Resumo

A investigação sobre manuscritos medievais iluminados é ainda muito dominada por uma análise baseada no estilo e na iconografia. Além disso, a maioria dos estudos sobre texto-e-imagem concentram-se no conteúdo e no significado simbólico da iluminura, enquanto questões ligadas à materialidade e paginação, que se situem para além da análise codicológica, são muitas vezes ignoradas. O mesmo acontece com a análise das cores: a investigação tem-se focado no seu significado religioso, dinâmico ou ritual, considerando-as categorias abstractas sem uma materialidade específica. Mesmo um especialista em pigmentos medievais como Heinz Roosen-Runge (Roosen-Runge 1967), seguiu a tradição iconográfica da história da arte e interpretou as cores com base na sua função, por exemplo, como meio de representação transcendental de ideias e ideais. Pelo contrário, historiadores como Michel Pastoureau (Pastoureau, 1990) trabalhando para «uma história social das cores», sublinharam a importância dos pigmentos e do seu simbolismo específico, e não de conceitos abstractos, para um melhor conhecimento da percepção medieval da cor. A tese de Pastoureau baseou-se principalmente na sua investigação sobre o papel da cor no vestuário e têxteis medievais. Com esta contribuição, desejo demonstrar que se tornaram atitudes semelhantes sobre a materialidade da cor em manuscritos iluminados. A recente investigação interdisciplinar sobre o «Codex Aureus Epternacensis», produzido em torno a 1045 no mosteiro beneditino de Echternach, conservado no Germanisches Nationalmuseum em Nuremberg, lançou uma nova luz sobre a consciência que os iluminadores e seus patronos tinham da materialidade da cor e do seu valor. As minhas reflexões basearam-se na análise científica do «Codex Aureus» levada a cabo por Doris Oltrogge e Robert Fuchs (Fuchs and Oltragge 2009) e, nas minhas próprias pesquisas sobre o uso e estética das cores na Idade Média (Grebe 2007). O precioso Evangeliário contém mais de 40 miniaturas a página inteira, pintadas por vários iluminadores de oficina. Os iluminadores usaram uma paleta muito variada de cores e tons, por exemplo, o «vermelho» ou «púrpura» não são apenas representados por um, mas por dois ou mais pigmentos. Entre eles encontramos os muito raros e dispendiosos pigmentos «exóticos», como o lápis-lazúli ou o quermes, que foram abundantemente usados neste manuscrito quando comparado com outros manuscritos românicos. Esta observação permite colocar como hipótese, que os iluminadores de Echternach e os seus patronos quiseram de facto usar o maior número possível de cores e as mais dispendiosas, para incluir a máxima variedade de cores no «Evangeliário Dourado».

Outro nível de «consciência cromática» revelou-se pelo facto de muitas miniaturas do ciclo com a Vida de Cristo a incluírem uma miniatura em duplo folio da Maiestas Domini (fól. 2v-3r) terem sido repintadas durante a produção do manuscrito. O retoque da maioria das carnações e fundos pode ser interpretado, numa primeira análise, como um «restauro estético». Surpreendentemente, os iluminadores não alteraram as composições na sua globalidade ou as formas das cabeças ou mãos, em vez disso, mudaram apenas o tom da pele e os fundos. O motivo foi, provavelmente, o de evitar contrastes violentos e unificar cromaticamente os duplo fólios executados por diferentes iluminadores. O «Codex Aureus Epternacensis» é, assim, a prova da elevada sensibilidade do período românico aos valores cromáticos e virtudes materiais de cores e pigmentos, que serão discutidos neste artigo.

palavras-chave
EVANGELIÁRIO
MANUSCRITO ILUMINADO
ESTÉTICA DAS CORES
OTONIANO
LÁPIS-LAZÚLI
Abstract

