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**Colour Turn**



**VIII. Reviews**

Loske Alexandra, and Sarah Lowengard.  
2024. *The Book of Colour Concepts*. Edited by  
Alexandra Loske. Köln, Germany: TASCHEN.

*Reviewed by Susanne Marschall*

Review of *The Book of Colour Concepts* by Alexandra Loske and Sarah Lowengard. Reviewed  
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In 2024, the publishing house *Taschen* released two elaborately designed volumes that are as important as they are weighty, under the title *The Book of Colour Concepts*. These books, housed in a slipcase, are indispensable from any colour researcher's

bookshelf. On a total of 850 large-format and colour-printed pages, the two authors Alexandra Loske and Sarah Lowengard unfold an enormous compilation of knowledge on centuries of engagement with the phenomenon of colour by scientists and artists – while many of them could be assigned to either realm. After all, the best colour research tends to emerge from 'between the chairs', as it most play a role in all fields of the natural sciences, life sciences, and humanities, yet its effects are often overlooked.

The colour concepts selected by Loske and Lowengard are explored through the physics of lights, the materiality of colour pigments and their substrates, the interplay between colour perception and the colour design of art and environment, and ultimately the historical evolution of the effect of colour through the development of new light sources and dyeing techniques. Moreover, the biological and physiological classification attempts, whether concerning humans, animals, plants or minerals, are and have often been determined by colours. Unfortunately, skin-colour-racism in the human anthropology, with all its negative effects, can also be traced back to such classificatory research approaches. In linguistic colour research, the interactions between perception, language and colour nomenclature are examined. The transcultural parallels or interculturally differing meanings of colour hues within the grammar of different sign languages hold significant relevance in cultural studies. Not to forget the many technical challenges of reproducing colour compositions in print or in the display of colours through photography and film. The colour concepts compiled by Loske and Lowengard relate to and overlap with all these research fields. This collection of colour concepts, compiled by an art historian and a technology historian, is also a testament to how much there remains to be discovered and learned in this field. Both authors have devoted their research careers to colour, as evidenced by their impressive publication records.

The two perspectives emerging from Loske's and Lowengard's respective research fields complement each other exceptionally, as demonstrated by the two outstanding introductions, printed in four languages and covering 277 years of colour research from 1686 to 1963. The somewhat cumbersome organization of images across four translations of the same text, which occasionally leads to a search for the illustration corresponding to the argument, is worth mentioning as a minor drawback. However, the chosen solution allows for an abundance of visual examples, which – once the system is understood – can be located easily by flipping back and forth. With this, the publication's print quality deserves praise. All creators, specifically in old times of hand-painted colour charts have struggled with the delicate interplay of light, pigment and material to achieve optimal results. The editors and publisher have exercised the utmost care in reproducing these images in print.

Loske's and Lowengard's research on the history and significance of colour concepts is both profound in its introductory texts and expansive in its chronologically arranged, richly illustrated short treatises of individual colour concepts. While no book of this nature can attempt to be exhaustive, it does offer new and extraordinary insights. The historically oriented literature on colour research has traditionally been overrepresented through names such as Isaac Newton (1643–1727), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Albert Henry Munsell (1858–1918), Johannes Itten (1888–1967), and Josef Albers (1888–1976). However, alongside their systematic engagement with these established figures, Loske and Lowengard explore a lesser-traveled research path: Loske and Lowengard seek out and rediscover women in theoretical, experimental and artistic colour research whose extraordinary and pioneering contributions were marginalized and have since faded into oblivion. Their research has yielded significant findings: treatises, illustrations of colour concepts, and paintings by figures such as Mary Gartside (1755–1819), Elizabeth Burris-Meyer (1899–1989), Emily Noyes-Vanderpoel (1842–1939), Christine Ladd-Franklin (1847–1930), and Carry van Biema (1881–1942). Many more women whose contributions to colour research urgently deserve greater recognition are also featured in the Book of Colour Concepts.

Discoveries like these highlight the many gaps in the history of science and art concerning women and encourage further individual investigation. The story of the Jewish theorist and artist Carry van Biema, who was murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942, poses as an example for the violent erasure of women's contributions. The first edition of Carry van Biema's book *Farben und Formen als lebendige Kräfte* (literally Colours and forms as living forces), published 1930 by Eugen Diedrichs Verlag, was destroyed by the Nazis, except for a few copies. Only in 1997, issued by the Ravensburger Buchverlag, was a reprint published but has since become widely unavailable. At least this work, which was 'widely discussed in Germany at the time of its release' (Vol. 2, p. 621), has been preserved, allowing Loske and Lowengard to include nineteen of its aesthetically striking and conceptually insightful colour charts in their *Book of Colour Concepts*. Besides an in-depth examination of Goethe's colour studies and Adolf Hölzel's (1853-1934) paintings, van Biema draws a striking comparison between colour and music, hue and musical tone, through which she approaches the project of grasping the living power of colour in contrasts and through systematic colour mixtures. She recommends looking at one of Goethe's color charts (panel VII, p. 624) through a prism in order to study 'strange transformations, shifts, irridations, glowing rims and fringes.' Following this advice, coloured edge spectra appear before the eye challenge the surface of the printed image. Once again, the vibrant force of colour becomes visible – sometimes even remaining hidden within the invisible. Alexandra Loske and Sarah Lowengard's multilingual work *The Book of Colour Concepts* is so rich in material, in visualisations, of knowledge, in references between disciplines, that it will stay with its readers for a very long time.

## References:

Loske Alexandra, and Sarah Lowengard. 2024. *The Book of Colour Concepts*. Edited by Alexandra Loske. Köln, Germany: TASCHEN.