

As Red as Time Itself

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More than 30,000 years ago, human beings placed the red imprints of their hands on the rocky walls of caves illuminated by the flickering light of fire. In those marks we find the presence of being and the brevity of life, but also a long chain of successive events and the myriad existences to come. In those imprints, the instant of human life is wedded to the ageless duration of stone.

Between the living body and the mineral, the red pigment set like a seal created to be broken at the very moment of its formation, like sealing-wax no sooner applied to the edges of a sheet of paper than split into the two halves of a symbol, between which a different time began to flow: the time of self-aware mankind, the embodied time we call history, made up of instants, events, actions, facts, and incidents, a time with the redness of fire and earth, of flesh and blood, born in the interior of a cave as the beat is born in the cavity of the heart, while outside the ever-changing sky of blue, black, and white speaks as always of eternity.

Life has its beginning in red, in a sheath of blood. And Adam, not formed in a mother's womb but made of earth, as we read in Genesis, bears as compensation for the absence of maternal fluid a name that means "red" and "living" in the Jewish tradition. The breath that brought to life the earth of which he was formed in the image and likeness of God contains in its image the breath with which Palaeolithic man sprayed red ochre mixed with saliva onto the walls of caves to create his own image and the image of the world, and mirror himself in them.

By virtue of that morsel of clay moulded at the beginning of time, man and God became vessel and potter in the images of the sacred writings.

Just like the vault of the heavens embraces the breath of blue, it is easy to discover the various dwellings of red in every hollow of the earth and every nook and cranny of the body as in the small, convex space of a vessel: in the terracotta of the amphora that holds wine, in the red earth of Attica on whose surface the images of men, heroes and divinities emerge from the background painted in black.

The vessel shaped on the spinning wheel recounts the time of mankind and its seasons. In the slight friction between the wet earth and the hands that shape it, we can

almost hear the pronunciation of the *h3ti*, the two-handled vase that indicates the heart in Egyptian hieroglyphs, a vessel of warm blood that forcibly drives life through the body, like the air blown by bellows to feed a fire. The instants from birth to death dwell in its movement. Everything remembered is gathered within it, since the heart is the red urn in which we preserve the sense of time that we call memory.

In 1430 the imperial potteries of the Ming dynasty in China produced some plates in which the perfect balance of copper oxide, temperature, and length of firing was struck with supreme skill to obtain a unrepeatable shade of red: lighter and orange-colored in the middle and darker, approaching a dense crimson, toward the rim. Legend has it that the potter threw himself into the flames in order to ensure the perfect temperature in the kiln. Those plates were to be used by the emperor during the sacrificial rites.

A few months ago, one of the thirty-five surviving plates of this ancient series was exhibited at the Smithsonian in Washington beside a red painting by Rothko, dark in the centre, brighter in the intermediate region and again dark at the edge of the canvas. A work that seems to be traversed by breath and the propagation of heat, it too was part of a sacrificial series, painted for the walls of a restaurant that was never to display them.

There's an artist who has been keeping color alive in a bowl for some years now in her studio in Venice, the European capital of red at the time of the vermilion factories. It is never allowed to dry out but revived every day with the addition of new pigment, as though it were a small fire to be kept burning. Every day she watches it change before her eyes and places it on the surface of her work with a brush, taking care to leave the color of the previous day visible in a thin strip, no wider than the edges of pages we see in an open book. All of her works are recordings of time. As Maria Morganti says, color happens.

The first color placed in the bowl was red and it is to red that she cyclically returns, in the conviction that it will necessarily be the last hue of her diary.

Red is the oldest color in most cultures, alongside black and white, often understood as the presence and absence of light. Red is what is in the middle. It is what happens. It is the place of before and after, the time that attends to the slender wonder of transitions. Red is the soft atmospheric line that accompanies dawn and dusk when the sky is clear, those two moments of the day in which time flows and in flowing shows itself to mankind, caressing the inconstancy of its gaze.

