

Dian Parker

## The Bugle Call of Red

Red is the most dominant and perhaps most dynamic of colors. It demands attention. For artists throughout the ages, red has created accents, shading and nuance, energetic movement and resonance, depth and space. And symbolism. In heraldry, red denotes courage and zeal. In Christianity, red is the symbol for blood, charity and sacrifice. In Hinduism, red destroys evil. Psychological studies show that red can cause restlessness, nervous energy, high blood pressure, heightened libido and even increased confidence.

And yet if someone says “red,” the possible shades are infinite. Is it the red of a ripe tomato, a Bing cherry, the Coca-Cola sign, Warhol’s soup can, Rothko’s painting *White Over Red* (1957), the chair in Picasso’s *Le Rêve* (1932) or the red of Matisse’s *The Red Studio* (1911)? In the Cave of Altamira in Spain, the painting of the bison uses an altogether different red and appears fresh after 35,000 years.

Red can be scarlet, crimson, vermillion, carmine, maroon, burgundy, ruby, rose madder, rouge, brick, blood red, blush, fire engine red, cinnabar, russet, rust, Venetian red, flame red and Indian red. You could be called a *red herring* and still get the *red carpet treatment*. You might be *in the red* while *painting the town red*. All colors have personality. Red is extroverted, strong-willed and determined. And yet there are two sides to this personality: focused and persistent; irascible and stubborn.

Shades of red have been made in many different ways throughout history. Crimson red comes from the cochineal, or scale insect, and is cultivated on cacti, like the prickly

pear. Producing red coloring from cochineals is a grim industry. The insect must be female. And pregnant. Thrown live into huge vats, the insects are churned furiously, leaving behind their much prized, crimson-red blood. It takes 70,000 cochineal insects to make one pound of dried cochineal. Ancient Egyptians imported cochineal by camel from Persia and Mesopotamia. Crimson tones were also made with grain, madder, dragon's blood plants, and brazilwood. Madder, a plant root native to Persia, is the only plant to produce true red. Its properties are so powerful that it tints pink the bones and milk of animals that feed on it.

Another insect prized for its red color is the kermes, the Indo-European cousin of the cochineal, used to create one of the oldest organic pigments. Kermes was the most expensive dye in Europe during the Middle Ages, and the cloth dyed with kermes was called scarlet or carmine. An extract of carmine, made by crushing the scale insects that fed on sap from live oak trees, was also called kermes. This formulation was used from the Middle Ages until the 19th century to make crimson dye. Insect blood has even been used for centuries to paint lips and rouge cheeks, and even now in red lipstick. Both the cochineal and kermes insects are used today in manufacturing fabric dye and for coloring food.

The mineral cinnabar, the ore of mercury, is the source of vermilion red. In Roman times, most cinnabar came from mines at Almadén in Spain. Mercury is highly toxic and working in the mines was often a death sentence for the miners, most of whom were prisoners and slaves. The Romans loved raw cinnabar, yet medieval artists preferred to mix the refined mercury with sulfur. This pigment was used in the painting of Chinese lacquerware and in the coloring of the murals of Pompeii. Vermilion was prized for its

resistance to blackening or fading. Because of its cost and toxicity, vermilion is now often replaced by safer cadmium red hues which have a comparable color and opacity.

Red has always been prized for its daring boldness. In painting, it can be a statement of fearlessness, and intentional abandon that feels reckless. Look at the women abstract expressionists of the 1950's. Ethel Schwabacher, Deborah Remington, Lilly Fenichel, Alma Thomas, Grace Hartigan, Mary Abbott, and so many more, stamped their way into the heartland of a male-dominated game and with that red, said "Here I Am!" Susan Walp's crabapples (pictured), so diminutive and tender, hold that hot power as well. A bugle call that wakes us up.

Dian Parker writes about art and artists for numerous magazines; including Two Coats of Paint, Vermont Art Guide, Kolaj Magazine, White River Herald, and Mountain View Publishers. She is the director of White River Gallery in Vermont.