Research on medieval manuscript illumination is still dominated by the analysis of style and iconography. Also, most word-and-image studies concentrate on the content and the symbolical meaning of a miniature, whereas questions of materiality and layout beyond codicology are often neglected. The same is true for the analysis of colours: research so far focuses on the religious, dynastical or ritual symbolism of colours that are considered as abstract categories without a specific materiality. Even a specialist in medieval pigments like Heinz Roosen-Runge (Roosen-Runge 1967) followed the iconographical tradition of art history and interpreted colours with regard to their function, e.g. as media to represent transcendental ideas and ideals. On the contrary, historians like Michel Pastoureau (Pastoureau 1990), working towards a «social history of colours», have underlined the importance of pigments and their specific symbolism instead of abstract colour terms for a better understanding of the medieval notion of colours.

Pastoureau’s thesis is based primarily on his investigations into the role of colours in medieval clothing and textiles. In my contribution, I am trying to show that similar attitudes towards the materiality of colours are manifested in medieval manuscripts. Recent interdisciplinary research on the «Codex Aureus Epternacensis», made around 1045 in the Benedictine monastery of Echternach, now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg has shed new light on the consciousness illuminators and patrons had of the materiality of colours and their respective value. My reflections are based on the technological examination of the «Codex Aureus» carried out by Doris Oltrogge and Robert Fuchs (Fuchs and Oltrogge 2009) and my own research on the use and aesthetics of colours in the Middle Ages (Grebe 2007). The precious Gospel Book contains more than 40 full-page miniatures painted by several illuminators of the Ottonian Echternach workshop. The illuminators used a very varied palette of different colours and tones, e.g. the colours «red» or «purple» are not only represented by one, but by two or more pigments. Among them we find many rare and expensive «exotic» pigments like lapis lazuli or kermes, which have been abundantly used in this manuscript compared to other Romanesque manuscripts. This observation leads to the hypothesis that the Echternach illuminators and their patrons explicitly wished to use as many and costly colours as possible to include the maximal variety of colours in the «Golden Gospel Book».

Another level of «chromatic awareness» is revealed by the fact that many miniatures in the cycle with the Life of Christ and the double page miniature of the Majestas Domini (fol. 2v–3r) have been painted over during the making of the manuscript. The reworking of most of the fleshy parts and backgrounds can tentatively be interpreted as «aesthetical restoration». Surprisingly, the illuminators did not alter the whole composition or touch the forms of the heads and hands, instead, they only changed the tone of the complexion and backgrounds. The reason was probably to avoid violent colour contrasts and to chromatically unify double-pages executed by different illuminators. The «Codex Aureus Epternacensis» thus proves the high sensibility of the Romanesque period towards chromatic values and material virtues of colours and pigments, which will be discussed in the article.

key-words

Gospel Book
Illuminated Manuscript
Aesthetic of Colours
Ottonian
Lapis lazuli
VALUE AND BEAUTY: TOWARDS A DOUBLE AESTHETIC OF COLOURS IN EARLY ROMANESQUE BOOK ILLUMINATION

ANJA GREBE
Department of Medieval Art History
University of Bamberg, Bamberg (Germany)

