

Talking colours, heraldic enamels (oral)

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Without going into too much detail, which would lie outside the scope of this paper, heraldry – or the study of blazons – appears to have been codified in the early thirteenth century [1-2].¹ The famous librarian and French historian Michel Popoff² stated “*s’il peut y avoir d’héraldique sans meubles, il ne peut y avoir d’héraldique sans couleurs*” [3].

Heraldry uses five tinctures or enamels,³ and two metals - not even the smallest part of the three-dimensional space of colour. The enamels are red, blue, green, purple and black, while metals are silver (white) and gold (yellow).⁴ Traditional rules govern the composition of the basic shape of heraldic arms; enamels and metals have to alternate so that two enamels are never next to each other, nor should two metals be side by side. However, there are exceptions. In 1110 Pope Paschal II bestowed on the new State of Jerusalem a coat of arms with the *Signaculum Domini*, the old symbol of the Saviour crucified in the city [4]. This blazon, ‘*argent, a cross potent between four plain crosslets, or*’ contrasted with the rules of heraldry which had recently been established at that time.⁵

First pre-heraldry and then to some extent heraldry – at least throughout the Middle Ages – was based on traditional principles, correspondences, similarities and symbols [5].⁶ On this issue, Robert Viel writes that: “[...] *figure e pezzi [sono] state utilizzate simbolicamente soltanto in tempi ed in luoghi in cui i simboli potevano essere capiti: bisogna quindi [...] rinunciare a spiegare in quel modo le armi araldiche moderne*” [2].⁷ In modern heraldry, the symbol is basically a figurative representation of certain concepts expressed by a geometric design or any kind of drawing. However, in the Middle Ages – and until Rene Descartes developed the radical and absolute separation between the soul and the body - the symbol was a ‘support’, a background for meditation based on the divine Intellect it reflected [6].⁸ Clearly these relationships were understood in a more complex manner during the Middle Ages, one which was very different to our current logic [7].⁹

Symbolic zoology considers animals and colours as genuine metaphysical messengers, a *mundus archetypus* with which our ancestors were very familiar. This awareness has been handed down to us in an extraordinary manner through the Bestiary [8],¹⁰ a didactic genre and model of all-inclusive knowledge of the cosmos. Man who believes in transcendent reality, expresses his belief thanks to myths, symbols, and rites, which turn objects and actions into something different from what they are in our everyday life, the deeper meaning of which we need to understand and interpret in a way far from a psychological, sociological, philosophical or historical viewpoint.

Colours also belong to the world of symbols and are present in every tradition; like zoomorphic forms, modern man now considers them simply as signs rather than

HERALDIC COLOURS

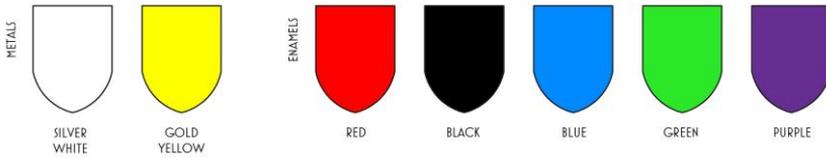


Fig. 1 – The seven colours of heraldry: two metals and five enamels.



Fig. 2 – The Bayeux Tapestry. (Detail) Harold is freed and taken by Guy to William accompanied by his retinue. William's horsemen display the symbol of the dragon.



Fig. 3 – The Bayeux Tapestry. (Detail) Harold dies struck in the eye by an arrow. Note the shield with the emblem of the swastika.



Fig. 4 – The Bayeux Tapestry. (Detail) Heraldists often consider the tapestry as 'the victory of the dragon over the swastika'. Right: one of William's horsemen – with the dragon shield – defeats a Saxon footman carrying the swastika insignia.

symbols. Our contemporaries have subverted the medieval and purely traditional way they considered and perceived nature; nature has become mere form, sensitive perception, and sentiment, while in the ancient world man was aware of the metaphysical principle embodied by every object.

