours of the Orient and contrasting it with our own, pale European existence, like Testas, Klee and many others did, aren't we adding just another iteration to the long list of simplistic binaries with a colonial pedigree that haunt us: Western vs. Oriental, rational vs. irrational, secular vs. religious, traditionalist vs. progressive, civilised vs. uncivilised?

2. Greek | Arab | Iranian

Several scholars have critiqued the Western perspective on colours along these lines, deconstructing the ideological assumptions and implications of the infatuation with the polychromy of the Oriental, especially the Muslim ‘other’.[9] By contrast, there is little scholarship devoted to the indigenous discourses on colour in non-Western, especially Islamic societies. In this regard, we still have many things to learn.

What kind of colour discourses, then, have emerged from those parts of the Islamic world that Testas encountered firsthand? The Islamic world, of course, is vast, to the point that scholars often point out that we should speak of “islams” in the plural, not of a single “Islam”. Accordingly, there is no unified view of colour in Islam, only a multiplicity of historically and geographically diverse traditions of thinking about colour. This does not mean, however, that writers in the Islamic world did not try to come up with universal, encompassing models and theories of colour.

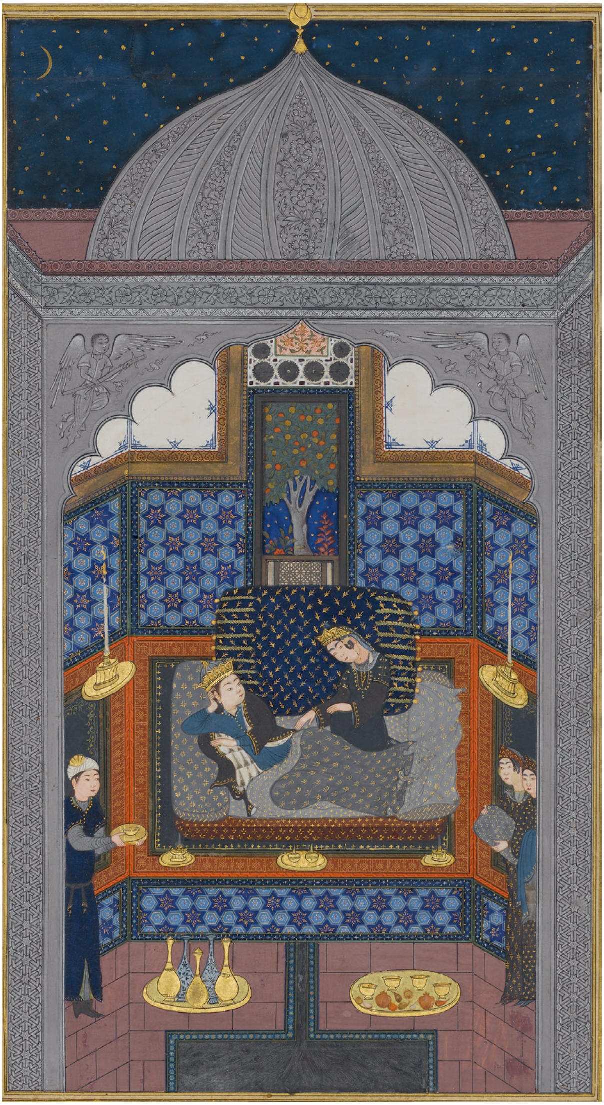
In the classical literatures of the Islamic world, we come across at least three different basic colour schemes. These schemes count either four, five, or seven colours. Writing in Baghdad in the 9th century CE, al-Kindi (d. ca. 870), the first self-identified philosopher of Islam, lists four basic colours: black, white, yellow, and red, a model inherited from the Greek philosopher Empedocles. These four colours, al-Kindi tells us, correspond to the four elements, the four seasons, the four ages of the human being, the four humours of the body, and the four strings of the luth (called *‘ud* in Arabic): black to earth, winter, old age, black bile, and the lowest, fourth string of the

ʻud; white to water, autumn, adulthood, phlegm, and the third string of the *ʻud*; red to air, spring, childhood, blood, and the second string of the *ʻud*; and yellow to fire, summer, adolescence, yellow bile, and the highest, first string of the *ʻud*.[10]

A century later, also in Iraq, the Brethren of Purity, compilers of an influential encyclopaedia of philosophical and scientific knowledge, likewise count four basic colours. However, the Brethren of Purity expand al-Kindi's four colours into four colour clusters: black/grey, white/beige, red/yellow, and green.[11] The addition of green is noteworthy. Green is usually considered the colour of Islam, the Prophet's favourite hue. It appears, in other words, that the Brethren of Purity islamise al-Kindi's Hellenic model, as in general their aim is to bring the Greek philosophical heritage into harmonious dialogue with Islam.

In fact, the Arabs of the Arabian peninsula, responsible for bringing Islam to North Africa and the Middle East, counted five, not four, basic colours: black, white, yellow, red, and green. As al-Namari (d. 995), the author of the oldest Arabic treatise on colours, writes: "God, the Exalted, created five colours: white, black, red, yellow, and green. [...] If someone asks: What about grey, brown [...] and the likes of them?, we say: these are not pure colours, they all go back to their [basic] type."[12]

Finally, from the Iranian side, we encounter colour schemes based on the number seven. The mathematician and astronomer al-Biruni (d. ca. 1050) correlates seven colours with the seven heavenly bodies: black (Saturn), beige ("dust colour", Jupiter), red (Mars), yellow (Sun), white (Venus), green ("mixed colour", Mercury), and blue (Moon).[13] One of the most famous Persian romantic epics of all times, 'The Seven Beauties' of Nizami (d. 1209), builds on al-Biruni's model (fig. 4). In 'The Seven Beauties', an Iranian king has a differently-coloured pleasure dome built for each of his seven wives, each of whom he goes to visit on one day of the week, and each of whom tells him a story. Each of the coloured domes represents a



4 *Bahram Gur and the Indian Princess in the Black Palace on Saturday*, Persia, 15th century (MET, 13.228.13.4).

planet and a region of the earth: black (Saturn, India), beige (Jupiter, Greece), red (Mars, the lands of the Slaves), yellow (Sun, Turkestan), white (Venus, Iran), blue/turquoise (Mercury, Maghreb), and green (Moon, Khwarazm).

Looking closely, one finds that al-Biruni's and Nizami's models do not overlap perfectly: Mercury and Moon, green and blue, are swapped. The line separating these two colours is notoriously fuzzy. In old Arabic texts, including the Koran, the colour word *akhdar* can refer to "green" but also to "blue". For example, the derived form *al-khadra',* "the green one", is an archaic Arabic word for "sky". In such instances, it would seem quite appropriate to translate *akhdar* not as "green", but as "grue". Only gradually did *akhdar* come to mean "green" *exclusively*, while another word, *azraq*, came to be used for "blue".

