



Blurb

What's your favourite colour? Ever wondered how it got from nature into your paints?

Long ago, brilliant blues, glittering greens and radical reds weren't easy to make. Artists had to crush beetles, burn bones and even drain sea snails to create colours.

Come on a journey through history, packed with amazing stories, dazzling illustrations and iconic artworks from around the world to discover how we solved the mystery of colour.

Written by a master paint maker and colour expert, this book will inspire curious minds to see colour in a whole new way!

Synopsis

The Mystery of Colour takes readers on a fascinating journey through time to uncover how humans discovered, created and used colour.

From the earliest earthy pigments made from ochre, charcoal and bone, to rare and precious colours like lapis lazuli and Tyrian purple, the book reveals the surprising, sometimes strange and often astonishing origins of the colours we use today. Readers will discover that colours were once made from crushed insects, sea snails, minerals and even unusual substances like cow wee!

Blending science, history and art, the book explores how colour has shaped cultures, beliefs and artistic expression across the world. It also explains how paints are made, introduces important artworks and artists, and looks ahead to the future of colour through modern scientific discoveries.

Beautifully illustrated and full of fascinating facts, *The Mystery of Colour* encourages readers to see colour not just as something we observe, but as something humans have actively created, experimented with and transformed over time.

Colours are not just visual – they are shaped by history, culture and scientific discovery, and each colour carries stories from the past.

Themes



HISTORY OF COLOUR



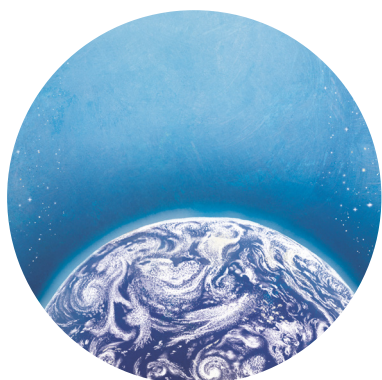
SCIENCE & DISCOVERY



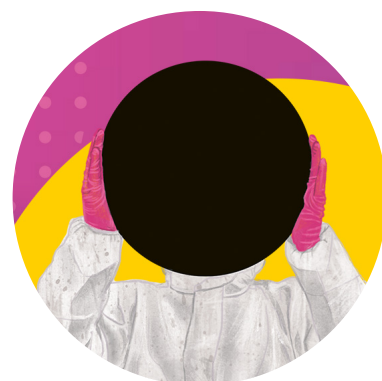
ART & EXPRESSION



CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE
OF COLOUR



ETHICS & CHANGE
OVER TIME



INNOVATION & THE FUTURE



Writing style

The Mystery of Colour is written in an engaging, accessible nonfiction style that blends storytelling with factual explanation. The text moves through history, using vivid, sometimes surprising, sometimes humorous examples to spark curiosity and maintain reader interest. Technical ideas about colour, materials, processes and different styles of artwork are explained in clear, age-appropriate language, with a strong emphasis on cause and effect (how colours were made, why they were rare and how this changed over time). The use of direct address and rhetorical questions invites readers to think like scientists and artists, encouraging inquiry and reflection.

Short sections, headings and carefully selected details support comprehension, while also offering opportunities for further discussion. Practical and fun experiments and projects add to the book's interactive appeal, allowing readers to test ideas, explore materials and experience the science and art of colour firsthand. The book also includes a contents page, glossary and details about the artworks shown throughout the book.

Illustration style

The illustrations are rich and visually engaging, combining artistic flair with informative detail. They support and extend the text by showing historical processes, materials and artworks in ways that make complex ideas easier to understand. Colour is used purposefully as a central storytelling device, highlighting contrasts, transformations and the emotional impact of different hues.

About the author

David Coles is a real-life colour detective who has spent years investigating how colours are transformed into pigments and paints. David started his journey in his dad's art studio before going to art school where he learned all about traditional painting techniques. After graduating he experimented to create his own paints – grinding precious stones and mixing magical powders to make colours – just like the artists of long ago.

Today, David runs Langridge Artist Colours, where he creates some of the world's most beautiful paints. He wrote a grown-up book, called *Chromatopia*, all about the history of colour, and now he's sharing those incredible stories with kids in this children's edition. David loves showing how colours have shaped art and history, and he hopes this book will inspire readers to see the rainbow in a whole new way.

About the illustrator

Margaux Samson-Abadie grew up in a small coastal town in the west of France, playing pretend with her sister and drawing anthropomorphic animals. With a background in fashion and surface pattern design, her illustrative work is intricate and colourful, and rooted in her fascination for nature and cherished childhood memories.



