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Colours – From the First World War to the Museum

Since 2014, the Museum of Colours association has worked on a multidisciplinary concept to explore colour in a museum context. In the frame of the commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War, this topic may seem unexpected. However, there at least three ways to look at this major conflict through the prism of colours.

First, our imagining of the First World War is deeply related to black and white, reflecting most documentation that we have of it. It shows how strongly our representation is impacted by media, even if we know that the world wasn't black and white back then. The autochrome technology, developed in 1907 by the Lumières brothers, allows us to get a colourful insight of this chapter of history, even if the colours of the autochromes appear quite unreal to us. Re-colourisers of historical pictures and movies spend hours in research to pick up the right colours and give "life" back to these documents – providing us the feeling that these actions are taking place closer to us.

Colours are an important part of military strategy during war. The First World War saw the invention of camouflage patterns and the creation of specialised units in the different armies comprising artists and craftsmen: painters, carpenters, sheet metal workers and plasterers. Camouflage became an important defensive technology of trench warfare between November 1914 and August 1918.

Regarding uniforms, the shift from moving battle to trench warfare, and the impossibility, after the declaration of war, of importing chemical dyes from Germany, were the reasons why French uniforms changed colour from red (garance) to blue (so-called horizon blue).¹

1 Cochet, F. and Porte, R. eds. (2008) *Dictionnaire de la Grande Guerre 1914–1918*, "Tenue de Campagne". Paris: Robert Laffont, p. 1119.

The introduction of camouflage and changes to uniform colour were underpinned by changing ideas about visibility and identity in war-time,² and shifting codes of honour in military societies.³

Finally, the opposition of nations in the First World War was fundamentally represented by the symbolic colours of their flags and other elements of identification which accompanied all armies in the conflict.

These examples illustrate that colours are everywhere, and their presence, absence or shade has an impact of our perception of different times, without us noticing their true value.

Our project for a Museum of Colours is meant to raise awareness about the role and influence that colours have in our environment. Since 2014, we have created an international network of colour professionals and a cycle of exhibitions, which have allowed us to develop a general plan for the Museum of Colours.

Following an anthropological approach to colours related to humans and vice versa, the pathway through the museum will guide visitors from the perception of colours to the symbolic meanings of colours, through the colours in nature, the production and use of colours, and colours linked to artistic creation.

Beyond being a place of information, we believe the Museum of Colours will become a place to convey values such as the protection of the environment and multiculturalism.

2 Delouche, D. (2012) “Le Camouflage”. In: Audoin-Rouzeau, S. and Becker, J. eds. *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre 1*, Paris: Bayard Culture, p. 760.

3 Coutin, C. (2012) *Tromper l'ennemi: l'invention du Camouflage Moderne en 1914-1918*. Paris: coédition Ministère de la Défense (SGA/DMPA) et les éditions Pierre de Taillac, p. 240.