In a wellknown study, the anthropologist Brent Berlin and the linguist Paul Kay proposed that different cultures, defined by a common language, have different sets of basic colour terms. Stage 1 language groups, according to Berlin and Kay, divide all colours into two basic categories (black/white, or dark-cool/light-warm), followed by Stage 2 groups that consider black, white, and red as basic colours. At Stage 3, either green or yellow are added, at Stage 4 both green and yellow are present, and at Stage 5, blue enters the picture.[14] For example, Homeric Greek, according to Berlin and Kay, has four basic colour words (perhaps only three, the status of yellow is disputed), that is, it belongs to the Stage 3 language group. Arabic and Persian do not figure among the languages studied by Berlin and Kay, but it might be suggested that al-Kindi is operating at the Stage 3 level (black, white, red, and yellow), al-Namari at Stage 4 (black, white, red, yellow, green), and Nizami at Stage 6 (black, white, beige, red, yellow, green, blue).

Berlin and Kay's classification has elicited criticism on multiple levels. In addition to the difficulty of detemining what should count as a "basic" colour word in a certain language group, critics have taken issue with the evolutionary paradigm that undergirds the theory, from "lower", more primitive stages to "higher", more developed ones. It is easy to see how Berlin and Kay's model lends itself to making claims about the chromatic superiority of one culture, or language group, over another. However, the fact that a culture identifies certain basic colours does not mean that its chromatic palette, as expressed in its material culture and art, is restricted to these colours. Also, a language – Arabic seems to be a particularly good example – can have an extremely rich colour vocabulary (more on this below), even if speakers of that language agree on a much more limited list of basic colour terms. Finally, Berlin and Kay's model is not finegrained enough to tell us much about larger linguistic and cultural formations, in which we can expect to encounter local variations, as well as shifts over time. A research team in Iran, for example, has found that today's inhabitants of Mashhad and Shiraz have ten basic colour terms, but that in Isfahan and Tehran, there are eleven.[15] The Koran, compiled some time in the 7th century, has no more than five or perhaps six basic colour terms, but classical Arabic, let alone modern standard Arabic, certainly has more.

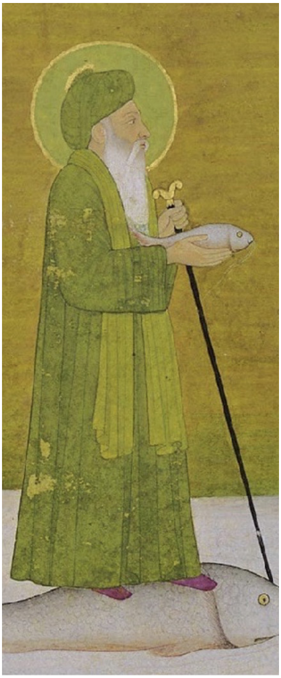
Whatever the explanatory value of Berlin and Kay's anthropological-linguistic theory, it tells us little about the supposed chromophilia of Islamic culture(s). Arguments for such a notion, if any, have to be sought elsewhere. Berlin and Kay's theory, however, invites reflection about a number of interesting phenomena. First of all, classical Islamic culture is a melting pot of many different peoples and colours. It includes traditions of thinking about colour that have nothing to do with Islamic religion, but rather derive from pre-Islamic Greek, Arab and Iranian sources. Secondly, there is a long-standing notion that Arabs count five basic colours, Iranians seven. Thirdly, the status of green vis-à-vis blue is uncertain and dynamic in both Arabic and Iranian traditions in the early and classical periods of Islamic history. We will take up these points in the following sections. Let us start with a consideration of the fraught relationship between green and blue.

3. Green | Blue

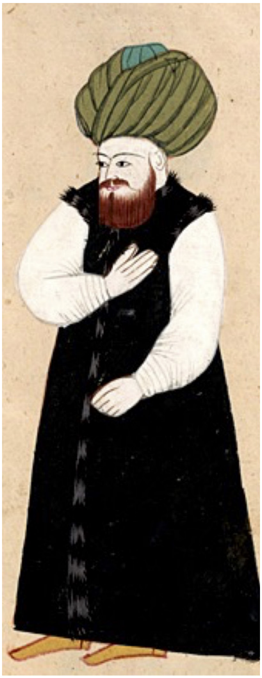
In modern times, blue has consistently been voted the favourite colour of adults in Northern Europe and North America. More than half of respondents typically indicate a preference for blue, with green occupying a distant second place, at around 20%.[16] We are lacking large-scale research on the favorite colours of the Islamic world, but there are indications that the ratio of blue and green has traditionally been inverse, at least in Near and Middle Eastern contexts.

Green, as noted above, is believed to have been the preferred colour of Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam. It is said that his favourite mantle and his standard were green. “To look at green,” he once declared, “is as pleasant as it is to look at a beautiful woman”. Also his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, the first of the Shiʿi Imams, reportedly had a green cloak.[17] As an eminent 19th-century scholar explains, the Prophet liked to wear green “because green is the colour of the clothes of the inhabitants of paradise and because it is extremely beneficial and pleasant to the eyes of onlookers”.[18] Other prophetic figures in the Islamic world shared Muhammad’s and Ali’s fondness for green. This infatuation with green is most strikingly embodied by Khidr (another derivation of the word *akhdar*), “the Green One”, a mythical saint who is venerated from North Africa to the Punjab (fig. 5a). In Anatolia, Khidr’s feast day, Hidrellez, coincides with the yearly spring festival. C.G. Jung linked Khidr to the archetypical figure of the “Green Man”, who appears as a foliate head in Gothic church decoration.[19]

The prestige of green is unabated throughout Islamic history; if anything, it grew over the centuries. In the 9th century,



5a *The prophet Khidr* (detail), Mughal empire, ca. 1760 (BNF Paris).



5b *A descendant of the Prophet* (detail), Ottoman empire, drawing by Claes Rålamb, 1657 (public domain).

al-Ma'mun, one of the great Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad, changed the Abbasids' imperial flag from an apocalyptic black to green. Under later dynasties, the privilege of wearing a green turban was reserved exclusively to the Sherifs and the Sayyids, the Prophet's descendants through his two grandsons, al-Hasan and al-Husayn (fig. 5b).[20] In Shi'i passion plays today actors representing members of the Prophet's family generally wear green.

