

Dian Parker

The Demonstrative Surprise of Orange

After I painted the door of our garden shed bright orange, everyone who saw it laughed out loud. Even a friend whose taste is decidedly monochromatic, her house inside and out white, is delighted by the door.

Orange is playful and flamboyant; radiating warmth and energy. There is the ripe brilliance of autumn before all goes white and cold. Green chlorophyll stops flowing, leaving the color orange. The orange of fruits, vegetables and autumn leaves comes from carotene, a type of photosynthetic pigment.

Ancient Egyptians used the mineral, realgar, which contains arsenic and is highly toxic, for the orange in their tomb paintings. They also used safflower, “a bastard saffron,” to dye the mummy wrappings, and to turn their ceremonial ointments an oily orange, close to the color gold. The mineral, orpiment, a deep golden yellow-orange pigment, was used for illuminating manuscripts, and to poison arrows during the Roman Empire. The Chinese used orpiment for medicine, and the early alchemists used the mineral in their search for gold.

During the Ottoman Empire, the richest orange-red was derived from the pink roots of the madder bush. Madder is a bright pink paint. If you add white wool to the madder dye bath, along with alum, the result is the exuberant orange of a redhead. Synthetic dyes contain only one color, but with madder there is blue and yellow combined with the red, creating a softer, more complex color.

During the Middle Ages, the sticky resin of the mastic tree was used as a golden varnish for paintings. Mixed with linseed oil, mastic gives the impression of thickly applied paint. Unfortunately for Turner, who used this mixture copiously, it caused paintings to darken. In 1711, the radiant orange varnish of a Stradivarius was created, but in 1750 the recipe was lost and has never been found. Today the sap from the Dragon’s Blood tree is a golden-colored resin highly prized for violin varnish.

The first synthetic orange pigment, in 1809, was called chrome orange, also known as Derby red, Persian red, and Victorian red. This basic lead chromate had the powerful ability to “hide” other colors, and was used by the Impressionists to capture the effects of natural light. Chrome orange is now an obsolete pigment. Pigments such as cadmium orange set the standard today for coverage, tinting, and light-fastness.

Saffron crocus from the Middle East was smuggled to England in a hollow silver cane during the Middle Ages. It was prized as a luminous orange dye, as a spice, and as medicine. It was also used as an aphrodisiac, to cure toothaches and the plague! Alexander the Great used saffron to make his locks look gold. Zoroastrian priests used it to make sunny ink for writing prayers to ward off evil. An early 17th century recipe made

saffron into a pigment by using egg whites left standing for one and a half days.

Today saffron costs \$10,000 per kilogram which takes 40 hours of labor, picked and processed by hand. It takes 150,000 flowers, 450,000 stigmas, to make one kilo of saffron. Kashmir's cultural identity has always been saffron but now, due to climate change, their thousands of acres of crocus are drying up.

Benzoin is a rich amber gum resin from the bark of the styrax tree. An example is the delicate Japanese Snowbell tree that smells like vanilla. Propolis or bee gum is as yellow as gold. The resinous mixture is produced by the honey bee, by mixing its saliva and beeswax with the fluid gathered from tree buds and sap flows. Yellow onion skins, carrots, alder tree bark, eucalyptus, butternut seed husks are just a few natural orange dyes. Buddhist robes were once dyed with turmeric. Later jack fruit was used, although now synthetic dyes are common.

"Orange is red brought nearer to humanity by yellow," wrote Kandinsky. Colors continuously interact in our perception. The higher key of orange is often paired with the deeper key of blue, its opposite on the color wheel. Renoir frequently placed orange against azure or cobalt blue to make his colors appear brighter. Van Gogh wrote that he was "trying to make the colours intense and not a harmony of grey.... There is no orange without blue." Orange pigments are largely in the ochre or cadmium families, and absorb mostly blue light. Art Deco often teamed sharp lime and cool blue with orange.

Carnelian, Fire Opal and Amber are considered orange stones. Terracotta is a hot orange; the heated, sundried, roasted earth. "Give me mud and I will paint the skin of Venus," wrote Delacroix. Dutch Orange, Buff Orange, Indian Yellow, Quinacridone Gold, Tangerine Dream, Moroccan Sands, Burnt Orange, Mandarin, Hansa Yellow, Aureolin Hue, Sundrenched Gold, Sahara Sandstone, Curried Prawns, Golden Saffron. The Yellow Emperor of the Ming Dynasty sailed in his saffron barge along the Yellow River.

"I'm Just Mad about Saffron, and Saffron's Mad about Me," sang Donovan.

Orange traffic cones and flaggers' vests warns of danger. Their high contrast against the dark asphalt can't be missed. Orange warms us in our fires on a frigid dark night and sings out its radiance in New England autumns. The varnish of a Stradivarius is as if spun with gold. The translucent orange of free-range egg yolks within their zinc white shells, dropped into a black cast iron frying pan, is true art.

