

VALUE AND BEAUTY: TOWARDS A DOUBLE AESTHETIC OF COLOURS IN ROMANESQUE BOOK ILLUMINATION

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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, 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 proposed contribution, I would like to show that similar attitudes towards the materiality of colours manifest themselves in medieval manuscripts. Recent interdisciplinary research on the “Codex Aureus Epternacensis” (ca. 1045) 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 (1) and my own research on the use and aesthetics of colours in the Middle Ages. The manuscript contains more than 40 full-page miniatures painted by several illuminators of the Early Romanesque Echternach workshop. The illuminators used a very varied palette of different colours and tones (1,2); e.g. the colour “red” or “purple” is not only represented by one, but by two or more pigments. Among them we find many rare and expensive “exotic” pigments like lapislazuli 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* (f. 2v-3r) have been overpainted during the making of the manuscript. The reworking of most of the incarnates and backgrounds can tentatively be interpreted as “aesthetical restoration”. Surprisingly, the illuminators did not alter the whole composition or touched the forms of the heads and hands; instead, they only changed the tone of the flesh 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 further explored in the paper.

(1) D. Oltrogge and R. Fuchs, *Die Maltechnik des Codex Aureus aus Echternach*, Nuernberg (2009)

(2) A. Grebe, *Der Codex Aureus von Echternach*, Darmstadt (2007)