It is a different story with blue, which, in Islamic contexts, is overwhelmingly a colour that signals negative emotions: danger, evil, and sadness. The idea finds support in the Koran, where it is stated that the eyes of evildoers will be made to appear blue on the Day of Resurrection (Koran 20:102). In Arab folklore, the figure of the blue-eyed witch has deep roots, stretching back to pre-Islamic times. The Arab world's most famed witch is Zarqa' al-Yamama, "Blue-Eye from al-Yamama". Zarqa's vision is said to have been so piercing, so acute, that she could see things at enormous distances, in places that would normally take three days of travel to reach. In North Africa and other parts of the Arabic-speaking world, witches are likewise thought to be blue-eyed, a notion that may have been known to Shakespeare, whose *Tempest* features the "damn'ed witch Sycorax" from Algiers, a "blue-eyed hag". For the members of the American-Muslim *Nation of Islam*, the white race is the race of "blue-eyed devils" – a late, modern offshoot of the traditional disdain of blue. Last but not least, the evil eye, around the Mediterranean and beyond, is usually blue, as are the talismans that are

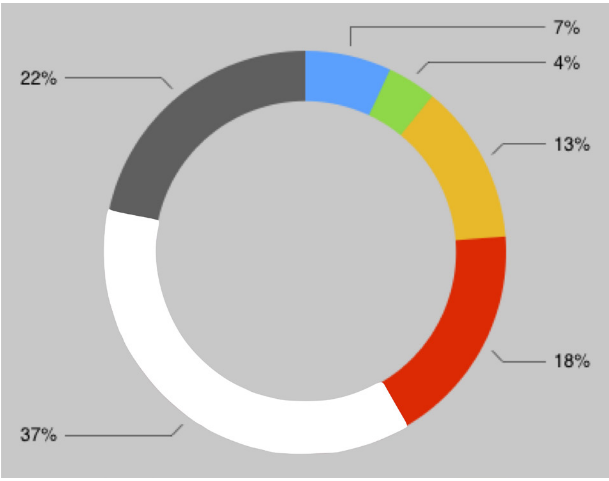
6 Talismans sold on a street in Turkey (Photo: Vik Walker, 2010).

used to undo its evil influence, for fire is best fought with fire (fig. 6).[21]

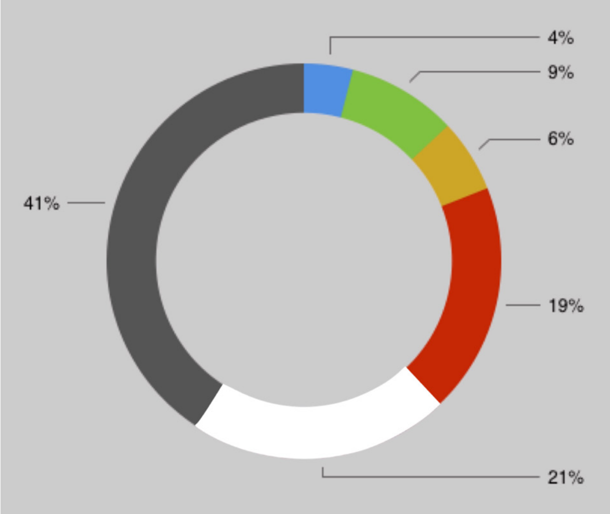
In sum, at least in recent centuries, attitudes towards green and blue in Northern Europe and the Near and Middle East have differed significantly. This is confirmed by a comparison between two major early modern encyclopaedias, Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (france, 1751-1772) and al-Majlisi's *Oceans of Lights* (Persia, around 1700). While the ratio between blue and green in the *Encyclopédie* is roughly 2:1, it is the other way around in the *Oceans of Light* (fig. 7a and 7b). It is not easy to explain this phenomenon, but it reminds us that there is no common, cross-cultural meaning of colour, no globally shared preference for one type of colour over another.

This goes against the grain of traditional colour psychology, which maintains that colour perception is governed, in Goethe's words, by certain "primordial relations that belong both to people's visual perception and to nature",[22] or otherwise put, that colour is a universal language, something that is hardwired into nature and into the brains of all human beings in the same way. Writing in this vein, C.G. Jung proclaimed as a perennial truth that "blue stands in stark contrast to red and indicates a cool or calming state".[23] However, art historical research has shown that in the European Middle Ages and the Renaissance blue was considered not a cool, but a warm colour.[24] Hence the blue madonnas of Leonardo, Raphael, Carlo Dolci and others (fig. 8a). In other words, not even in the European tradition did blue have a stable meaning, consistently evoking the same emotion in those beholding it.

This should give us pause. Why would the situation be any different in the Islamic world? As we already noted, green and blue, in the Islamic world, are dynamic colours. They intermingle and shift meaning across time and space. For example, the Brethren of Purity, in 10th-century Iraq, link the colour green to gentleness, patience, and magnanimity, but al-Biruni, in

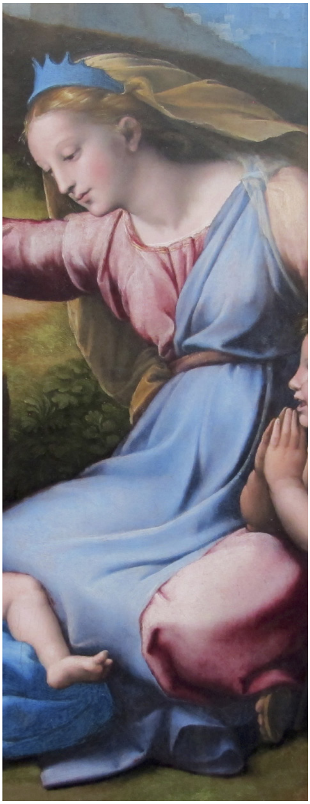


7a Colour distribution in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, France, 1751-1772 (© C. Lange, 2024).

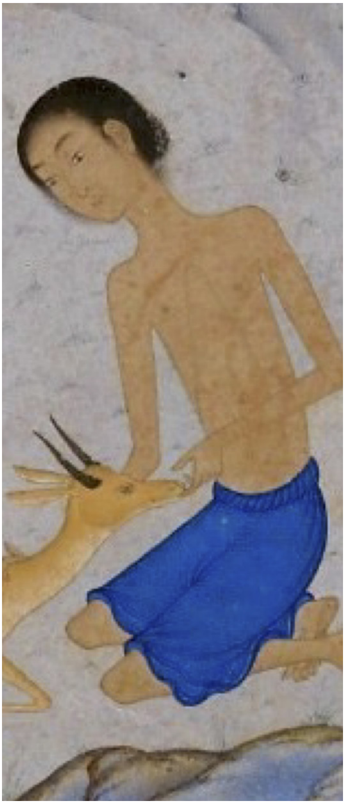


7b Colour distribution in al-Majlisi's *Oceans of Lights*, Persia, ca. 1700 (© C. Lange, 2024).