Australian curriculum links

English:

- Responding to texts
- Language features and vocabulary
- Creating informative and imaginative texts

Science:

- Physical sciences (light and colour)
- Chemical sciences (materials and changes)
- Scientific inquiry and discovery

Visual Arts:

- Use of colour in artworks
- Exploring materials and techniques
- Responding to artworks across cultures

History:

- How people lived in the past
- Cultural practices and discoveries
- Technological change over time

HASS (Humanities and Social Sciences):

- Cultural traditions and beliefs
- Trade and exchange

Design & Technologies:

- Processes of making (eg: paint production steps)
- Materials and sustainability



Cross-curriculum priorities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures:

- Exploring First Nations art practices
- Understanding storytelling through art

Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia:

- Looking at colour use in Asian art or traditions
- Exploring where certain pigments or dyes originated

Sustainability:

- Natural vs synthetic pigments
- Environmental impacts of producing colour
- Using sustainable materials in art
- Ethical use of natural resources





Notes

Before reading the text

- What is your favourite colour? Why?
- Where do you think colours come from?
- Do you think colours have always existed the way we see them now?
- Can colours have meanings?
- Create a mind map for one colour:
 - Where do we see it?
 - What does it represent?
 - How does it make us feel?

After reading the text

Colour through time

The Mystery of Colour explores the discovery and development of colour through history.

- What problems do you think people faced when trying to make colours in the past?
- Why would some colours have been more valuable or rarer than others?
- How do you think the invention of new colours changed art and society?
- Do you think it is easier or harder to make colours today? Why?
- How did scientific discoveries change the history of colour?
- Were all methods of making colour fair or safe?

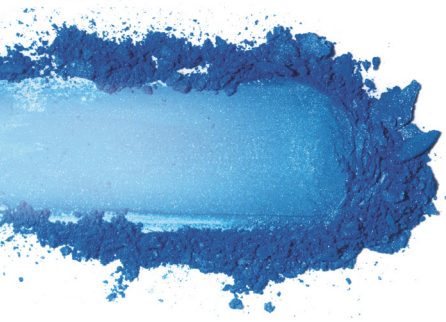
Class timeline



- Create a class colour timeline that shows:
 - Early pigments
 - Ancient discoveries
 - Medieval pigments
 - Modern synthetic colours
- Divide the class into small groups. Assign each group a period in history. Have each group researches their time period and creates a poster presentation. Include the following:
 - What colours were used during your assigned time period?
 - Where did they come from?
 - How were they made?
- Include drawings, labels and short descriptions to explain the use of colour in your moment in history.
- When every group has finished, join each poster presentation to make a timeline that shows colour through history. Discuss:
 - What is the biggest change you notice over time?
 - Why do you think people kept trying to create new colours?
 - How does art from long ago look different from art today?
 - If you were an artist in the past, which time period would you choose? Why?
 - How would your life be different if you only had access to a few colours?

History, culture and colour

- How can a colour tell us something about the past?
- Why might some colours have been rare or valuable in days past?
- How did people's access to colours change over time?
- What can colours tell us about a culture's beliefs, environment or resources?
- Do colours mean the same thing all around the world?



- Can you think of a colour that has a special meaning in your own life or culture?
- Choose a few colours (eg: red, white, black, gold) and discuss their meanings in different cultures.
- Why might the same colour mean different things in different places?
- How do celebrations, clothing or traditions use colour?
- Can colours sometimes be misunderstood between cultures?

Be a colour detective

Explore how a colour has changed over time.

- Choose one colour and investigate:
 - Where it came from (plants, minerals, animals)
 - How it was made
 - Why it was important
 - Who could use it (everyone? Only the wealthy?)
- Present your findings as a mini 'museum label' (this link may be useful: stqry.com/blog/museum-labels-guide).
- Alternatively, write a short 'biography' of the colour.



Primary and secondary colours

- What are the three primary colours?
- Why do you think they are called *primary* colours?
- What happens when you mix two primary colours together?
- Name the secondary colours that are made by mixing primaries.
- Where have you seen these colours in nature, art or everyday life?





Colour mixing lab

Explore how primary colours combine to create secondary colours.

- You will need:
 - Red, blue and yellow paint (or food colouring and water)
 - White paper or a mixing palette
 - Brushes (droppers will be easier if you are using liquid colour)
 - Water and paper towels
- Paint three separate circles: one red, one blue and one yellow.
- Mix:
 - Red + yellow
 - Blue + yellow
 - Red + blue
 - Paint a new circle for each mixture
 - Label each new colour with its name (orange, green, purple)
 - Add a tiny bit more of one colour to see how the shade changes
 - Try mixing all three primary colours. What happens?