1. From Material to Medium

In 1508, Albrecht Dürer started to work on a large altarpiece depicting the «Assumption of the Virgin» (Anzelewsky 1991, 221-228; Kutschbach 1995, 71-80; Decker 1996; Grebe 2006, 82-86; Pfaff 1971). The execution of the painting, which took Dürer more than one and a half years to complete, was accompanied by an extensive correspondence with the patron, the Frankfurt merchant Jakob Heller. Heller repeatedly complained about the delayed completion of the altarpiece and threatened to withdraw his commission. Dürer countered the reproach by pointing to the quality of the execution and his use of the best and «most beautiful colours» available. These included «ultermarin», or lapis lazuli, worth more than 20 ducats, which he claimed to have applied in 5 to 6 layers. And instead of apologizing to his patron, he doubled the price of the altarpiece. His arguments were: a painting executed with the maximum amount of materia and ingenium needed more time to finish, and it had its price – which Heller actually agreed to pay when he finally saw the painting. The Heller correspondence underlines the importance which was attached to certain colours and pigments at the beginning of the 16th century. Lapis lazuli, for instance, did not only provide a blue tone, but also represented quality and prestige (Pastoureau 2001; Fuchs and Oltrogge 1990; Bender 1990). The Latin name, «ultramarin», points to the far-off, exotic, and even mystical origin of the colour prepared on the basis of Afghan lapis lazuli, which was the most expensive pigment apart from gold and was therefore used as distinguishing feature in painting throughout the Middle-
2. Unfortunately, the original panel was destroyed by a fire in the Ducal Palace in Munich in 1729. Before the painting was sold to Archduke Maximilian I of Bavaria in 1614 the Nuremberg painter Jobst Harrich made a faithful copy of the original, now in Frankfurt/Main, Historisches Museum, Inv. Nr. B 265, which, however, does not allow any judgement about the paints or pigments used.

Ages. Dürer probably used lapis lazuli for the blue cape of the Virgin thus enhancing its inherent symbolical value by the use of the precious and prestigious material. If it had been his aim to communicate only the chromatic symbolism of blue as celestial colour he could have used a less expensive pigment like azurite instead. In his letters to Heller, however, Dürer does not mention the religious symbolism of colours, but insists on the value of the colour in its literal, material sense.

One should think that the primacy of «materia» would have been outdated in the age after Alberti. In his treatise «De Pittura» (1435/36), which Dürer knew from a copy in possession of a Nuremberg humanist (Fara 2002, 171-347), Leon Battista Alberti clearly put the referential value of colour, even of gold, above its material value (Alberti 2000, 290-291). According to Monika Wagner, Alberti marks the beginning of modern colour aesthetics: «Since Leon Battista Alberti […] colour was no longer judged by its material value. Now, its task was to simulate all kinds of other materials on the surface of the image.» (Wagner 2001, 17-18).

2. Colours in medieval book illumination: Colour systems and attempts at interpretation

In his «Theory of Colours» («Farbenlehre») of 1810, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe gave priority to the metaphysics as opposed to the materiality of colours (Schmidt 1965). He described colours as «acts of light», referring to medieval colour theories, where colours are described as reflections of the immaterial divine light which Saint Augustine had designated as «queen of all colours». Referring to Fritz Haeberlein’s «Essential Features of a Post-antique Iconography of Colours» («Grundzüge einer nachantiken Farbenikonographie»), Lorenz Dittmann characterised the colours in medieval art as intended to represent the divine («Vorstellungsfarben»). Released from all referential tasks colours could now function as «vocabulary» in the system of colour symbolism (Dittmann 1987, 2-3). Although Heinz Roosen-Runge, in his fundamental study on the «Colours and Techniques of Early Medieval Book Illumination», puts his main focus on the material nature of colours, he nevertheless interprets them as a means of representation for transcendental truth (Roosen-Runge 1967, vol. 1, 26-29).

Today, research on medieval manuscript illumination continues to be dominated by the analysis of style and iconography. Also, most word-and-image studies concentrate on the content and the symbolical meaning of a miniature, whereas questions of materiality and layout, which go beyond codicological issues, are often neglected. The same is true for the analysis of colours: research focuses mainly on the religious, dynastical or ritual symbolism of colours which are considered as abstract categories without a specific materiality. In view of the role of colours as bearers of meaning («Bedeutungsträger») in medieval art and culture one has to ask for the specific use of colours as well as the value(s) attached to them in the literal and figurative sense to fully understand a work of art.

