

Self-Guide

ART
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Red vs. Blue—Two Popular Hues

Long before red and blue became the emblematic colors of the two major U.S. political parties, the vivid hues had been used by artists throughout the world. Explore the fascinating sources and rich symbolism of these popular shades and cast your vote for the most compelling color.



GALLERY 207

“Portrait of Magdalena of Saxony, Wife of Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg” (c. 1529) by Lucas Cranach the Elder

With her ermine-lined robe, feather-embellished beret, and elaborate pearl-studded jewelry, the sitter in Cranach’s portrait, Magdalena of Saxony, boldly parades her wealth and status. It is fitting then that Cranach most likely used the costly pigment vermilion for the brilliant red found in the noblewoman’s costume. Though vermilion, or mercuric sulfide, occurs naturally, a complex chemical process had been developed to produce the pigment as early as the eighth century. Still extremely expensive, synthetic vermilion was prone to darkening and, as are all compounds containing mercury, highly toxic. Since the 1920s, this pigment has been replaced by the more affordable, reliable, and less toxic cadmium red.



GALLERY 215

“Charity” (1743/44) by Francesco de Mura

Draped in cloths of red and blue, Francesco de Mura’s image of a nursing mother is often mistaken for the Virgin Mary. Since the Middle Ages, painters had dressed the Virgin in these two colors, expressing her purity and divinity through rare and expensive pigments like lapis lazuli and vermilion. You can find depictions of the Virgin and her two-tone garments in works by Corregio in Gallery 205, Rubens in Gallery 208, and Tiepolo in this gallery. De Mura’s busy mother, however, is not the Virgin but rather the personification of charity, traditionally portrayed as a young woman suckling one child while lovingly tending to a few more. The pelican echoes this image of selfless love, drawing blood from its breast to feed its young.



GALLERY 134

“Circular Box”, Wanli period (1573–1620), China

This elegant porcelain box is a fine example of the blue-and-white porcelain that has been a popular Chinese export throughout the world since the 12th century. For these wares, artists used a technique that originated with Iraqi ceramists of the 10th century, in which brilliant cobalt blue pigment was painted directly on the porcelain surface. The even tone of the cobalt on this vessel demonstrates the growing skill of Chinese artists during the Ming dynasty. In earlier periods, uneven grinding of the cobalt ore and its thick application often lead the blue to break through the glaze, oxidizing to black or rusty brown on the surface. The blue designs on this work, such as the peacocks and peonies, are auspicious and ancient symbols of culture, wealth, and honor.



GALLERY 50

“Female Figure with Rooster Offering Bowl” (Olumeye), (late 19th/ early 20th century), Yoruba

You may need to look closely to find the blue pigment that is rubbed into the carved patterns on this Yoruba offering vessel. The intense blue color is a material called bluing, a powder that has been used as a laundry aid since the late 19th century to prevent white clothes from yellowing. For the Yoruba of West Africa, the color blue carries special significance. It is associated with water, water deities, and a unique sense of “cool,” a concept that combines qualities such as purity, discretion, and composure. This cool attitude is also conveyed in the serene expression on the woman’s face. A special surprise awaits anyone who opens the container’s lid—the bowl’s interior is saturated with a coat of bluing!



GALLERY 156A

“Finger Ring with Engraved Gemstone” (mid-1st century A.D.), Roman

Perhaps not quite as dazzling as a ruby or a garnet, the luminous red gemstone in this gold ring setting is a variant of onyx known as sardonyx. In ancient Rome, this stone was believed to convey willpower, strength, and protection on its wearer. Roman soldiers often wore sardonyx talismans engraved with images of heroes or revered animals like the horse on this example, trusting that the courage and spirit of the depicted character would embolden them in battle. The stone’s popularity not only stemmed from its perceived power and its simple beauty but also from its wide availability. Unlike rarer gemstones, sardonyx was affordable to a greater portion of the public, not the wealthy alone.



GALLERY 262

“Ready-to-Wear” (1955) by Stuart Davis

American painter Stuart Davis’s increasing interest in color theory led him to coin the term “color-space.” As he explained, “every time you use a color you create a space relationship... I simply called the things that happen when you use two colors... a color-space event.” Davis used advancing warm colors and receding cooler colors to add vitality to his canvases. Such dynamism is the perfect fit for the energy of Davis’s chosen subjects—gasoline stations, jazz scores, neon signs, sign boards, and taxicabs. In *Ready-to-Wear*, the warm red and contrasting cool blue animates the various shapes that may represent leftover pieces of fabric on a cutting-room table. This lively composition celebrates the vibrancy of the ready-to-wear industry itself and the business’s uniquely American origins.

Haven’t had your fill of these terrific tones?

See brilliant blues and radiant reds come to life in the monumental tapestries featured in *The Divine Art: Four Centuries of European Tapestries*. Visit the exhibition’s reading room to learn about the various sources of dyes used to color the textiles, including crushed beetles and the indigo plant.

Or, follow red and blue down a political path as the Museum of Contemporary Art presents exhibitions, performances, and education programs as a part of *Art and Democracy Now*. Learn more on how you can see, discuss, and participate at www.mcachicago.org.