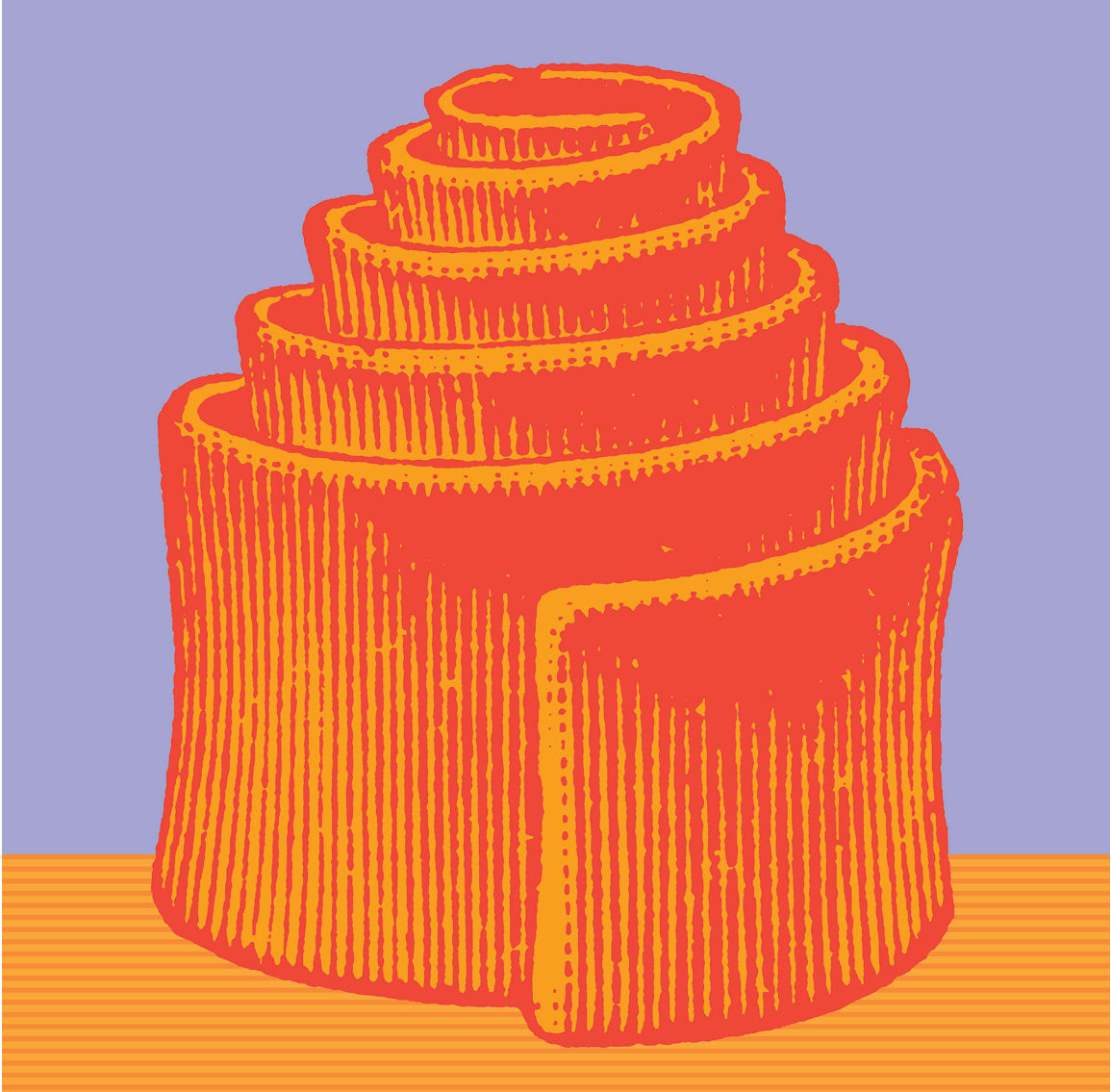
Helen Frankenthaler's 1978 painting, "Jockey," is pooled and puddled oranges alongside cerulean green, with the shock of ultraviolet against a yellow background. Schiele's watercolors, the 1910 "Town of the Blue River" with the saturated orange field behind the beige and brown house, and the 1912 "The Single Orange was the Only Light" with the dab of orange on a black cloth in an otherwise beige room lifts off the paper. Effervescent.

W. David Powell's palindrome, "Rotator" (pictured), with its eye-popping orange against

a demure periwinkle background grabs our attention. The image is a line engraving from an antique dictionary, now part of a 16x20 inch perforated, gummed sheet of 25 postage stamps. “I used Josef Albers’ *Interaction of Color* when playing with color combinations in the *Palindromes* project,” Powell said.

Marigolds, and the streak of the Kingfisher eye. The lower wings of the Tiger Moth. The neck ruff of the Golden Pheasant and the body of a Warty Newt. The famous Seville oranges, too bitter for marmalade, need to be bought only in the few short weeks of January. The sparkling citrus of orange. The tang of tangerine. The glow of nectarine. The soft hue of apricot and peach. Orange – it’s all round us.

(Disclosure: I live in Orange County, Vermont)



ROTATOR