Early artists and artworks

For tens of thousands of years, First Nations peoples of Australia have used natural pigments such as ochre (earth rich in iron) to create art. These artworks are not just decorative – they are deeply meaningful and connected to culture, stories and Country.

Important note: We can be inspired by the idea of storytelling through art, but we should always be respectful and not copy sacred or special cultural symbols.

Look at examples of First Nations Australian rock art from places such as Ubirr or Nourlangie in Kakadu National Park, where artists from long ago used ochre for to tell stories about animals, people and Country.



The following First Nations artists use ochre traditions in their paintings:

- Emily Kame Kngwarreye – known for Yam Dreaming series
- Rover Thomas – ochre paintings inspired by Country and stories
- Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri – symbolic storytelling works
- Johnny Warrkatja Malibirr – bark painting using natural pigments

Discuss:

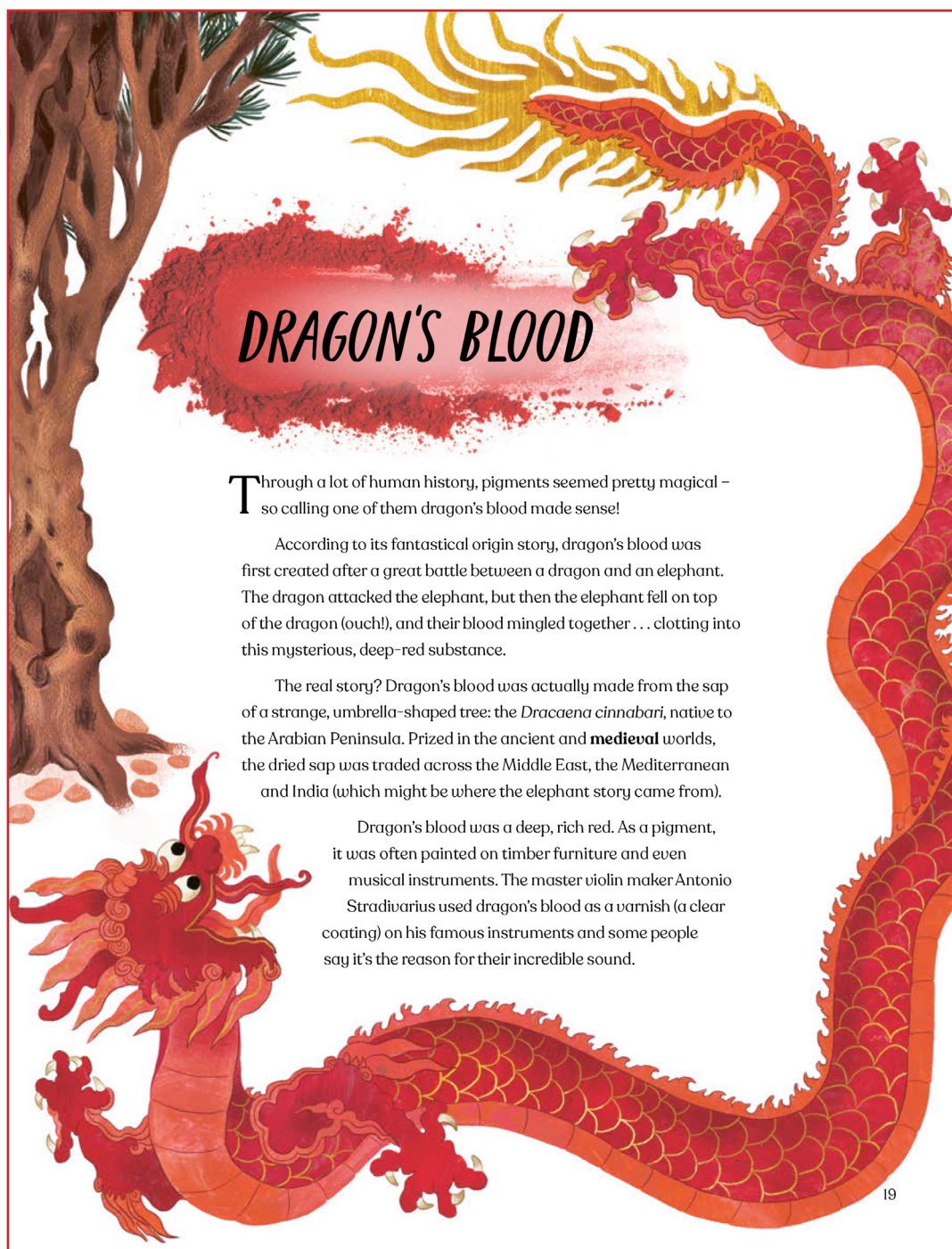
- What colours can you see in these artworks?
- Where do you think these colours came from?
- What shapes and symbols can you see?
- What do you think the artist is showing or telling the viewer?
- Why might these artworks be important to the people who made them?