11th-century Afghanistan, connects green to intelligence and elegance – related, but hardly synonymous concepts. And as we just saw, in religious and mythological contexts, blue often signals danger; but for al-Biruni, blue is the colour of simplicity, even simplemindedness, and of goodheartedness. By contrast, for Nizami, in the late 12th century, blue is a colour of mourning.

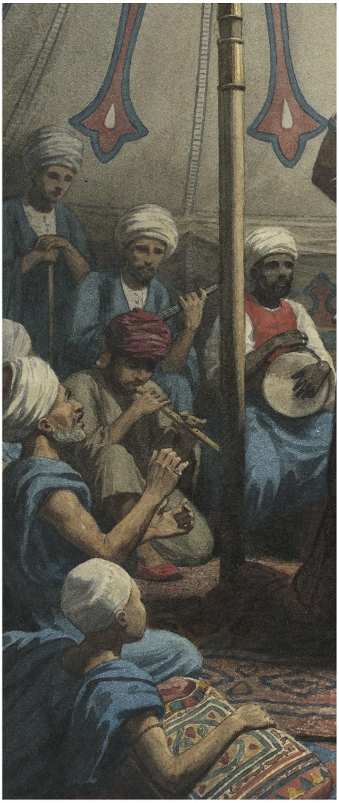


8a Raphael, *Madonna with the Blue Diadem* (detail), ca. 1510-12 (Paris, Louvre).

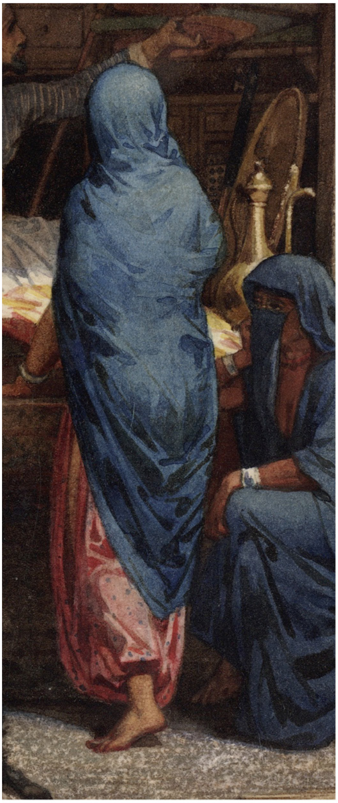


8b *Majnun among the animals* (detail), Safavid empire, ca. 1540 (British Library, London).

Indeed, in the later Islamic tradition, certainly in the lands of Persia, blue as a colour of mourning and of ascetic renunciation is a recurring theme. The Sufis, the mystics and renunciants of Islam, were known to dress in blue frocks, to show to the outside world that they had left all worldly concerns behind and that they mourned the world just like one would mourn a dead person. In late-medieval Persian illustrations of the story of



9a Testas, *Dancer* (detail), 1868 or later (Rijksmuseum).



9b Testas, *A shop in Cairo Caire* (detail), ca. 1860-72 (Teylers Museum DD 025).

Leili and Majnun, the unhappy Majnun, lamenting the loss of his beloved Leili, is typically depicted as wearing a blue sash (fig. 8b). He's literally got the blues.[25]

At the same time, in countries like Egypt, indigo-dyed cloth has been a staple of fashionable clothing throughout the centuries, worn by different strata of society, men and women alike, and for different purposes. When de Famars Testas paints a group of Egyptian musicians accompanying a belly dancer (fig. 9a), all dressed in striking indigo, or again when he shows us blue-clad women in a Cairo street boutique (fig. 9b), there is not much, in other words, that we can say about the meaning or the symbolism, if any, of the colour of their garments, or about about attitudes toward blue and other colours among the inhabitants of Egypt's capital, as portrayed by Testas. Blue, like other colours in the Islamic world, has had and continues to have innumerable connotations, which in most instances seem simply impossible to disentangle.

4. Middle Eastern vexillology

In the face of such diversity and instability, must we resign ourselves to complete colour relativism? Is it really true that, as two leading historians of Islamic art have asserted, colours in the Islamic world "could mean whatever people wanted them to mean"?[26]

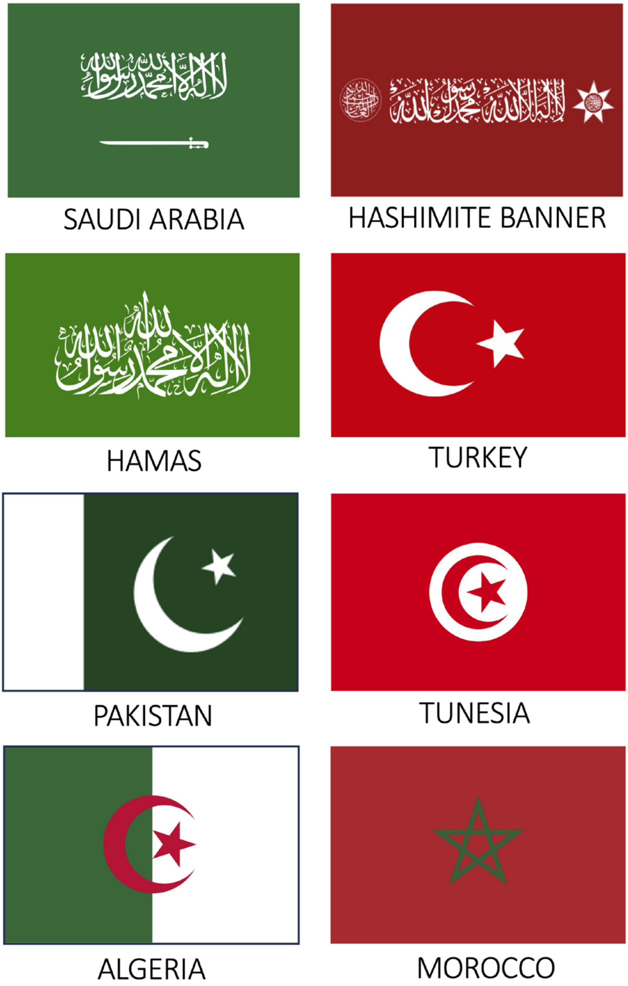
An excursus into vexillology, that is, the study of flags, suggests a slight shift of perspective. In the political arena in the Islamic lands of the Near and the Middle East, certain colours, whether by design or by accident, came to acquire quite specific, rather stable symbolic meanings. This phenomenon largely belongs to the era of the nation state and of national symbols, though there is a certain symbolic continuity of political colours also in earlier times.