Until now, such questions have mainly been asked by historians. Michel Pastoureau, above all, has been working towards a «social history of colours» («histoire sociale des couleurs»), that takes into consideration the percipient against the backdrop of his culture, ideas, experiences and sensitivity (Pastoureau 1990, 22). According to Pastoureau, research into the use of colours in the Middle Ages should not be based on abstract theory but on the objects and their specific colouring in which the polysemantic and multifunctional character colours is manifested.4 This leads to the hypothesis, that people in the Middle Ages in many cases did not perceive colours as abstract chromatic values, but in their material form as pigments. The case of the red pigment called *sanguinis draconis*, for instance, clearly shows that it is necessary to develop a kind of «pigment symbolism» instead of abstract colour terms to help with our understanding of the medieval notion of colours:

«Quand au XVème siècle un peintre utilise pour tel élément de son tableau le célèbre pigment *sang-dragon* plutôt que tel ou tel autre pigment rouge, c’est sans doute pour des raisons à la fois économiques, techniques et artistiques, liées au prix de ce pigment, à son pouvoir couvrant, aux effets qu’il permet d’obtenir, mais c’est aussi et surtout pour des raisons symboliques, liées au nom même de ce pigment et aux rêves que ce nom suscite chez l’artiste et son public.» (Pastoureau 1989, 39-40)

3. The values of colour between consciousness of material («Materialbewusstsein»), symbolic function and aesthetics

Michel Pastoureau’s thesis is based primarily on his investigations into the role of colours in medieval clothing and textiles. In the following, I would like to show that medieval manuscripts manifest similar attitudes towards the materiality of colours. The investigations of Heinz Roosen-Runge and Johan Jakob Tikkanen (Tikkanen 1933, 352-443) have shown that medieval illuminators possessed a very detailed knowledge of colours and pigments, which was transmitted orally, by written treatises such as the «Mappae Clavicula», the «Heraclius» or the «Theophilus», and by numerous individual collections of recipes and guidelines (Oltrogge 2006; Gullick 1995; Roosen-Runge 1967; Bartl et. al. 2005, 17–34). These texts consist mainly of practical instructions in the preparation and handling of colours. Sometimes however, the introductory remarks contain theoretical reflections on the meaning of colours as well as on the conjunction of «materia» and «ingenium». A 12th-century copy of the «Mappae Clavicula» provides an example:

«The arts are learned little by little, step by step. The art of painting is preceded by the preparation of colours. Thus, you should first pay attention to the mixing of each colour. Only then should you start on the actual work, but you
should always strive to let your painting appear decorative as well as natural. This book shows how artistry in combination with ingenuity will enhance your work.» (cf. Halleux 1990, 179)  

In the Early Romanesque period, it is not only treatises, but the works of art themselves which testify to the awareness of illuminators and patrons towards the materiality of colours and their respective value. Up to now, nearly all attempts to draw up a kind of general «chromatic grammar» or system of colour symbolism based on the use of colours in illuminated manuscripts have failed. It has become clear that the application and distribution of colours varies from book to book, even when entire pictorial cycles are based on the same, constantly repeated models, as in the case of the so-called «Reichenau» and «Echternach» schools.

4. Colours in the «Codex Aureus of Echternach»

The following reflections are based on the technological examination of the «Codex Aureus Epternacensis», now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, which was carried out by Doris Oltrogge and Robert Fuchs in 2006, as well as my own research on the use and the aesthetics of colours in manuscript illumination.  