Although the blazon has not yet found its Rosetta Stone explaining even its smallest details, that's not to say, as many do, that it has no meaning and that the composition in the shield is dictated either by chance or an irrational whim [2].¹¹ In his *Allégories et Symboles* [9], Marc de Vissac wrote: "*Decuorcelles si sbaglia quando pensa che gli ebrei ed i grandi iniziati della massoneria siano i soli possessori della scienza simbolica; gli araldisti dovrebbero conoscerla a fondo, se volessero conoscere la loro arte. Lo scudo araldico, gli smalti, i metalli, le partizioni, etc., sono altrettanti caratteri geroglifici che, in un volume ridottissimo, contengono gli elementi completi della lingua feudale*".¹²

Nevertheless, it's clear that as a symbol an enamel, for example red, includes all the undefined hues of red until it turns into something else; bright red, brick red, dark red, light red are all 'red', but amaranth, pink or burgundy are not.

Medieval tradition defined the correspondence between colour and Christian virtues, and in fact the latter are present in heraldic blazons: seven colours and seven virtues. The Bible says that moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good actions; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love. There are four 'cardinal' virtues [10]: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance¹³; three are 'theological': faith, hope and charity.¹⁴

Figure 6 shows the seven Christian virtues and their respective heraldic colour; the four cardinal virtues create a square with diagonals between the opposite corners, and express the complementary virtues: temperance (purple) with justice (blue); fortitude (green) with prudence (black); and vice versa. Colours referring to the theological virtues are assigned to the vertexes of the triangle. Both forms – the triangle and the square – in turn represent heaven and earth [11].¹⁵ In the *Tao Te Ching*, "Heaven covers and the Earth sustains"; this is the traditional formula which determines the roles of the two main complementary virtues; it also symbolically defines their position, respectively upper and lower, compared to the 'ten thousand entities', in other words to the whole of creation.¹⁶

However, traditional lore was expressed with further alchemical and astrological similarities. Red corresponded to the planet Mars and to iron, since ferrous salts are red¹⁷; green corresponded to the planet Venus and to brass, since copper oxides are green. Black represented lead because it is spent and supple; since it was opaque and therefore different to other metals, unlike other colours it had to be characterised by a contrasting colour. And since lead is a metal that can easily be melted, and has a somewhat paste-like consistency, it was associated due to this similarity with Saturn, an evolving planet whose mass has not yet solidified and can therefore be considered as still being in a paste-like state.

Blue was used to represent tin and the planet Jupiter, probably because this metal was for a long time considered very rare.¹⁸ The link between purple and an element and planet is extremely interesting and fully reflects the traditional viewpoint. In fact, this colour has been identified by several heraldists as enamel, while others consider it a metal. The multicoloured and androgynous nature embodied by purple



Fig. 5 – The heaven of heroes and heroines, detail of the fresco in the Baronial Hall in the Manta Castle in Cuneo. Left, Geoffrey of Buglione, *Advocatus Sancti Sepulchri*, wearing the arms of the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

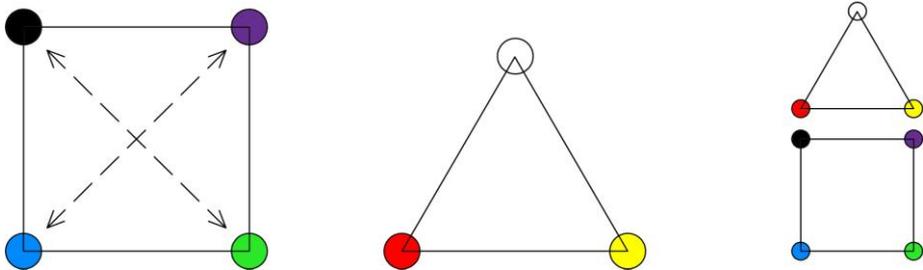


Fig. 6 – The seven heraldic colours and seven Christian virtues. The square with the four cardinal virtues, earth; the triangle with the three theological virtues, heaven [14].