We have already alluded to black as the age-old colour of the apocalypse in Islam. Around the middle of the 8th century, the Umayyads, the first major dynasty of Islamic history, were dethroned by a messianic movement that had originated in the east of their empire, in the Iranian province of Khurasan. The armies of this movement carried black banners, emulating the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, who was said to have carried a black banner when he conquered Mecca and established the religion of Islam there. The propagandists of the movement (later known as the Abbasid revolution) wipped up enthusiasm by predicting that following their victory, an era of eternal peace would begin, ushering in the end of the world. As they claimed, the Prohet himself had foretold that "black banners will appear from Khurasan; nothing will stop them until they are raised in Jerusalem". In the wake of the Abbasid revolution, messianic movements in the Islamic world on more than one occasion chose to carry black banners, including in recent times, as several jihadist movements have taken to the habit of using a certain black flag, sometimes called the "flag of jihad", which features the text of the Muslim creed, the *shahâda*, in white text: al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, the Chechen Mujahideen, Islamic State, Hezbollah, and Hamas.

Less revolutionary, but still ostentatiously Islamic flags tend to be green, presumably to indicate proximity to the Prophet Muhammad (fig. 10). The medieval Abbasids, as noted above, changed their black flag to a green flag – a symbolic shift from a state of revolutionary, apocalyptic excitement to the stability of a bureaucratic state. Today, the flag of Saudi Arabia is likewise green. Other examples include the flag of Pakistan, as well as the offical flag of Hamas.

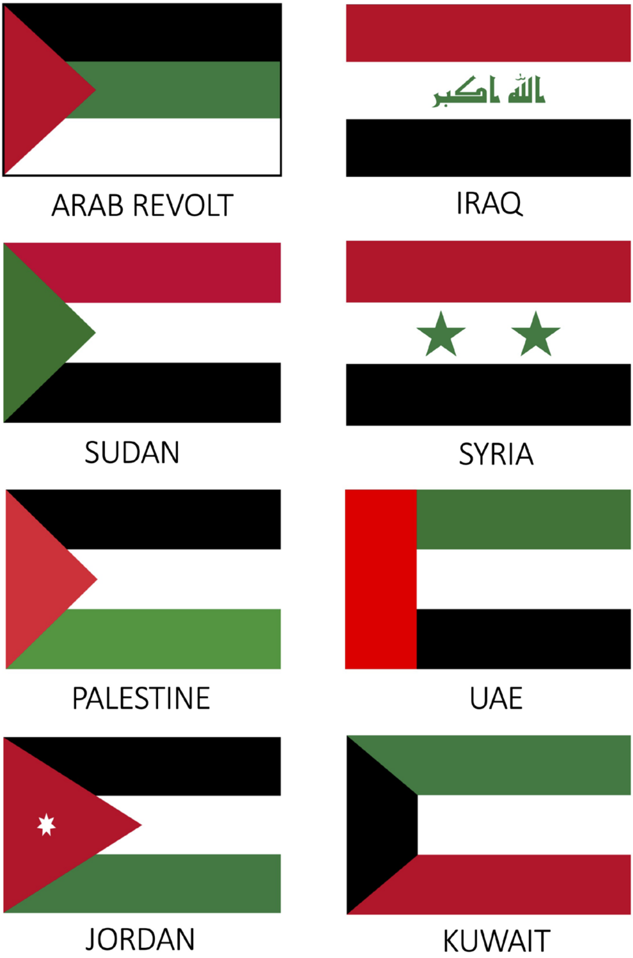
By contrast, the flags used by the Ottomans, the imperial superpower that ruled over the eastern Mediterranean for much of the second half of the second millenium, tended to be red, next to white.[27] The army flags of sultan Selim I (r. 1512–20), the Ottoman conqueror of Egypt and the Hejaz, were red. This ancient preference for red flags appears to be related to pre-Islamic Turkish shamanism and the belief in a fire deity or protective spirit. One of the old Turkish words for red, *al*, is a synonym of "flag".

The colour red, however, also had Islamic connotations. At the beginnings of the 16th century, the local governors of Mecca, the Sharifs, used a red flag to indicate their descendance from the Banu Hashim, the Prophet Muhammad's tribe. Today, Hashimite kingdoms such as Jordan on occasion still raise this red "Hashimite flag" (fig. 10). Although the Turks, as noted, carried red standards into battle already before Selim I's conquests, the Ottomans probably welcomed the added association of the colour red with Hashimite authority. Selim I, in fact, was the first Ottoman sultan who claimed to be caliph, that is, a direct heir of the Prophet. Selim I is also said to have captured the Prophet’s black flag, the *sanjāq-i şerîf*, and taken it to Istanbul (where it is exhibited, to this day, in the Topkapı Palace).


SAUDI ARABIA
HASHIMITE BANNER
HAMAS
TURKEY
PAKISTAN
TUNESIA
ALGERIA
MOROCCO

10 Green and red flags of the Islamic world.

Whatever the origins of the Ottoman predilection for red, the flag of the modern state of Turkey was inherited from the Ottomans, as was the Tunesian flag. Morocco was never part of the Ottoman empire, but nonetheless red is the colour of the


ARAB REVOLT
الله اكبر
IRAQ
SUDAN
SYRIA
PALESTINE
UAE
JORDAN
KUWAIT

11 Flags with the “pan-Arab colours”.

Alawid dynasty, rulers over the country since the 17th century. The Alawids, too, claim Hashimite descent, and the Moroccan flag is likewise red (with a five-pointed green seal in the middle).

In the course of the 20th century, however, most Islamic countries around the Mediterranean and Arabia adopted flags showing a combination of the Arab colours first identified by al-Namari in the tenth century (fig. 11). White, black, red and green are known today as the "pan-Arab colours". They were first seen on the flag of the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans (1916-18). This flag was designed, ironically, by Mark Sykes (1879-1919), an English diplomat and key negotiator in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 – two colonial interventions that have proven highly problematic, to say the least, for the countries of the Near and Middle East.[28] It is uncertain how Sykes came to choose these four colours. He was an amateur Arabist, so it is not impossible that he would have been aware of the rudiments of Arab colour theory, or that he would have been familiar with Arabic poetry mentioning the four colours, such as the famous line of the 14th-century Iraqi poet Safi al-Din al-Hilli:

White are our deeds, black our battles,
green our fields, and red our swords.[29]

Following the Arab Revolt, the pan-Arab colours appear on multiple 20th-century flags of the Arab Middle East, from the United Arab Republic (1958-61) to Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine (fig. 11). Ostensibly, the four colours on these flags signal a secular shift away from the religiously connotated messianic black, the Prophetic green, and the Ottoman-Hashimite red of other flags.

