

Dian Parker

## Evening's Wrap – Violet and Mauve

Dusk is a near-ineffable color somewhere between gray and blue, like twilight – an in between color. Consider it violet, lilac, or mauve. The color is soft and dreamy, like the smell of lavender, like a summer's evening. In winter, on a sundrenched day, the shadows of trees on snow appear ultramarine violet. In any season, hills in the distance at dawn and dusk are delicate mauve, with tinges of alizarin red. "What is violet? Clouds are violet in the summer twilight," wrote Christina Rossetti.

Violet has the shortest wavelength and the highest frequency of visible light. Behind it lies invisible ultraviolet. Makes sense that the color comes and goes like a will-o'-the-wisp. Catch it if you can. The color is iridescent opal and moonstone, the mother of pearl shell. It is the color underneath the blue jays' wing, only seen when the feathers catch the light.

Mauve was a happy accident. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, malaria was killing soldiers in the tropics where the all-mighty British Empire was adding colonies. The only remedy was quinine; extremely expensive. A teenager, William Henry Perkin, was attempting to synthesize quinine in a laboratory. He didn't succeed but the leftover precipitate had a purplish hue. Accidentally he had made the first synthetic dye, named mauveine, or Perkin's mallow. Since Roman times, the only way to make mauve clothing had been to harvest 12,000 sea snails, whose mucus yielded only 1.5 grams of pure dye.

At 21, Perkin became a millionaire and today, because of his discovery, we have artificial dyes and a way to color cells, critical for chemotherapy research. His dye discovery led to the *Mauve Decade* in 1890. The color was identified with artificiality and decadence. No Victorian matron would dare be seen dressed in mauve. Opium was considered the mauve drug. Today, mauve saves lives.

Impressionist painters created violet shadows during this time. Monet's haystacks are awash with violets and pinks in the sunset. Matisse bathed his painting *Woman with a Green Parasol on a Balcony* in violet skies, her dress and chair, beside a slash of Prussian blue shutter. Violet chaplets were sold in the market. Even Pliny had a terrace of sweet-scented violets. The violet flower is in the viola genus – the largest genus with over 500 species.

Violet purple is the petals of asters. Lavender purple, composed of blue, red, a bit of brown and gray, is visible on Porcelain Jasper, dried lavender flowers, and in the spots of the Peacock Butterfly's upper wings. Lilac has a pink tint. Lavender is tinted blue. Mauve Pink is pale and purplish, redder and deeper than Orchid Tint. The mallow flower is mauve as a neutral, pale purple with a gray tint. Dying fabric with violet or mauve, on a sunny day, turns out blue. On a cloudy day, purple.

"Violet is red withdrawn from humanity by blue," Kandinsky wrote.

Susan G. Scott's *Where Water Grows Still* (pictured) is an oil on canvas. Speaking about violet colors, Scott said, "When I am outdoors, working from observation, which is the source of all my large-scale oil paintings, I use Daniel Smith's watercolor Naphthamide Maroon. Later, working on the oils in my studio, I use Windsor Newton's Purple Lake."

Indigo is halfway between blue and violet. Violet is halfway between blue and purple. Indigo is one-third purple and three-quarters blue. Helen Frankenthaler's *Almost August*, acrylic on paper, uses Mars Violet; a deep bluish red. The short purple slash in the lower left brings out the subtle tones of violet throughout.

In Japan, violet is the color of victory, the color in which Shinto priests wrap their most precious objects of the temple, and the color of the costume of the highest-ranking Sumo referee. The 2022 Pantone color of the year is called *Very Peri*, a misnomer to be sure. Periwinkle is a lavender blue. *Very Peri* is definitely purple. Pantone states, "Encompassing the qualities of the blues, yet at the same time possessing a violet-red undertone. The Hero Shade," whatever that means. Just goes to show that describing violet colors is a slippery slope, like dusk.

Talk about violet and mauve! There is Rose Foncé, Ultramarine Pink, Manganese Violet, Violet de Cobalt, Alizarin Violet, Magenta, Murex Shell, Tyrian Purple, Madder Lake, Cobalt Violet, Cerise, Hibiscus Violet, Fandango Violet, Royal Violet, Helio Violet, Amethyst Violet, and on and on.

Paynes Grey is a dark blue-grey color, often used instead of black. It is a mixture of ultramarine and black, or ultramarine and burnt sienna. Paintings can look grey-violet, just like the sky in the evening, using Paynes Grey. My bedroom is painted this cool grey. I finally bought thin grey curtains for the room. When my four-year-old charge was taking his nap, I closed the curtains for the first time. The midday light hit the grey, turning the curtains deep Phoenician purple, billowing like Cleopatra's sails on her barge.

"I have finally discovered the true color of the atmosphere," Monet once said. "It is violet. Fresh air is violet." Dusky violet.



Susan G. Scott "Where Water Grows Still" oil on canvas, 6' x 10'