

**Blue: Color and Concept.** BEINECKE RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY. Mounted at the Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. 21 January to 19 April 2014. Curated by NANCY KUHL.

Colour is so intrinsic to the physical world that we can easily overlook its presence in everyday objects. The exhibition *Blue: Color and Concept*, on view at the Beinecke Library at Yale University in early 2014, took on this subject to show how it fundamentally pervades life and artistic expression. The wide-ranging exhibition explored with broad strokes the cultural history of the colour blue in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American arts and letters.

Institutional collections – whether libraries, archives, or objects-based museums – traditionally categorize holdings by creator, title, subject, or format. Exhibitions drawing on these collections often explore a single movement or an individual author, artist, or work, displaying together related objects to delineate the history or full scope of the historical or artistic theme under examination. By focusing on a colour, however, a range of otherwise conceptually diverse objects is suddenly cohesive, building a material portrait of an incidental trait. This exhibition asked what can be learned by thinking about archival holdings from a different perspective, from the viewpoint of a colour, and encouraged a visual reading of objects traditionally read for linguistic content. Bringing together books, manuscripts, and visual works by looking at this single quality resulted in unexpected juxtapositions, and encouraged the visitor to make new kinds of conceptual connections between otherwise seemingly unrelated objects. As a colour, blue is a quality – it is produced in nature and by man, and can be applied to everything from book covers to enamelled cigarette cases. But conceptually, blue has many definitions outside of the purely visual: it also describes emotions and music, and has other colloquial meanings. In this exhibition, Nancy Kuhl, Curator, Poetry, Yale Collection of American Literature, deftly explored all of these connotations and uses of blue.

Because the Beinecke's exhibition space is spread throughout the building and not confined to a designated gallery or room, there were multiple points of entry to the main sections of the exhibition. This tricky layout was effectively navigated by mounting displays in two complementary but autonomous sections that could be explored from either entry point. Both sections fully explicated the themes and questions of the exhibition, but material was not duplicated in either: visitors were more fully engaged by going through both sections, but following a particular trajectory through the exhibition was not necessary. Placed between the sections, and serving to unify the exhibition, was a display of original and vinyl facsimiles of blueprints for amusement park attractions. These photomechanical reproductions were printed on paper that was treated with light-sensitive iron-based compounds, which caused them to



*Blue: Color and Concept.* Image created by Megan Mangum at Words That Work. Image provided courtesy of Beinecke Library, Yale University.

turn blue in the process.<sup>1</sup> The fact that colour informed language – the blue of the paper leading to the name of the format – was an important starting point for either section of the exhibition, each of which opened with an introductory case that brought together a representative sample of the range of materials on view throughout the space. This included books, literary manuscripts, photographs, sheet music, realia, and industrial manuals, all blue in colour.

For example, a copy of *The Practical Ostrich Feather Dyer*, published in 1888, was opened to a page that contained four pieces of real feathers, each a different hue, which hinted at developments in the production of commercial dyes in the nineteenth century. This was shown alongside David Hockney's 1977 etchings for Wallace Stevens's "The Man with the Blue Guitar." The poem, which in turn was informed by Pablo Picasso's oil painting *The Old Guitarist*, concerns the power of imagination and possibility, and the inclusion of these prints was a remark on the creative process through the re-appropriation and use of colour, language, and theme. Here, too, visitors saw Langston

1 There was nothing misleading about the inclusion of reproductions here: label copy clearly indicated which blueprints were originals and which were facsimiles.

Hughes's blue enamelled cigarette case (a gift from Carl Van Vechten), 1894 photographs of extra-morainic deposits in eastern Pennsylvania, a draft of Richard Wright's "Blue Black Blues," and volumes of the standard edition of Freud's works in blue wrappers. These tightly focused juxtapositions were extrapolated and explored more fully throughout the rest of the exhibition. Separate vignettes investigated the varying definitions of blue, whether physical, associative and musical (or aural), or conceptual.