5. The colour of God

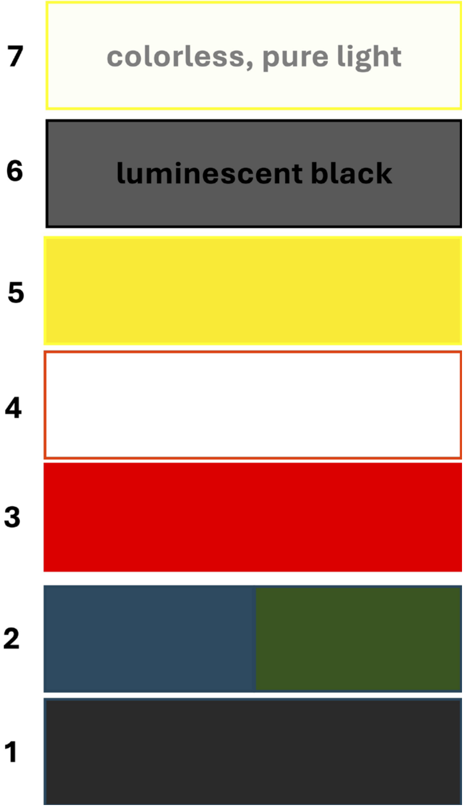
Up until here, I have drawn attention to certain Prophetic connotations of colours in Islam. I have also highlighted the fact that, in addition to Prophetic motifs, pre-Islamic Greek, Iranian and Arab philosophies and cosmologies all came together to form the discourse of colour in the Islamic world. However, I have skirted around the theological dimensions of colour, that is, the question whether in Islam, certain colours imply a special connection to God and the transcendent, divine realm. Religion should not be seen as the major, certainly not as the only factor contributing to general attitudes toward colour in the lands of Islam. But Muslim theologians and mystics do have much to say about colour, and we would miss out on an important part of the story if we chose to ignore them.

Does God have a colour in Islam? In some early stories, the Prophet is remembered as describing how, during his legendary ascension into heaven, he saw God in the form of a beautiful youth, dressed in a green garment and with golden sandals. However, Muslim theologians quickly settled on the view that God cannot be seen, certainly not in this life; and should we able to see Him in the future paradise, what we see is definitely not colours. If God is visible at all, He is seen as light: bright, colourless light.

We may not see God's colours, but as God's light shines into the created world, we may be able to see a refraction of His light, divided into a colour spectrum, as if in a prism. In Shi'i theology, for example, we come across the notion that the first refraction of God's light occurs in the throne on which He sits, which is red, green, yellow and white – quite possibly a reference to the rainbow.[30] (Whereas today, we tend to see seven or more colours in the rainbow, scholars in the Islamic world up to the 19th century generally saw no more than four.[31]) God's colours, however, are not only manifest in the rainbow; in a certain way of looking at things, all the colours of creation reflect God's colourless light, as if in a mirror. This idea was particularly dear to the Sufis, the mystics of Islam. The Anatolian master Rumi (d. 1273), for example, when contemplating the first green leaves of spring, declared that he saw in them the angels of paradise, known in Persian as "those who are dressed in green".[32]

However, not everybody, not even every Sufi, looked at the colours of creation in this way. For example, the Persian mystic 'Attar (d. ca. 1221), author of *The Conference of the Birds*, maintained that the world is "an artificial flower of wax that glitters with a hundred colours", such that, "if someone crushes it in his hand, it becomes obvious that it's all wax".[33] Creation is a pretty but worthless kaleidoscope of colours. Rather than looking for colours in the external world, Sufis such as 'Attar suggested, one should look inwards, towards the colours of the soul.

The members of the Kubrawiyya, an historical Sufi order that emerged in Iraq and northern Iran in the late Middle Ages, are especially renowned for linking inner, mystical experiences to colours. In his *Treatise on Colours*, the Iranian Ala'uddin Simnani (d. 1336), one of the Kubrawiyya tradition's main theorists, describes a spiritual progression through seven inner, coloured "realms of the soul".[34] As inward-looking Sufis progress from one realm to the next, the colours they perceive are gradually purified and become lighter, until the Sufis see within themselves the colourless, pure light of God. The visionary journey begins in a kind of muddy black, corresponding, as Simnani explains, to the sensible world of sin and temptation, the realm of the Devil. The Sufis then ascend to blue/green (grue), which are the colours of the human soul at the moment when it is still stuck in the sensible world, but slowly disentangling itself from base instincts and impulses; then follow three colours relating to the more spiritual parts of the soul: red (the realm of the heart), white (the realm of "the inmost being"), and yellow (the realm of the spirit); followed by luminescent black (the realm of divine mystery), and finally, the colourless, pure light of God (fig. 12).



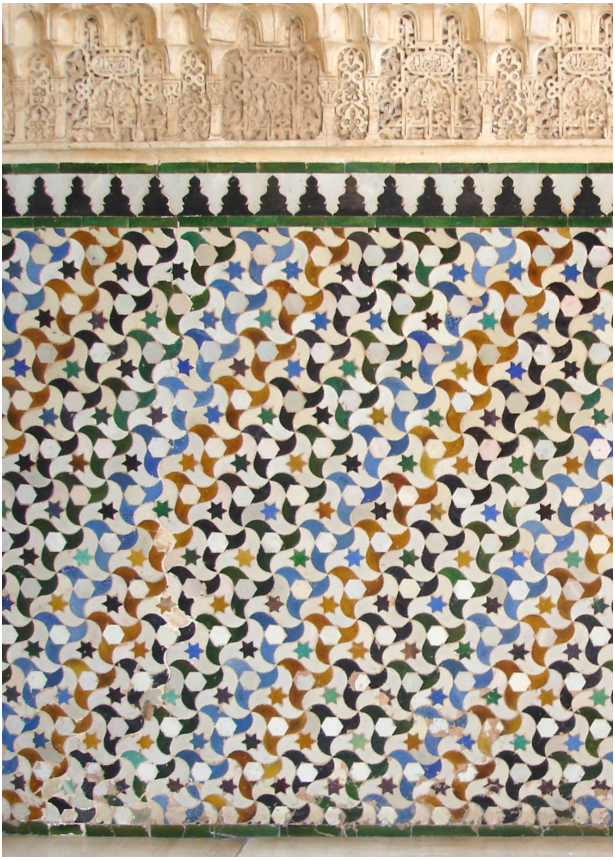
12 Simani's coloured realms of the soul (© C. Lange, 2024).

Sufi masters, Simnani says, have the ability to see not only the inner colour of their own spiritual state, but also the coloured insides of other people. They perceive their colour-coded aura, as we might say. In this way, they can judge people's degree of spiritual advancement. A bit like a person, nowadays, might go to see a fashion advisor to find out what colour season type they are, Kubrawi Sufi disciples were told, it seems, that they were the blue, yellow or red type. The process was not necessarily top-down. Kubrawi masters appear to have instructed their disciples to wear clothes in the colours they themselves saw in their visions.[35]

The reference to "luminescent black" in Simani's model is quite surprising and mysterious. Let us recall that colour is more than just hue. Colour, in fact, has three properties: hue (tonality, or colour in the narrow sense), saturation (the intensity of the hue), and luminosity (its brightness or darkness). To give an example: there is the kind of dark blue in which Testas paints his Sufi musicians and Cairene women (fig. 9a), and the kind of light, luminescent blue in which he paints the sky over Ezbekiyyeh square (fig. 1, 8a, 8b). Similarly, even though it may seem paradoxical to us, Simnani speaks of a dark black, the colour of the Devil, as well as of a luminescent black, the colour of divine mystery.

