

SPECIAL INTEREST DAY – WEDNESDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2024

To be held in the Dove Suite at The Ark, Turners Hill. Timing 10.00 - 15.00

Subject: A Colourful History of Paints, Pigments and Dyes

Lecturer: Lynne Gibson BEd, MA

We will explore some of art's most beautiful, expensive, rare and poisonous paints and dyes.

We will journey from the beginnings of empire and exploration, where precious colours such as lapis, lazuli, cochineal and indigo were brought into Europe, to the modern day international trade in industrial pigments.

From the days of Medieval alchemists, who concocted colours in secret from mixtures of arsenic, sulphur and mercury, to modern chemists with their toxic experiments and lurid coal tar dyes.

Artists, fabric dyers and manufacturers have brought us a brilliant world of a man-made colour. It has been a fascinating journey and this will be a very colourful day!

Lecture 1 – Alchemy and Adventure – A History of Exotic Colours and Poisonous Pigments

In our modern world it's easy to take colour for granted. Yet before organic chemistry the most desirable pigments were often exotic or poisonous. Merchants supplied pungent yellow 'purree' nuggets from India, cochineal 'grana' from the holds of Spanish galleons, lapis rock carried by camel train from the mountains of Badakhshan. Alchemists prepared deadly 'King's Yellow' and 'Ruby of Arsenic'. 'Moorish Gold' was concocted, according to a 12th century monk, from basilisk powder ground with human blood! Small wonder artists kept their paint recipes closely guarded in Books of Secrets.

This first lecture tells the stories of alchemy and adventure behind some of our most colourful Old Master paintings



Colour Cinnabar Orpiment Lapis



Cochineal Collecting Newbury

Lecture 2 - Death by Wallpaper – Colourful Stories of Chemical Pigments and Dyes

Was Napoleon killed by his green wallpaper? This story begins in 1775 with a German chemist and his experiments with arsenic. The resulting powerful green reached its height of popularity when worn by "Queen of Fashion", Empress Eugénie. It was printed on wallpaper by Morris & Co. and was a favourite of plein-air artists, such as Monet, Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh, keen to capture the freshness of nature. But a century later, it was rebranded as rat-poison.

In 1856 a chemistry student took home a school project to make synthetic quinine. He failed his home-work, but accidentally invented a vibrant purple dye. Queen Victoria and Empress Eugénie wore dresses in the season's must-have shade. Punch magazine dubbed the craze: "the mauve measles"!

Scheele's Green and Perkins' Mauveine were forerunners of hundreds of synthetic dyes and pigments. You will hear fascinating stories – of serendipitous discoveries, industrial enterprise, and some very sinister secrets.



Kersting Embroidery Met



Green silk dress Met

Lecture 3 – Handling (with due care!) the pigments. Discussion of a small selection of paintings. Q & A