

When the art of Ancient Greece lost its colour

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Although we know today that Ancient Greek art was rich in colour, a mistaken belief in its whiteness has prevailed since ancient times. Philippe Jockey retraces the colourful story of this myth of a white Greece and examines its aesthetic, moral and ideological implications.

Reviewed: Philippe Jockey, *Le mythe de la Grèce blanche, Histoire d'un rêve occidental*, Paris : Belin, 2013. 208 p, 19€.

‘Thou art true, pure, perfect; thy marble is spotless¹’, wrote Ernest Renan in 1876 in his *Prayer on the Acropolis* to describe the immaculate white marble of the temples which symbolised the ideal of Ancient Greece. This ‘mystical’ belief (p. 218) in the whiteness of Ancient Greek monuments, which dismissed the evidence of archeologists and travellers as much as it ignored the ravages of time and man endured by the Parthenon, served to separate the monuments from their historical context in order to align them more closely with the cultural heritage of the Western world, that of France, England and Germany dreaming of finding their own ancient origins in the great Athens of Pericles.

However, as Jockey illustrates convincingly in his latest work, this cult of a ‘pure’ Greece was by no means an invention of the modern era. Whilst he acknowledges and places significant emphasis on the delusions of whiteness which neoclassical ideology and its subsequent variations espoused, he suggests that we go back further to Greco-Roman antiquity if we are to better understand the origins of this denial of colour so intrinsic to Hellenic culture². *Le Mythe de la Grèce blanche* follows in the wake of growing public awareness of *poikilia* (the Greek word for *multicolored*) and the central role which colour actually played in the arts and cities of Ancient Greece, boosted by major exhibitions³ and several important studies on the topic⁴, including articles by Jockey himself⁵. His text offers

¹ Ernest Renan, *Prière sur l’Acropole, La Revue des Deux Mondes*, (Prayer on the Acropolis, *La Revue des Deux Mondes*) December 1876, p. 486.

² In the first chapter, Jockey explains in particular the religious, political and anthropological significance of harmonious colour combinations (*poikilia harmonia*) in Ancient Greece (p. 17).

³ In 2011, the Louvre held a large exhibition devoted to archaeological discoveries in Macedonia. See *Au royaume d’Alexandre le Grand — La Macédoine antique*, (In the Kingdom of Alexander the Great - Ancient Macedonia) Paris, Somogy / Éditions du musée du Louvre, 2011.

⁴ Sophie Descamps (dir.), *Peinture et couleur dans le monde grec antique*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 2007 ; Adeline Grand-Clément, *La Fabrique des couleurs. Histoire du paysage sensible des Grecs anciens (viii^e - début du v^e siècle avant notre ère)*, Paris, De Bocard, 2011. See also <http://arts.ens-lyon.fr/peintureancienne/index.htm>

both a geographical and a chronological journey through what he describes as ‘places of whitewashed memory’ (p. 189), from which this myth of a spotless Greece, free from all stains of Otherness, emerged.

White imperialism

The text opens with an exploration of the many aspects of the Ancient Greek culture of polychromy in order to emphasise the irony and misinterpretation inherent in the denial of colour which subsequently occurred. For example, the white marble which was initially only a sign of unfinished sculpture and which symbolised feminine beauty rather than martial perfection for the Ancient Greeks, paradoxically went on to become the dominant colour and a symbol of imperial *virtus* from the period of the Roman Empire onwards. Jockey illustrates the relationship between power and whiteness in aesthetic, ethical and political terms. To support his well-informed argument, he highlights and explains the subjective attitudes towards certain key works of art (including the Laocoon, the Apollo Belvedere, the Portland vase and the Diadumenos) as well as the many founding texts, from Pliny to Winckelmann, which contributed to the creation of this ideology of absolute whiteness.

What these examples reveal is that the false ideal of a white Ancient Greece was above all the product of a subjective discourse which, although ‘depoliticised’ (Barthes, cited p. 13), was nevertheless rooted in ideologically motivated opinion, and which became increasingly radicalised upon contact with those viewed by the Western world as *Other*. This is precisely what happened in 1492, when the ‘primitive’ colours of the New World were first discovered.

This discourse strove quite literally to erase the wild colours of the savages and the very pigment itself from that which did not conform to the ancient ideals which the West considered it was its duty to guard and protect. The whitewashing which began in Rome and which was enthusiastically pursued from the late Middle Ages onwards, particularly during the Quattrocento period, was carried out in a variety of ways. Jockey devotes whole pages to the perfect marble reproductions which were for a long time preferred to their Greek originals⁶, and which so effectively and conveniently stripped the latter of their colour when reproduced as plaster casts, sketches and, later on, black and white photographs.

The author examines the many art forms which have been used over the centuries to ‘bring to life’ (but without the slightest hint of flesh-and-blood colour) the ideal of ancient whiteness, whilst inviting the reader to explore the often overlooked texts of authors such as Cyriacus of Ancona and Maxime Collignon, as well as better-known essays, including Chateaubriand’s *Voyage en Grèce* (1811) interestingly revisited in connection with this Western ‘leukomania’.

Colour resistance

Despite this whitewashing, however, the legacy of colour endured to leave its mark on the culture and history of Antiquity. As Jockey shows, it is always likely to emerge where one

⁵ Philippe Jockey, 'Praxitèle et Nicias, le débat sur la polychromie de la statuaire antique', (Praxiteles and Nicias: the polychromy of ancient sculpture), in Jean-Luc Martinez and Alain Pasquier (dir.), *Praxitèle*, Paris, Musée du Louvre Éditions, 2007, p. 62-81.