A number of historians of Islamic culture have ventured the view that what is particular about the attitude toward colour in Islamically coded contexts is the great value bestowed on luminosity and saturation. Thus, one reads in a standard encyclopaedia entry that "the Arabs" were more impressed with luminosity and saturation than with tonality, or hue. "This is to be expected," the entry continues, "of a people living in a sun-drenched environment".[36] While some, like the author of the entry, identify natural causes behind the preoccupation with seeing light in colour, others prefer to foreground religious explanations. Islamic culture, they argue, is deeply spiritual, and hence its attitude toward colour is spiritual, too: it stresses the aspect of illumination.[37]

These are large and generalising, some would say 'essentialising' claims that are hard to back up by facts. For the sake of argument, one might point to the astonishing richness of colour



13 Tilework on wall in the Comares Patio, Comares Palace, Alhambra, 14th century.

terms in Arabic, a language that has, to stick to the example of black, different words for "simple black" (*aswad*), "mat black" (*armak*), "shining black" (*adham*), "raven black" (*asham*), as well as other kinds of black. However, even if we grant that Islamic colour discourse and also, Islamic artistic production, is in many instances deeply committed to luminosity, we still face

14 Shiraz, Nasirulmulk mosque (Photo: Diego Celso, 2016).

the challenge of how best to explain this phenomenon, whether in secular or in religious terms. Both approaches are found in scholarship on Islamic art. For example, in the strikingly polychromatic decoration of the Alhambra palace in Granada (fig. 13), a prominent art historian sees the artistic commitment to “constant, kaleidoscopic, multicolored motion” – an esthetic, but not a religious agenda.[38] By contrast, a leading Ottoman art historian stresses that in Islamic art and architecture, “light and brilliance of color, religious and aesthetic elements are all intimately interlinked”.[39] And in a detailed study of the Persian seven colour scheme, such as one sees materialised, for example, in the tile decoration of the Nasirulmulk mosque in Shiraz (fig. 14), we read that colour, in Persian art, “was considered beautiful in so far as it captured and reflected the luminous light of God in both sensible and spiritual senses”.[40]

What does this diversity of viewpoints tell us? First and foremost, I think, it demonstrates the unsurprising fact that interpretations of colour in the Islamic world are driven by prior assumptions, that is, whether one considers Islamic culture to offer space for a secular esthetics, or whether one thinks that Islamic art and other arenas of Islamic cultural expression depend inevitably, in all places and at all times, on religious sensibilities. And further: if, for the sake of argument, we side with those who stress the religious dimension of Islamic polychromy, we can still do so for different reasons. Thus, our aim can be to reclaim a certain spiritual depth for Islamic culture, a depth that Western publics are not used to accord it; or we can do so in order to underline Muslims’ supposed inability to secularise.

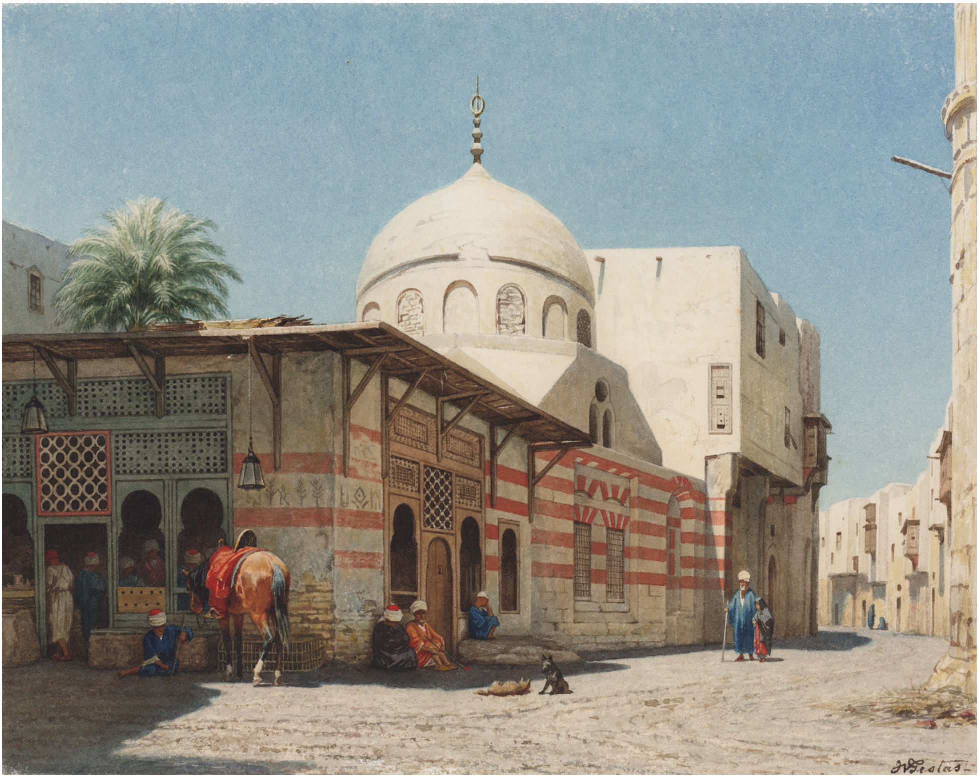
6. Conclusion

Like the dark-blue and grey businessmen sporting a colourful tie, as observers and interpreters of Islamic culture we tiptoe around the colour danger zone. Our problem is not, or only in a superficial sense, that we hesitate to put on Hawaii shirts. What concerns us, rather, is the immense cultural diversity within the Islamic world, which makes it difficult, not to say impossible, to generalise about Muslim attitudes to colour, or about the symbolic meaning of certain colours in Islam. We do not want to overemphasise the religious aspect of colour in the Islamic world, because we do not wish to imply that, when it comes to colour, Muslims cannot think beyond the dictates of their faith.[41] At the same time, we worry that if we downplay, perhaps even refuse to countenance the religious dimension of colour in the Islamic world, we deny Muslims an important part of their identity. Operating from within a secularised educational system and society, we fear that we fail properly to appreciate the depth of engagement, the living relation, that connects Muslims to their spiritual heritage.[42]

No doubt it is true, as two prominent historians of Islamic art have put it, that "it would be unreasonable, even foolish, to imagine that attitudes toward colors had to be the same in seventh-century Arabia and nineteenth-century North Africa".[43] It is easy to agree with this – a little too easy. For certain long-term dispositions and trends in people's relationship to colour in the Islamic world *can* be determined. Here, I have highlighted a couple of them: the notion that there is a basic set of five Arab colours, next to the seven colour scheme of Persian culture; the association of the colour green with the Prophet;

that of the colour blue with danger and with sadness; certain vexillological conventions (Prophetic green, revolutionary/apocalyptic black, Turkic and Hashimite red, the "pan-Arab" colours of the Arab revolt); and the peculiar interest in luminosity displayed in many works of Islamic art.