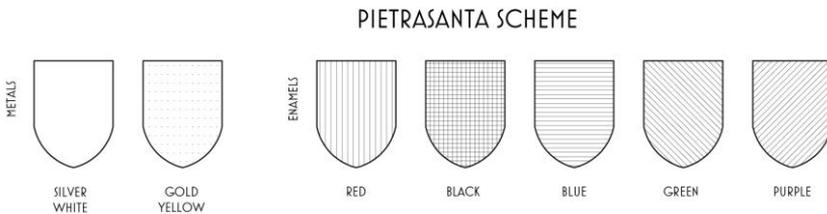


Fig. 7 – A point and line system is used to depict colours in black and white. The system was invented by the Jesuit Father Silvestro da Pietrasanta and illustrated in his manuscript “*Tesseræ Gentilitiæ*” dated 1638.

was associated with the planet Mercury and the element mercury which alchemists have always considered as undifferentiated in power and with an undifferentiated orientation [2].¹⁹

In Christian orthodoxy, the colours of heraldic blazons are present on the liturgical vestments of priests who administer the sacraments. Father Cadet de Gassicourt and Baron Roure de Paulin explain that the priest's garments are white or the 'colour of the day' when performing mass; it is violet for confession and extreme unction, while during baptism it is violet at the beginning of the ceremony and white at the end; during confirmation the stole and cope are both white; during the celebration of a marriage, the stole is either white if the mass can be celebrated *pro sposo et sponsa*, or else the 'colour of the day'; the same is true during ordination [2].²⁰

Five colours are used by the Roman church and in some cases also by the *Ordo* of the various dioceses: white, red, purple, green, and black. Two more colours have to be added to reach the seven heraldic colours of enamels and metals: gold, which can replace the 'colour of the day' in order to make the ceremony more lavish and magnificent, and blue, used in Spain and Brazil for the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for which special dispensation must be granted by the Holy See [2].²¹

Explaining how the Church uses these colours is easily done: white (silver) is the symbol of purity and Faith; red represents the fire of charity, a gift of the Holy Spirit, the blood of Christ and that of the Martyrs²²; purple recalls sadness and penitence; green, used after the Epiphany, represents the hope of every Christian in a better life; finally, black is the sign for mourning.

COLOUR	ELEMENT	PLANET	MEANING
White	Silver	Moon	Purity/Faith
Yellow	Gold	Sun	Justice/Love
Red	Iron	Mars	Charity/Courage
Black	Lead	Saturn	Mourning
Blue	Tin	Jupiter	Devotion/Loyalty
Green	Copper	Venus	Hope/Honour
Purple	Mercury	Mercury	Sadness/Penitence

Tab. 1 – The heraldic colours, elements, corresponding planets, and their meaning.

In conclusion we would like to once more draw the reader's attention to the symbolic nature of colour which needs no further attributes except to link the conceptual idea to the colour itself. This is further proof of what is clearly transmitted by the pragmatism associated with contingencies; in the early twelfth century, in order to facilitate greater distribution of heraldic texts, it was necessary to shed the restrictions imposed by miniature art, a goal achieved by using printed matter.

However, this raised the question of how to transmit the essence of heraldry – colours – in black and white. It was Vulson de la Colombière, a Frenchman, who invented the graphic method to portray colours; he devised a series of backgrounds made up of lines and points and thereby allowing heraldry to become printed matter.

In 1637, the method was reviewed in the *Tesserae Gentilitiae* written by the Jesuit Father Silvestro da Pietrasanta who classified it, turned it into a science within the framework of heraldic art, and made it accessible to the public at large. Silver (white) was indicated by the whiteness of the page, gold (yellow) by stippling, red by vertical parallel lines, black by horizontal and vertical parallel lines, green by oblique parallel lines from top right to bottom left, and purple by oblique parallel lines from top left to bottom right [13].²³

References

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- [14] D. L. Galbreath e L. Jéquier, *Lehrbuch der Heraldik*, Lausanne 1978.

