

EVALUATING MANUSCRIPT YELLOWS

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All our aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, and other art history starts from looking at – and enjoying – the colours of manuscripts. However, the colour we see today on a manuscript is not always the colour that the artist applied, so long ago. This unfortunate and uncomfortable truth can be clearly demonstrated, beyond all reasonable doubt. But until everyone learns to appreciate this fundamental fact, some ridiculous errors of interpretation will continue to be made. Before we can speculate on the aesthetic and symbolic uses of colour, and its appreciation and comprehension, by mediaeval artists and their contemporaries, we must first establish what colours were when they were first applied.

Examining at mediaeval manuscripts, it seems clear beyond doubt that fading has occurred especially badly in reds and yellows. In addition it seems that there was clearly at least one blue that was pale and greyish (unsaturated) even when it was fresh, and which may subsequently have become paler. Reds and blues have faded, but yellows have apparently faded to an extreme degree, so much that in some cases it is hard to tell that they were ever there. This paper will therefore concentrate on yellows, and will discuss how we may assess what yellow pigments were originally present. Technical art history offers three ways to evaluate what the original appearance of manuscript colours may have been: (i) iconography and visual harmony of the colours in images, (ii) technical analysis of surviving paint, (iii) mediaeval artists' recipe books.