The question is to what extent these long-term dispositions and trends help us understand single instances of Islamic art. The best answer to this question, I think, is found in the hermeneutic circle. That is: the meaning of a given colour



15 Testas, *Street scene with coffeehouse, Cairo,* ca. 1860-72 (Teylers Museum DD 028).

emerges dialectically. We best grasp this meaning by going back and forth between the colour's immediate historical and geographical context and the larger, transhistorical and translocal context of Islam. To ignore the latter, the larger civilisational and religious factors, might at times feel safer. It might even produce cleaner results. In the long run, however, we should aspire to tell the full story and not only its local refractions.

In the meantime, let us not forget to enjoy the vivid colours of Testas' Egyptian scenes (fig. 15).

Notes

1 Terry Van Druten, “La naissance d’un orientaliste nordique : l’influence de l’expédition d’Émile Prisse d’Avennes sur l’œuvre de Willem de Famars Testas”, in *Émile Prisse d’Avennes. Un artiste-antiquaire en Égypte au XIX*^{e} *siècle*, ed. Mercedes Volait (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 2013), pp. 141-162, at p. 141.

2 *Nieuws van de Dag* (24 oktober 1884), p. 2: “Toch doet dat felle blauwe groen ons eenigszins pijnlijk aan.”

3 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), pp. 22-23.

4 John Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1993), p. 10.

5 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre*, ed. Manfred Wenzel (frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1991), p. 264, § 835: “Naturmenschen, rohe Völker, Kinder haben… eine Neigung zum Bunten… Gebildete Menschen haben eine Abneigung vor Farben. Es kann dieses teils aus Schwäche des Organs, teils aus Unsicherheit des Geschmacks geschehen, die sich gern in das völlige Nichts flüchtet. Die Frauen gehen nunmehr fast durchgängig weiß und die Männer schwarz.”

6 Paul Klee, *Tagebücher 1898-1918*, ed. Wolfgang Kersten (Stuttgart: Teufen, 1988), p. 350: “Zuletzt in einem Strassenkaffee gelandet. Ein Abend von ebenso zarter als bestimmter Farbigkeit [...] Es dringt so tief und mild in mich hinein, ich fühle das und werde so sicher [...] Die Farbe hat mich [...] ich und die Farbe sind eins. Ich bin Maler.”

7 Michael Taussig, *What color is the sacred?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 10, 12.

8 Willem de Famars Testas, *De schilderskaravaan (1868)*, vert. Maarten J. Raven (Leiden-Leuven: Ex Orient Lux-Uitgeverij Peeters, 1992), pp. 22, 25.

9 See, seminally, Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient”, in *The Politics of Vision* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 33-57.

10 Al-Kindi, *Risala fi ajza’ khubriyya fi al-musiqi*, in *Mu’allafat al-Kindi al-musiqiyya*, ed. Zakariyya Yusuf (Baghdad: Matba’at Shafiq, 1962), pp. 100-102.

11 Ikhwan al-Safa’, *Rasa’il* (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1957), vol. 1, pp. 230-232.

12 Al-Namari, *K. al-Mulamma’* (Damascus: Matbu’at Majma’ al-Lugha al-‘Arabiyya, 1976), p. 1.

13 Al-Biruni, *K. al-Tafhim li-awa’il sina’at al-tanjim*, tr. Ramsay Wright (London: Percy Lund, Humphreys & Co., 1934), pp. 240 (§ 401), 253 (§ 434). See Petra G. Schmidl, “The Planets and their Corresponding Colours in Astology - An Example from 13th-century Yemen”, in *Farben in Kulturgeschichte und Naturwissenschaft*, ed. Gudrun Wolfschmidt (Hamburg: tredition, 2011), pp. 548-573, esp. pp. 556-557, 560.

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15 S. Gorji Kandi, M. Amani Tehran, N. Hassani & A. Jarrahi, “Color Naming for the Persian Language”, *Colour: Research and Application* 40.4 (2014), pp. 352-360.

16 Michel Pastoureau, *Bleu. Histoire d’une couleur* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 170.

17 Alfred Morabia, “Recherches sur quelques noms de couleur en arabe classique”, *Studia Islamica* 21 (1964), pp. 61-99, at pp. 94-95.

18 Al-Shawkani, *Nayl al-awtar* (Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 1993), vol. 2, p. 117.

19 C.G. Jung, *Symbole der Wandlung: Analyse des Vorspiels zu einer Schizophrenie,* Olten: Walter-Verlag, 1973, pp. 242-254.

20 Jonathan Bloom & Sheila Blair, “Introduction: Color in Islamic Art and Culture”, in *And Diverse are Their Hues: Color in Islamic Art and Culture*, ed. Jonathan Bloom and Sheila Blair (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 4-53, at p. 33.

21 Kristina Richardson, “Blue and Green Eyes in the Islamic Middle Ages”, *Annales Islamologiques* 48.1 (2014), pp. 13-29; Jean-Charles Coulon, “Le bleu dans la civilisation

arabo-musulmane médiévale", in *Les routes bleues: périples d'une couleur de la Chine à la Méditerranée*, ed. Étienne Blondeau (Limoges: Les Ardents Editeurs, 2014), pp. 30-36.

22 Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre*, p. 283, § 918: "Urverhältnisse... die sowohl der menschlichen Anschauung als der Natur angehören. "

23 C.G. Jung, "Psychological Interpretation of Children's Dreams (Winter Term, 1940/41)", in *Children's Dreams: Notes from the Seminar Given in 1936-1940*, ed. Lorenz Jung & Maria Meyer Grass, tr. Ernst Falzeder (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 236–378, at p. 366.

24 Michel Pastoureau, *Black: The History of a Color* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 15.

25 Julie Scott Meisami, "'I Guess That's Why They Call it the Blues': Depictions of Majnun in Persian Illustrated Manuscripts", in *And Diverse Are Their Hues: Color in Islamic Art and Culture*, ed. Jonathan Bloom & Sheila Blair (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 120-151.

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39 Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995), p. 196.

40 Trevathan, *Colour*, pp. 129-130.

41 Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität. Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), pp. 192ff.

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