

Dian Parker

The Perplexing Color of Pink

Cherry blossoms, flamingos, rose quartz, and the London *Financial Times* are all pink. And yet, in the visible light spectrum, there is no pink. This section of the electromagnetic spectrum is made up of all the colors in the rainbow. Because white is not a color in the spectrum and therefore unable to mix with red, there is no pink. It is considered an extra-spectral color.

Light is parsed into wavelengths. Each wave length of the spectrum is a particular color; red having the longest wavelength and violet the shortest. Pink doesn't have a wavelength. Added to that, "Color is not a property of light or of objects that reflect light. Color is a sensation that arises within your brain." Scientific American. Color is confounding and enigmatic. That we can all agree on Willem de Kooning's 1939 "Elegy" being predominantly pink, with turquoise shapes, is nothing short of a miracle.

With a mix of red and white, we can create the color rouge, salmon, crepe, ballet slipper, magenta, fuchsia, and watermelon. How about sweet, vivid, powder, misty, and cherry pink? And the pink of flowers, like carnations and roses. The color pink was first named after a flower in the late 1600s – the genus *Dianthus*, which means the frilled edges of a petal, and in Greek, the flower of God. We can purchase from Windsor Newton shades of pink labeled Bengal Rose, Opera Pink, or Pale Rose Blush. In 2011, Pink was Pantone's Color of the Year.

Visiting the Harvard Pigment Lab in Boston, I was captivated by the glass vials of Rose Foncé and Madder Lake. The delicate brilliance of these pigments, after one hundred years, is still undiminished. Pink pigments were originally made by binding organic to inorganic substances, such as buckthorn berries with chalk. Rose madder is a natural dye from the root of the madder plant. The ancient Phoenicians made a pink dye from the mucus of the hypobranchial gland from the Murex family of sea snails. Unfortunately, making the dye required many thousands of snails to make even one gram.

Pink became popular due to Madame de Pompadour, mistress of Louis XV in France. She also helped make the Rococo style famous. The Sèvres porcelain factory created a new hue of pink for her, by adding subtle tints of blue, black, and yellow to red. Popular in the 18th century were red and pink buildings, built with sandstone mixed with hematite/iron ore. Today, the ripened fruit of sumac, cherries, and red onion skins make a soft pink dye.

Valentino was tinted pink in his movies. Homer used the phrase "rose-fingered dawn" 23 times in the *Odyssey*. Hot pink was Elsa Schiaparelli's, the Italian fashion designer, favorite color, calling it "Bright, impossible, impudent, becoming, life-giving. A shocking color, pure and undiluted." Pink has always shocked. The acres of flesh that cover Renaissance ceilings. Christ's robe in Piero della Francesca's "Resurrection." Mary's luminous head scarf of shocking pink in "The Visitation" by Jacopo da Pontormo.

Degas' ballet dancers float with different shades of pastel pink. Philip Guston's saturated, shimmering pinks of his 1971 Roma series, like "Stack," is composed primarily of three colors; red, black, and white. Lee Krasner learned the power of using traditionally sweet colors, like pink, to heighten the sense of tragedy and violence in her paintings. The 1956, pink "Prophecy" is fraught with foreboding. In the Nazi concentration camps, homosexuals were forced to wear pink triangles, which later became the symbol for gay rights in the 1960s.

Ruth Marten's *No. 1610* (pictured) is from her "Fountains and Alligators" series. Marten created this masterful work by using watercolor, ink, and collage on a 19th century copperplate engraving. A demure damsel in pink with a scaly alligator wrap has a disarming effect. All is not what it seems. "Once you drape an alligator shawl around a lady's shoulders, the game is on," Marten said.

In psychology, pink is thought to counteract melancholia, helping to distract our attention from within, and to direct it outward. Pink as a verb means to pierce or perforate. Pinking shears. The power of pink is not to be underestimated.



Ruth Marten, No. 1610, 2015, 19th century engraving with watercolor, 7.5 x 4.2"
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