¹ The *Bayeux Tapestry* (c. 1080) is considered to be the first document in which it is possible to distinguish persons or uniform groups of horsemen displaying 'group symbols'; the most famous are the dragon and the swastika. Several scholars consider that a 'preheraldic' period ensued between roughly 1100 and 1200 in which various figures are canonised and governed by pre-established rules. [1], p.307; [2], pp.89-101

² Michel Popoff (27 July 1942,) is the current President of the *Académie internationale d'héraldique*. [3].

³ The term 'enamel', *émaux*, indicates the kind of hue used on the coat of arms, which is in fact an enamel.

⁴ We should mention that it is possible to talk of Italian, French, German, and other heraldries. In fact even rarer colours such as brown, murrey, ash-grey, orange, sanguine and *tanné* are used in other countries.

⁵ According to Louis Charbonneau-Lassay, the contrast between gold and silver was intended by the Pope to represent the Old and New Testament. The Mosaic Law, depicted by silver, and the Christian Law, depicted by gold, were both promulgated in the land of the new Kingdom of Jerusalem. [4], p.101

⁶ The significance of the word 'symbol' has lost its deeper meaning, becoming a simple 'sign'. The latter is based on a relationship of similarity or correspondence, between any idea to be expressed, and a graphic, verbal, or any other kind of image. Instead symbols express analogy between different kinds of reality, a correspondence linking all the degrees of universal Existence that can put the human state into communication with the other superior states of being. [5], pp.137-160

⁷ [2], p.190

⁸ [6], pp.20-24

⁹ [7], p.130

¹⁰ Originally the transcription and re-elaboration of just one text, the so-called *Physiologus*, probably dating to the second century. Bestiaries become a very popular literary genre in the Middle Ages; they were both a product of the imagination and a scientific text. They included real animals and fantastic creatures, classifying the wisdom of the ancients and embellishing it with observations based on a medieval mentality. [8], pp.8-9

¹¹ [2], pp.174-175

¹² “Decourcelles is mistaken when he thinks that the Jews and grand masons are the only ones who understand the science of symbolism; heraldists should understand it thoroughly if they want to understand their art. The heraldic shield, enamels, metals, partitions, etc., are hieroglyphics which, although reduced in number, contain all the elements of the feudal language”^[9]. Translated by the author.

¹³ [10] “If one loves justice, the fruits of her work are virtues. For she teaches moderation and prudence, justice and fortitude”, (*The Book of Wisdom* 8,7). Translated by the author.

¹⁴ [10] “Through these [virtues], he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature, after escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire”. (*2Peter*. 1,4); the text in square brackets is by the author.

¹⁵[11], pp. 79-92

¹⁶ With regard to the heaven that ‘covers’, an identical symbolism is expressed in the Greek word *Oouranos*, equivalent to the Sanskrit *Varuna*, from the root *var*, to cover, as well as the Latin *Caelum*, from *caelare*, ‘to hide’ or ‘cover’. [12], p.15

¹⁷ Including iron sesquioxide better known as rust.

¹⁸ Until the mid-thirteenth century, tin came only from the British Isles.

¹⁹ [2], p.193

²⁰ F. Cadet de Gassicourt and Barone Du Roure de Paulin, ‘Hermatism in Heraldic Art’ in [2], pp.194-195

²¹ The liturgical information cited here was provided by Mons. Le Mâle di Bayeux. [2], p.195.

²² Used respectively for the feasts of Pentecost, the Holy Cross and martyrs.

²³ In heraldry, ‘right’ and ‘left’ always refer to the person wearing the shield, so the right side of the coat of arms is left for the onlooker. [13].