INFORMATION

This exhibition is part of a European Research Council-funded academic research project based at the Sorbonne, Paris and Oxford University which explores the 19th century ‘chromatic turn’ in France, England and Germany.

CURATED BY
Charlotte Ribeyrol
Sorbonne Université/Ashmolean Museum
Matthew Winterbottom
Ashmolean Museum
Colin Harrison
Ashmolean Museum

TOUR SCHEDULE
Ashmolean Museum Oxford
July—September 2022

AVAILABILITY
From October 2022

SPACE REQUIREMENTS
4,000–5,000 sq ft

FEES
To be negotiated

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Images
The examples shown are indicative of pieces we hope to display in the exhibition.

Cover image
John Ruskin,
Study of a Kingfisher, with dominant reference to Colour, 1871, watercolour and bodycolour over graphite on wove paper,
The Colour Revolution: Art, Fashion and Design in Victorian Britain is a major international touring exhibition from the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Showing in Oxford from July–September 2022 the exhibition is available for international display from Autumn 2022.

The ground-breaking exhibition will challenge widely held perceptions that the Victorian age was dark and gloomy. A dazzling selection of paintings, sculptures, textiles, and jewellery by major Victorian artists and designers will show that this was in fact one of the most colourful periods in British history. Spanning Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901, the exhibition will include key works by artists such as Turner, Ruskin, Rossetti, Millais, Holman Hunt, Burne-Jones, Morris, Burges, Pugin, Sandys, Hughes, Gibson, Moore, Solomon, Alma-Tadema, Anderson, Sargent, De Morgan, Tissot, Beardsley and McNeill Whistler.

The Victorian art critic John Ruskin played a crucial role in shaping modern debates about colour which he saw as a creative force in art, no longer secondary to form. His praise of the sacred hues of nature as well as his discussion of medieval polychromy influenced major artists and designers throughout the 19th century.

But discussions about colour were not confined to artistic circles; scientists explored colour production and perception, such as Charles Darwin whose theory of sexual selection directly challenged Ruskin’s belief in natural colours as a Divine gift. Technological innovations such as vivid coal-tar dyes and chromolithography also made bright hues accessible to all sections of society. Over six million people visited the 1862 London International Exhibition which reflected this new fascination for colour, both in its decoration and exhibits. And yet this key event celebrated the colours of the past as much as the new hues of modernity. John Gibson’s controversial Tinted Venus, William Burges’s polychrome gothic bookcase, as well as Minton’s dazzling majolica fountain were all tributes to the richly colourful cultures of bygone ages. Equally as influential were the hues of the East, from Egypt to India and even Japan whose artworks created a sensation at the 1862 Exhibition.

From the late 1870s, these colours, both old and new, Eastern and Western, converged in the works of the Aesthetes who advocated colour for colour’s sake. Breaking away from Ruskin, Oscar Wilde claimed that ‘Even a colour-sense is more important, in the development of the individual, than a sense of right and wrong’.

The exhibition will contain works from the Ashmolean’s own extraordinary collection, along with significant loans from UK and United States museums and private collections.

J. McNeill Whistler and Albert Moore, the final section will pay tribute to the fin-de-siècle, cosmopolitan explorations of chromatic harmonies in fashion and aesthetic decoration which culminated in the scandalous ‘Yellow Nineties’.

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