

**LLI - Colors & Creatures: Symbolism in Western Art**  
**Summer 2023 - Wednesdays, 10 – 11:30, July 12, 19**  
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Specific colors were often used in art to convey meaning. What does the blue that Mary usually wears in Renaissance paintings mean? Animals and insects also came to symbolize individuals and concepts. Sometimes the meaning of a creature varied by culture. How did the snake that conveyed healing in the ancient world transform into the reviled tempter of Genesis? Using examples from Egypt, Crete, Greece, Rome, Early Christian and Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Europe, and even the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we'll examine the symbolism of colors in the first class and creatures in the second one.

**Colors: Symbolism in Western Art**

BLUE – Heaven, heavenly love / Truth, the unveiling of truth / Melancholy

RED – Power / Blood / Love, hate

The color for martyred saints

The color for Pentecost

WHITE – Innocence, purity, holiness

The liturgical color for Easter, Christmas

GOLD / YELLOW – Sun, divinity / Jealousy, treason, deceit

BLACK – Death, mourning, sickness / Devil, witchcraft, underworld

Liturgical color for Good Friday

Black + white = humility, purity

BROWN – Spiritual death, degradation / Renunciation of the world

PURPLE – Royalty / Sorrow, penitence

The color for Advent, Lent

VIOLET – Love, truth / Passion, suffering

The color worn by penitents

GREEN – Vegetation, spring / Triumph of life over death

Charity / Regeneration of the soul through good works

The liturgical color for Epiphany

RAINBOW – ROY G BIV = Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet

Union, reconciliation / God's covenant, hope

Used as Christ's throne in the Last Judgment

## Creatures: Symbolism in Western Art

BEE – associated with gods + rulers / activity, industriousness, diligence, work, mutual support + community, Catholic church / Barbarini, Bonaparte

DOG – fidelity, faithfulness

DONKEY / ASS – the animal of the poor, indicates humility

DOVE – purity, peace / Holy Spirit / inspiration

EAGLE – Zeus/Jupiter / Resurrection, new life, generosity / St. John the Evangelist

ELEPHANT – military victory

FISH – Christ, Christianity, baptism / attribute of Tobias, Peter

GOLDFINCH – Passion of Christ

LAMB – sacrificial animal, Christ / attribute of St. Agnes

LION – Hercules / strength, majesty, courage, fortitude / Resurrection / St. Mark, St. Jerome

OWL – Athena/Minerva, wisdom / darkness, Satan / attribute of Christ

OX – strength, patience, sacrificial animal / Jews / Christ / St. Luke

PEACOCK – vanity, pride / immortality, Resurrection

PELICAN – love, charity / sacrifice of Christ

PIG / HOG – unclean, gluttony, sensuality / attribute of St. Anthony Abbot

SNAKE / SERPENT – fertility, wisdom, healing / evil, sin, temptation, Devil

WHALE – cunning of the Devil, mouth = gates of Hell / associated with Jonah

WOLF – Apollo, Mars / sacred to Romans / associated with St. Francis

UNICORN – purity, feminine chastity / Mary / Christ

Some references:

Ferguson, George: *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*

Finlay, Victoria: *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*, 2007

Hall, James: *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*

St. Clair, Kassia: *The Secret Lives of Color*, 2017

Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art – Color exhibit, self-guided

<https://asia.si.edu/explore-art-culture/art-stories/color>