

THE REINVENTION OF BLACK

As the means of creating the color black have changed, so have the subjects it represents.



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Suddenly, black was everywhere. It caked the flesh of miners and ironworkers; it streaked the walls and windows of industrial towns; it thickened the smoky air above. Proprietors donned black clothing to indicate their status and respectability. New black dyes and pigments created in factories and chemical laboratories entered painters' studios, enabling a new expression for the new themes of the industrial age: factory work and revolt, technology and warfare, urbanity and pollution, and a rejection of the old status quo. A new class of citizen, later to be dubbed the "proletariat," began to appear in illustrations under darkened smokestacks. The industrial revolution had found its color.

Black is technically an absence: the visual experience of a lack of light. A perfect black dye absorbs all of the light that impinges on it, leaving nothing behind. This ideal is remarkably difficult to manufacture. The industrialization of the 18th and 19th centuries made it easier, providing chemists and paint-makers with a growing palette of black--and altering the subjects that the color would come to represent. "These things are intimate-

ly connected," says science writer Philip Ball, author of *Bright Earth: The Invention of Color*. The reinvention of black, in other words, went far beyond the color.

Bideford black is an extraordinary material," says Onya McCausland, a doctoral candidate in fine art at University College London. She is talking about a black pigment found in the Carboniferous formation that runs from Wales to Devon in England. Mined from the 18th to the 20th centuries, it was considered one of the best coal-based black pigments available. "Its texture is soft and velvety," McCausland says. "It produces a very dense, bluish-black. If I want the black to be really immersive and dense, I'd use Bideford black."

Bideford black was one of many carbon-based black pigments used from the 16th through the 19th centuries in Europe. Charcoal was the inexpensive mainstay, though it produced a gritty paint that was difficult to apply. Bone black (ground from burnt bones) gave a warm brownish black, while lamp black (burnt vegetable oils) and vine black (charred grapevines or other vegetable products) gave cooler shades. Black derived from ground ivory was perhaps the richest of the lot.

This dark arsenal of dyes supported an evolving but particular set of subjects and themes. For centuries, black was a color of death and evil. The Egyptian jackal-headed god

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Anubis, who guided souls to the afterlife, almost always appeared as a black figure, his skin matching the blackened flesh of mummified bodies. When the devil began to appear in European art, in the 11th century, he too was usually a nightmarish black.

Black also developed a second identity around this time representing the asceticism favored by monks, as noted by the French historian Michel Pastoureau. By the 15th century, black garb had become a fixture of regal courts in Europe, connoting power and privilege. Soon after, the growing middle class also adopted black garments to represent their growing wealth, as well as their piety.

Seeking to reflect the wealth around them, 16th- and 17th-century artists used this broad palette of blacks to distinguish the different tones and textures of their sitters' sumptuous clothes. "In the late Middle Ages, black became the color of distinction," says Ball.

The arrival of the industrial revolution in the 18th century sparked advances in mining technology that boosted the output of coal-based pigments including Bideford black, while simultaneously driving up demand. Bideford black was ideal for

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