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## The Primary and Powerful Blue

In 1508, the painter Albrecht Dürer complained about the price of a pound of ultramarine blue at 100 florins. Today, if we followed a recipe from the Renaissance using lapis lazuli that has been mined in Afghanistan for 3000 years, it would cost \$4000. The quest to create the perfect blue pigment has been going on for centuries, from the ancient Egyptians, the Han dynasty, Mayan cultures, the Renaissance, and on into today.

The creation of blue can be toxic as well as expensive. Making cobalt blue from metal attracts arsenic. Prussian blue is really iron ferrocyanide. Recently, at Oregon State University's College of Science, scientists discovered a vibrant blue pigment that is so durable and stable that even in oil and water the color does not fade. And it is nontoxic. This new pigment is formed from a crystal structure that allows manganese ions to absorb red and green wavelengths of light, which in turn reflects blue.

Traditionally, because of its prohibitive cost, blue was restricted to the adornment of Christ or the Virgin Mary. The radiant ultramarine of Fra Filippo Lippi's *Coronation of the Virgin* is still, 569 years later, breathtaking. During this time and throughout the Middle Ages, blue was favored for the garments of the powerful and wealthy in Europe. Blue is more than a color; it is a statement and a mood – spiritual, lyrical, foreboding, transcendent.

Van Gogh said about blue that “to exaggerate the fairness of hair, I make a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky. There is no blue without yellow and without orange.” *Starry Night's* sky (1889), along with his cyclonic yellow and orange sun, is a prime example of this dynamic.

Early in Picasso's career, during his three-year Blue Period of depression, (1900-1904), he used a monochromatic palette of blue and blue-green. The Blue Rider Group, *Der Blaue Reiter*, was founded in 1909 by Russian and German artists, including Kandinsky and Franz Marc. For them, blue was the color of spirituality. The dark blues, like indigo, symbolized wisdom and spiritual realization and the rider symbolized the

ability to move beyond. Matisse's famous cut-outs, *The Blue Nudes* (1952), were made with his ultramarine gouache-painted paper, because for him, blue signified distance and volume.

There are so many shades of blue: air force blue, baby blue, blue-gray and blue-green, Caribbean amber and Carolina blue, Persian and Prussian blue, azure, cerulean, cobalt, cornflower, cyan, midnight and navy blue, electric blue, indigo, periwinkle, phthalo and powder blue, royal blue, teal and turquoise, violet-blue, indanthrone, manganese and ultramarine blue. "Blue is the only color which maintains its own character in all its tones. It will always stay blue," said Raoul Dufy, a French Fauvist painter. "Yellow is blackened in its shades and fades away when lightened. Red, when darkened, becomes brown and when diluted with white, it is no longer red but pink."

Today Vermont artist, Brenda Garand, uses a saturated Prussian blue gouache for her *Pouch Cove Series*. "I made these drawings during a Newfoundland residency," says Garand. "I used a wet into wet technique. The color, for me, relates to the raw landscape and feel of the region. It was my admiration of cyanotypes that first brought me to use the intense hue of Prussian blue."

People are often more productive and contemplative in an environment of blue. There are the Blue Mosques found in Cairo, Istanbul, Tabriz and Yerevan. Blue is a sacred color in Iran symbolizing paradise. In India, the god Krishna has blue skin, and in Greece, blue is worn to ward off the evil eye.

In the landscape, there are many shades of blue: the sky and the deep blue sea, wildflowers lobelia and cornflower, the Indigo milk cap mushroom, Vladimir Nabokov's Karner blue butterfly. Blue is a cool color in landscape design, bringing a soothing element to the garden. Blue plants visually recede, helping to make a small space appear larger.

"In the prebirth of the evening/the blue cherry blossoms/on the blue tree/from this yellow, ended room—press to the windows/inside shall be out/  
the clustered faces of the flowers/straining to look in" William Carlos Williams

Blue is imposing. And enigmatic.