The «Codex Aureus», made around 1045 in the Benedictine monastery of Echternach, where it remained until the French Revolution, is one of the rare medieval Gospel books entirely written in gold ink (Oltrogge and Fuchs 2009; Grebe 2007; Kahnsitz [ed.] 1982). It is also one of the largest and most richly decorated manuscripts, with more than 50 large-format illuminated pages. These include a sumptuous double-page depicting the Majestas Domini, while each Gospel is preceded by a sequence of equally lavish double-pages with the portraits of the Evangelist (fig. 1), full-page decorative initials, other decorative pages as well as four sequences of scenes from the life of Jesus. The texts of the Gospels themselves are not interrupted by scenic illustrations like in other Ottonian manuscripts. The codex is the work of at least eight illuminators, some of which executed only a single page. They must have been working together very closely and within a short period of time. In several cases, recto and verso of one and the same sheet of parchment are executed by different illuminators who possessed a distinctive style yet used nearly the same palette of colours. The technological examination of the manuscript has revealed a very rich and varied palette, in which nearly all the colours and hues available to 11th century scriptoria occur (Oltrogge and Fuchs 2009, 153-162, 163-167). The colours «red», «blue» or «purple», for instance, are represented not by a single, but by two or more pigments. Among these we find many rare and expensive «exotic» pigments like lapis lazuli or kermes, which were actually used quite abundantly in this manuscript as compared to other Ottonian manuscripts. This observation leads to the hypothesis that the Echternach illuminators and their patrons explicitly wished to use as many and as costly colours as possible to provide...
VALUE AND BEAUTY: TOWARDS A DOUBLE AESTHETIC OF COLOURS IN EARLY ROMANESQUE BOOK ILLUMINATION

FIG. 1 CODEX AUREUS OF ECHTERNACH, ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST, F. 112V.
© NUREMBERG, GERMANISCHES NATIONALMUSEUM
The maximum variety of colours for the «Golden Gospels». Lapis lazuli, for instance, can be found as a distinguishing colour for the garments of the protagonists, but was used also for backgrounds, e.g. in the Pentecost scene (fig. 2B), where we would...
expect a less expensive pigment like azurite. In the eyes of the contemporaries, the prodigal use of the most expensive pigment must have enhanced the exceptional character of the manuscript (Pastoureau 2001, 32-40).
The most dominant colour in the codex is purple (fig. 3), a synonym of sumptuousness and costliness and symbol both of God and the Emperor, which occurs in different tones and shades both in the miniatures and the decorative pages (Muthesius 1997, 27-33; Steigerwald 1990; Fuchs and Oltrogge 2007, 82-98). The extensive use of purple enhances the religious significance of the book as an embodiment of God’s words. The illuminators did not apply the «real» Tyrian purple extracted from the murex shell («murex brandaris»), but used less expensive pigments made from plants like different kinds of the *Rocella* (or *auricella*) or the *Ochrolechia* as well as *Kermes vermilio*, which were perhaps also better suited for the preparation of body-colours (Oltrogge and Fuchs 2009, 155-159). Technological examination has revealed
a preference for the darker *Rocella* purple, which was easier to procure, for the less prominent sections of the miniatures, whereas clothing is more often painted in the more costly *Kermes* purple, which had to be imported from the Mediterranean (Oltrogge and Fuchs 2009, 34-50). Thus, in the case of purple, the illuminators probably wished to enhance the more important parts of a figure or scene by using a more expensive pigment, again displaying an awareness of the material quality of colours (Oltrogge and Fuchs 2009, 34-50).

Another level of this «chromatic consciousness» is revealed by the fact that many full-page miniatures, amongst others the double page depicting the *Majestas Domini* (f. 2v-3r, fig. 6A), the Evangelists as well as most of the miniatures in the cycle of...
the life of Jesus (fig. 4-5), were partially painted over at some point. This must have taken place in the workshop itself either during the making of the manuscript or immediately after the illuminations had been finished, but before the final binding.
of the pages. The retouches were carried out by the same group of illuminators who, probably with one exception, had been responsible for the original or first phase of the work. Curiously enough, these alterations, which were done using the same col-
ours and pigments as before, only concerned the backgrounds, the tone of the flesh and the hair of the figures, leaving the form of the heads and hands as well as the rest of the composition untouched (Oltrogge et Fuchs 2009, 34-35, ill. 57-72).