Red is the line of the horizon in many landscapes by Romantic painters, close observers of the future but also poets of a new beginning and faithful to the primal religion. It is there, on that earthly threshold of infinity, that their spirit appears. It is there that Turner's flames blaze and devour the red of sunset which seems to have ignited them. It is there that Friedrich's embers burn freely in landscapes where, beneath every clod of brown earth, between grass and rock, a flickering molten red betrays the immense furnace brooding below the world of the senses. In the depths of the earth, beneath the horizon, his mystic red builds up before venting itself in glory to color the clouds in the sky.

It is precisely to the depths of caves and mines, as close as possible to the incandescent core of the planet, that Novalis, another Romantic spirit, looked. Though best-known for the poetic image of the blue flower, the symbol of infinity and the longing for eternity, his verses drove Bachelard to an astonishing chromatic paradox.

Novalis has dreamed of the warm intimacy of the earth as others dream of a cold, resplendent, expanding sky. For him the miner is an “astrologer in reverse.” Novalis lives with a concentrated heat rather than with a luminous radiation [...] You may also object that Novalis is the poet “of the little blue flower,” the poet of the forget-me-not tossed as a pledge of imperishable memory over the edge of the precipice in the very shadow of death. But go down into the depths of the unconscious, find there with the poet the primitive dream and you will clearly see the truth: the little blue flower is red.¹

In a Phrygian cave, not unlike those of Chauvet and Lascaux, hangs a skin and the whole place resounds with the terrible noise made when Apollo tore it from the body of Marsyas. Outside the sound of the aulos is intermingled with the light blue of the air and the blue of the lake in which Athena saw her reflection and discovered how red and distorted playing the instrument made her face. She hurled it away in anger and cursed whoever should pick it up. The unhappy Marsyas found it, mastered its technique and took such pride in his skill as to challenge Apollo, the god of music and the lyre. Judged by the muses to have triumphed with his playing and singing, Apollo punished Marsyas by flaying him alive.

Men blew red pigment onto the walls of caves just as wind instruments are played by blowing air into them from inside the body together with vital heat. The reeds used in order to spray the color were not so different from their prehistoric pipes. Their cheeks, flushed crimson with the effort, became round like the hollows of the shells and skulls used to contain their pigment. It is perhaps no coincidence that the synesthete Kandinsky attributed the color red to the sound of all the brass instruments.

The other and more terrible sound of the flaying that laid bare the bloody red inside of the body is, however, also bound up with the history of images, with our history of art. As a student of medicine, the young Alberto Burri may well have come across ancient anatomical illustrations in which human figures, like graceful models of muscles, elegantly open up their skin to facilitate observation or nonchalantly leave it hanging nearby. While he certainly saw the opening of wounds, how they were soiled with earth and how the earth was soaked in blood, as a medic in the war, he later succeeded in endowing those images with classical beauty through the strength of his composition, just as he must have stitched and healed the wounds in the bodies of his comrades. Between the flat metre of black and white, the stitching of sacks, the charred wood and the welded iron, red reappears in his

¹ G. Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, transl. A. C. M. Ross (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), chapter 3, paragraph VII.

works, always violent and glittering, to the point where the dreadful drapery of burnt flesh emerges in the melting of plastic.

Other physicians and other artists might have obtained a different compound from the hanging skin of Marsyas, one used in the past as a compress to heal wounds or taken as a medicament for a whole variety of ailments. Venice was the centre of production of this rediscovered ointment, known as theriac and produced in the squares in front of apothecaries' shops with the din of pestles grinding in tall mortars, whose circular imprint can still be seen today on the paving stones.

A compound of a similar kind was also known to painters, beginning in the fifteenth century, in the form of brown pigment—the darkest of the shades of red. Prized for the particular sheen of the glazes derived from it, it was called mummy brown. The firm of C. Robertson and Co. in London produced it throughout the nineteenth century with material obtained, according to its representatives, from ancient Egyptian mummies of people and cats. Rudyard Kipling relates how his uncle Edward Burne-Jones rushed in holy terror to bury a tube of it in the garden on being told by his fellow pre-Raphaelite Alma-Tadema that it contained fragments of a pharaoh.