⁶ In his *Histoire de l'art dans l'Antiquité* (1764), (The History of Art in Antiquity) Winckelmann himself acknowledges that ‘we spend much more time examining the copies than we would if we had the pleasure of the originals before us’.

tries too hard to erase it. This resistance, spilling colourfully over the edges of the ‘miracle’⁷ city of Athens so adored by Renan, is a sign of a very different Greece, one in which a brightly adorned statue of Diana, discovered in Pompeii in 1760 and whose colour caused Winckelmann much discomfort, could be said to truly belong.

It was in the 19th century, a period of great change, that the conflict between the proponents and detractors of the theory of colour in Ancient Greece finally came to a head. Increasing numbers of archaeologists were coming forward with evidence confirming the Hellenic taste for vibrant colour. Their descriptions of colourfully decorated temple pediments and *tanagras*, brightly painted statuettes discovered in Boeotia in the 1870s, seriously undermined the white myth. The Franco-German archaeologist J.I. Hittorff⁸ was one of the many ardent defenders of this evidence of colour who challenged the delusions of whiteness which were so prevalent amongst his contemporaries and which were exacerbated further by a colonial context that saw a deepening ideological divide emerge between the Western white man and the yellow or black *Other* described in the racial categories proposed by Gobineau. This conflict of opinion crystallized in what Jockey very aptly refers to as the ‘Paradox of Parthenon’ (p. 175).

However, neither the archaeologists nor the anthropologists of the late 19th century were successful in persuading the critics of colour, and the white myth endured into the following century, becoming ever more radicalised during the inter-war period with the emergence of new symbols of white supremacy, evident in the writing of Charles Maurras and in the films of Leni Riefenstahl which paid homage to the new Aryan ‘hero’.

White desire?

Whilst this binary opposition between the colourful and the colourless is useful, it might nevertheless benefit from greater nuance, especially when applied to more ambiguous subjects such as literature. Théophile Gautier, whom Jockey curiously depicts as the successor to Renan’s conservative white doctrine, is one such author. For example, it would be simplistic to interpret Gautier’s *Émaux et Camées*, published in 1852, solely in terms of this distinction between the idealised white state vs. the vivid colours of savage Orientalism. Jockey acknowledges how Gautier’s marble often comes back to life, its ‘implacable whiteness’ imbued with ‘rosy tones’ (p. 224), and inspired by the myth of Pygmalion which enjoyed extraordinary popularity in the second half of the 19th century as a subject in both poetry and painting. The same fantastical imagery and ‘spiritism’ can be found in *Arria Marcella* (1852), in which the desire of a young man named Octavien breathes life back into the marmoreal fragment of a woman’s breast, all against a background of a Pompeii teeming with colour. Similarly, the Oriental and Dionysian foot of the mummy in one of his Egyptian short stories is mistaken for a ‘fragment of some antique Venus’⁹, while its ‘beautiful ruddy and tawny tints’¹⁰ and the smell of myrrh which accompanies the dancing foot is reminiscent of the *agalma*, ‘brightly coloured little gifts’ (p. 19) which the Greeks presented to the Gods. One may also choose to read *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) for further insight into this

⁷ Renan, *Prière sur l’Acropole*, *op. cit.*, p. 482.

⁸ For further information on Hittorff and Greek polychromy, see also Adeline Grand-Clément, ‘Hittorff, Raoul-Rochette et Ingres: à chacun sa peinture grecque’ in Sandrine Alexandre, Charlotte Ribeyrol, Nora Philippe (dir.), *Inventer la peinture grecque antique*, Lyon, ENS Editions, p. 149-162.

⁹ Théophile Gautier, ‘Le pied de la momie’, in Jean Gaudon (ed.), *La Morte amoureuse, Avatar et autres récits fantastiques*, (The Dead in Love) Paris, Gallimard, 1981, p.136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

somewhat unsettling emotion of 'retrospective love'¹¹ that marble was capable of eliciting, much like the Sleeping Hermaphroditus in the Louvre which served as inspiration for several of Gautier's texts¹².

White, even the purest white of Parian marble, was thus not always just a tool of the 'dominant' established order but was also sometimes the medium by which secret and subversive fantasies could reveal themselves. Jockey refers to this idea in his analysis of the repressed homoeroticism apparent in Montherlant's admiration for the skin of an Olympian boxer, described as 'diaphanous like Paros' (p. 262). Even in the 19th century, less conservative writers such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde had attempted a more explicit subversion of the overly Apollonian white ideal¹³, a subversion whose origins they attributed to...Winckelmann himself! Wilde was also an avid fan of the homoerotic black and white photographs of Wilhelm von Gloeden and his cousin Wilhelm von Plüschow in which they posed as beautiful, swarthy young Sicilian men. The colourless photograph seems to have in no way diminished desire...

Jockey's text remains one of undeniable originality, which offers the reader a fascinating exploration into several centuries of monochrome Western hellenomania.

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¹¹ Théophile Gautier, 'Arria Marcella', *ibid.*, p. 177.

¹² This sculpture, which appears in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, is also the subject of the poem 'Contralto' in *Émaux et Camées*.

¹³ It could be interesting to re-read Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) from the perspective of this opposition between white and colour.