One case was devoted to prints from *Insectes* (ca. 1925) and *Papillons* (1926) by French entomologist, artist, and designer Eugène Alain Séguéy. These highly detailed and richly coloured illustrations of beetles, moths, butterflies, and other insects are examples of pochoir printing, in which stencils are used to apply individual colours to black-and-white images. In addition to explaining the printing process that created the vibrant illustrations, a separate label in this case, positioned alongside a light meter, described preservation requirements for light-sensitive works on paper. This allowed visitors to engage with the material on yet another level, and further reinforced the concept that colour is part of the material world, and that historic artifacts (in this exhibition, largely works on paper) must be thoughtfully cared for in order to preserve their physical traits. The physicality of blue was further considered in a case devoted to artist Robert Henri's notes on colour and experiments with pigment samples, in another case featuring cyanotype photography, and in displays of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century commercially published books, all bound in various shades of blue stamped cloth. But perhaps one of the most interesting sections was focused on literary modernism. Using blue Air Mail stationery as an entry point, this section discussed the relationships between the modernist poets H.D., Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, and others.

Musical and aural associations were explored in a case filled with material documenting the life and work of W.C. Handy, who was known as the Father of the Blues, and whose "St. Louis Blues" may be the most recorded song in history. It would have been interesting to investigate the link between the term and the colour, but the etymology of "the blues" was not explicated here. But the point – that blue is more than a colour – was effectively made with sheet music, manuscripts, and illustrations that charted the early history of the musical form. Some of the works displayed, such as a manuscript inscribed to Carl Van Vechten, had interesting connections to figures of the Harlem Renaissance. On view was a 1926 anthology illustrated by Miguel Covarrubias, who also illustrated Langston Hughes's first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues* (also published in 1926), and nearby was an array of manuscripts and sheet music from the poet's papers in the Beinecke's James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection. These sections on the history of the musical form and related poetry were further enriched by the exhibition's web

page and its links to a Spotify playlist.<sup>2</sup> This additional layer of interpretation allowed visitors to listen to recordings of the works on view, further reinforcing the concept of “blue” as an artistic expression.

Other colloquial definitions of blue were explored in displays of ephemera, printed books, and photographs. Visitors learned that, as an adjective, “blue” can be used to describe something pornographic. This definition was illustrated with displays of printed posters and movie cards related to Andy Warhol’s *Blue Movie* (1969) and copies of Blue Book directories that described and listed the addresses of prostitution houses in Storyville, a fifteen-block neighbourhood of New Orleans in which prostitution was legally regulated at the turn of the twentieth century. Black-and-white photographs of prostitutes from the same neighbourhood, taken by E.J. Bellocq, accompanied these directories.

Throughout the exhibition, each case was densely packed with archival materials and contained generally a single label to describe the contents. If a visitor was curious about an individual object on display, there was a detailed pamphlet available to navigate the specific works. The flat and bound objects were visually engaging, and the presentation of the materials reinforced the exhibition’s exploration of a dense network of associations among a diverse range of items. Drawing together materials in this way enhanced the educational potential of the exhibition: visitors were invited to engage on multiple levels with a variety of formats, and to learn about topics as diverse as modernist poetry, cyanotype photography, the history of prostitution regulation, and blues music.

The interesting and diverse agglomeration of material in this exhibition engaged with the stated topic – the history and uses of a colour – but also with the more fundamental question of what we can learn from archival holdings by thinking across genres and outside of traditional methods of categorization. Catalogues and finding aids record only so much detail about individual objects. Colour is not normally noted, unless it is unusual for the edition or notable in some way, and therefore this information remains “hidden,” in much the same way as it remains hidden in unprocessed or uncatalogued archival holdings. This exhibition, therefore, was successful not only in building a material portrait of a colour, but also – and perhaps more interestingly – in the way that it incisively highlighted ways to think across archival holdings.

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2 See Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Exhibitions (current and past), *Blue: Color and Concept*, accessed 23 August 2014, <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu/exhibitions/blue-color-and-concept>. The playlist of more than thirty songs is still available on the exhibition web page, and there is a link to the exhibition checklist.