After the profanation of the royal tombs during the French Revolution, some cases containing the hearts of kings and queens were opened and their content sold to the painters Alexandre Pau de Saint-Martin and Martin Drolling. The latter is supposed to have painted his *Kitchen Interior*, an image of rustic domesticity, with the pigment obtained from the mummified hearts in 1815. Attention is focused on the bright red of a piece of cloth bathed in daylight on the knee of the woman sewing it. The serene atmosphere of a simple dwelling is thus subtly interwoven with the epic sense of history, as the compressed time of the two previous decades emerges in the memory of the red flag flown beside the Altar of the Homeland in Paris, steeped in the blood of the revolutionaries killed by the national guard in 1791.

Another red preparation long used in painting was also born as a medicine. Known since antiquity, this very fine clay, rich in iron oxide, was called Armenian bole after the country that produced a particularly valuable variety. It was also common on the isle of Lemnos and in Italy in the areas of Otranto and Matera, whose landscape was marked, according to the physician and humanist Girolamo Marciano (1571–1628), by a multitude of shafts, tunnels and caverns dug in order to extract the clay for transformation into pigment, moulding into vessels and the production of medicines, particularly as a cure for the bite of poisonous animals.

Used for years to cover the panels of icons and all the gilded backgrounds in the history of Western art as a base for the application of gold leaf, Armenian bole also speaks to us in its own way about time. Today, many of those skies of eternal brightness and many of the dimensionless spaces against which the outlines of mantles and halos stand out sharply afford glimpses of the red beneath. The red of the earth, which is inextricably bound up with human history—the natural image of the humble matter of which it is made and of

the decomposition that awaits it—thus emerges through the slow action of centuries in the divine history of gold.

Armenian bole was not the only red in art to be used prior to the completion of the work. This color appears to be indissolubly linked with the inner layers of paintings, almost as though their surface were again a skin covering bloody limbs. The ground of paintings was red during the Renaissance and for a long time afterwards in Venice and in Spain, where Seville earth was used. Red were the grounds of some of Caravaggio's works and then of many eighteenth-century Italian canvases. Until the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was the only color used for the underdrawings of frescoes, just as many sketches in sanguine or red chalk were later transformed into paintings. Red is the mid-tone, the carnal dimension from which the artist sets out to attain the absolutes of black and white through endless variety.

The red of earth is the origin of painting just as it was the origin of man in myth.

And red was the harrowing ink with which the Word made flesh left His imprint on Veronica's veil and on the shroud at the end of His human life to mark the beginning of a new time.

Armenia is also the source of another story related in the 2015 *RED/RED* drawings of Aslı Çavuşoğlu. The two pigments used by the artist are Armenian red and Turkish red. The latter, which is longer lasting, is the color of the countless national flags waved recently in the streets of Ankara and Istanbul after the attempted coup d'état and during the long period of governmental repression. Armenian red, obtained from the bodies of the cochineal that feed on the roots of a plant typical of the Araxes river on the border with Turkey, tends to fade in time. It therefore lends itself to the melancholy image of the weakening of the Armenian ethnic group due to the genocide perpetrated by the Turks, at the very time when the plants on which the life of the cochineal depends are dying out because of industrialization.

If it is true that red and gold meet in medieval art and icons to represent transience and eternity, it is perhaps precisely due to this interweaving of earthly reality and divine aspiration that the chromatic combination was identified for a long time with the insignia of power and adorned the ceremonies of the republics of Rome and Venice as well as the coronation robes of the sovereigns of Europe.

The union of red and gold is found in blown glass aspiring to the beauty of the ruby as well as in the centuries-long history of alchemy, where mercury and sulphur play a role both in the formation of red and in the transmutation of gold. In the phase of *rubedo*, as in the Red Mass, the chemist's heated crucible is confused with the chalice of Christ's blood. It encloses the possibility of the final achievement, the philosopher's stone.

The incandescent birth of metal takes us once again underground, where the red Hephaestus forges weapons and shields. The metal of arms was covered in Rome with a thin layer of transparent red varnish to make the gold shine more brightly.