In the case of the Majestas Domini double-page, the alterations can partly be detected with the naked eye (fig. 7-8). The figure of Christ enthroned, the angel symbolising St Matthew or the personification of Prudentia (fig. 9-10) each possess four eyes: one pair of eyes belongs to the «actual» face, while below this which appear two dark points that belonged to the original features. Investigation with infra-red light has revealed that the second illuminator completely covered the fleshy parts, but did not touch the original version which is entirely conserved.
The alterations seem to be highly unusual and demand an interpretation. A «practical» explanation could be that we are faced with an early repair of defective portions or layers of paint which were corrupted or chipped. This, however, can be rejected in the view of the remaining, fully conserved original faces. A second hypothesis concerns the content of the miniatures. It states that the makers of the manuscript may have wished to change the character of a figure or a scene. There is, however, no substantial evidence for this explanation either. While the illuminators would frequently alter the tone of the flesh and some of the facial features, they would generally not change the posture of the head or the line of sight. One of the few exceptions is the «Noli me tangere» scene, where the painter corrected the orientation of the angels’ heads, which had originally looked straight ahead (fig. 11-12). By re-directing them to the right the illuminator enhanced the focus on Christ as the central figure of the scene, but did not completely change the meaning of the image. Similar changes do also occur with some of the minor figures which are part of the decorative framework and do not carry any particular meaning. This observation suggests another explanation. The alterations were probably carried out for aesthetical reasons and can tentatively be interpreted as «aesthetical restorations». Interestingly enough, the illuminators did
not paint over entire figures, which would probably have been easier, but instead only retouched the fleshy parts, making sure that the renewed face fitted between the hairline and the neckline. In the case of the Majestas Domini and related pages, the rather long-nosed «face-lifting» did not really result in an improvement in appearance. However, as technological analysis has revealed, the more harmonious general features of the first version had been combined with a rather garish pink skin colour and blue hair as seen in the portrait of St John. Some minor figures preserve this colouring, and these give us an idea of the original facial tones: the ox symbolising St Luke (f. 2v), the grotesque masks in the frame of the decorative initial page of the Gospels of St John (f. 114r) and St Peter in the scene of the «Doubting Thomas» (f. 111v). Some of the trumpeting angels as well as St John the Evangelist (f. 112v) even retained their original blue hair (fig. 1).

These examples suggest that the true reason for the alterations was probably to avoid violent colour contrasts within the images, and to create a chromatic harmony between several of the double-pages which had been executed by different illuminators. The new, brownish skin colour and black hair, for instance, do indeed match better with the colours of the clothing and backgrounds. Thus, the «Codex Aureus» underlines the high level of sensitivity of the Romanesque period towards both chromatic values and material virtues of colours and pigments.
The astonishing insights into the production of the codex reveal a twofold aesthetic of colours, which had both the materiality of the colours or pigments and their chromatic interaction in view. Instead of focusing only on the symbolism of certain colours, which was the general supposition of research until recently, the makers of the manuscript actually gave priority to chromatic variation. Their aim seems to have been to enhance the status of the codex as an actual materialisation of the word of God by endowing it with the finest of colours both in the material and the artistic sense. Hopefully, the new interpretation proposed here of the employment of colours and the importance attached to chromatic values in medieval and especially in Romanesque book illumination may be supported by further technical and art historical research into other manuscripts in the nearby future.

Bibliography


Biography

Anja Grebe studied Art History, History, and French Literature at the University of Constance (Germany) and Paris, La Sorbonne. 1995 M.A. Dissertation on Modern French Artists’ Books. 1996–1997 Research assistant at the University of Constance, Department of Art History. 1997–2000 Graduate school «Medieval Writing Culture» at the University of Münster; PhD Dissertation on «Art on the Edge: Book Design in the Burgundian Netherlands after 1470». Since 2001 Research assistant at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg and Associate lecturer at the University of Erlangen, Department of Art History.

Institutional affiliation: Assistant professor of Medieval Art History at the Otto-Friedrich-University, Bamberg.