This must have been the treatment used for the metal of the weapons taken as booty by Euryalus in the night of his foray against the people known as Rutulians from the ancient Italic *Rudhuli*, meaning *red* in the sense of golden-haired. Euryalus stabs Rhaetus to death, whereupon Virgil reveals that the human soul is crimson and sometimes, in the case of violent death, gushes forth from the body mixed with blood and wine.² Shortly afterwards, the weapons taken from the slain enemies shine in the moonlight and betray Euryalus, upon whom Volscens takes revenge by running his white body through with the sword. The poet describes the dying young man as a crimson flower cut down by the ploughshare, or a poppy with its head bowed down on a weary stem beneath the rain.

The meeting of metal and red does not, however, always lead us to contemplate death and the forge, as in poems of war and certain works in iron by Burri. Donald Judd, a far cooler and kind of different artist, chose a cadmium red enamel to coat the insides—interiors once again—of the box-like constructions of copper sheeting he called *Specific Objects*.

Judd used cadmium red in at least thirty different works produced between 1961 and 1990. He favored red because he regarded it as possessing an unchallenged power of attraction over space and acting as a natural focus of attention. He believed that the sharp edges of his precise geometric shapes could be highlighted only by that color. Cadmium red offered him a further and different way of making form absolute, giving it the sharpness of a blade.

As he wrote in *Some Aspects of Color in General and Red and Black in Particular* (1994):

After a few decades the discussion of color is so unknown that it would have to begin with a spot. How large is it? Is it on a flat surface? How large is that? What color is that? What color is the spot? Red. If a second spot is placed on the surface, what color is it? Black? [...] What if the red and black spots are next to each other? And of course, which red? Cadmium red medium. And which black? Ivory black. The red could also be cadmium red light, the medium, cadmium red dark or alizarin crimson. In a way, side by side, the red and the black become one color. They become a two-color monochrome. Red and black together are so familiar that they almost form a new unity.

Judd's unadorned prose is not untouched by history. Countless images reverberate in that encounter of primal colors, innumerable dashes of red combined with the depths of black, from Attic vases to Paolo Uccello's *Hunt in the Forest*, from Titian's portraits to Rembrandt's *Night Watch* and the dazzling contrast of black stockings and red velvet couches in the brothels painted by Toulouse-Lautrec. Not to mention the pure chromatic values of Suprematism, the lost stained-glass windows of Albers in Weimar and the paintings of Picabia, who created in red and black boundless skies and lovers' kisses. All this

² Virgil, *Aeneid*, book IX, 349–50: "Purpuream vomit ille animam et cum sanguine mixta / vina refert moriens". See M. Brusatin, *Storia dei Colori* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), p. 19.

memory passes through Judd's two-color monochrome and is handed on to artists like Anish Kapoor, who have opened up huge cavities like new caves in that particular monochrome, sinking space into the blackest black, sucking it into a metaphysical anti-universe, but only so that red can intervene sooner or later to throw it back out, spraying and soiling everything around it, giving space and color back to the here and now of matter.

Judd can hardly have been unaware of a particular red interior in the history of art, one that Rothko studied for days and months after it entered the MoMA collection in 1949. In Matisse's *Red Studio* (1911), red unexpectedly becomes the color of timelessness. The few paintings shown in the work sink into a space with no dimensions and no apparent future. The handless dial of the grandfather clock in the center of the composition is there to state that art inhabits the space of being and draws upon the unrelated essence of time.

The studio, the place of the artist's interiority, where everything happens that must before the work is finished, is submerged in a lacquer-like red with no depth, a smooth seal that contemplates no accidents. An earlier artist than Matisse would have painted that suspended atmosphere, destined to accommodate not so much the body as the mind, on a gold ground. This is what the Venetian Carpaccio did in his own way four centuries earlier when he painted the contemplative figure of Saint Augustine in his studio, made up of closely interlocking vermilion planes and objects bounded at the end of the perspective by a vault of golden yellow, in the hollow of which the warm light that inundates the entire space returns and throbs.

The voice of eternity thus also reverberates in the symbolic power of red.

Bachelard was not mistaken. Close examination reveals that the blue of the sky is also made up of cinnabar.