Tell a story without words

- Long ago, people told stories through pictures instead of words. Explore how images and symbols can communicate meaning, inspired by early ochre art. You will need:
 - paper (or brown paper for an earthy feel)
 - Red, yellow, brown and white paint to mimic ochre tones
 - Sticks or fingers for painting
 - A simple story (eg: a journey, an animal encounter, a day outside)
- Create your story using shapes, patterns and symbols (no words!) using the ochre-like colours.
- Can you understand each other's stories without words?
- What clues helped you figure out the meaning?
- Was it easy or difficult to tell a story this way?

Imagining colours

- On page 19 of *The Mystery of Colour*, the author shares both a fantastical story and a real-life explanation for the pigment dragon's blood. Why do you think people created stories to explain colours in the past?
- Which version do you find more interesting – the imagined story or the real one? Why?
- Can you think of other things in nature that people might once have explained using stories?
- Why do you think colour names are often so descriptive or unusual?

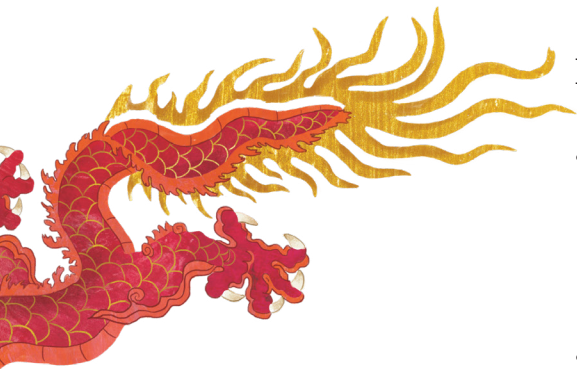


Create your own colour

- Let your imagination run wild and invent a colour, its origin and its purpose!
 - What is your colour called?
 - What does it look like (bright, glowing, dark, shimmering, speckled)?
 - Where is it found?
- Write a short origin story to explain where your colour comes from.
 - Is it created by a creature, like in the dragon's blood story?
 - Does it come from a place (deep ocean, outer space, hidden cave)?
 - Was it discovered by a person or passed down through time?
 - Does it have any special powers or meaning?

Design your paint

- Create a 'paint product' for your colour.
 - Draw or paint the colour
 - Design a label for your paint. Include the colour name, a short description and a symbol or illustration
- You might like to design a whole box of paints with imaginative names and labels.
- Alternatively, take each of your classmates' paint products and create a class box of imaginative paints. Arrange them like a paint shop or gallery, grouped by types (nature, space, magical etc). Give the display or 'box of paints' a title.



Colours and emotions

'Red is the colour of our blood, so it is often linked to life and death. It's also used to express strong and contrasting emotions like love and anger. This bold primary colour is dramatic, bountiful and sometimes gruesome!' (pages 16 –17)



- Which colours do you associate with different emotions? Why?
- Do you think everyone feels the same way about colours? Why or why not?
- Why might red be linked to both love and anger?
- What colour would you use to show:
 - Happiness?
 - Calm?
 - Fear?
 - Excitement?
- How do colours help tell a story or set a mood in books, films or artworks?
- Can colours have different meanings in different cultures?

- Create an artwork that shows a particular emotion using only colours, shapes and patterns (no words!). Think about bright vs dark colours, warm vs cool colours and bold vs soft shapes.
- Ask students to guess the emotions being expressed in everyone's artwork.
- Did anyone choose a different colour for the same emotion? Why might that be?
- How can artists use colour to influence how we feel?
- Use a simple program such as Canva, Microsoft Paint or Preview (for Macs) and upload an image. Use tools such as tints, filters, colour adjustment etc and create different versions of the same piece of art. How does each version make you feel? Can you explain why?
- Has a colour ever changed how you felt about something?



Colour me happy?

'Many scientists think yellow inspires positive feelings. Artists have strong opinions on colour and emotion, too. In her diary, Frida Kahlo noted down her associations with each colour. Yellow, she wrote, meant "More madness and mystery . . . all the ghosts wear clothes of this color, or at least their underclothes . . ." ' (page 44)



SAFFRON

Before synthetic yellows were invented in laboratories, people used tiny saffron threads – red, spicy and hard to collect – from the crocus flower to make a yellow dye. It takes a whopping 8000 handpicked crocus flowers to collect just 100 grams of red saffron threads. That's the weight of an apple. It was hard work to make, but these saffron threads could produce a strong and pure translucent yellow that was used to imitate gold. A shame it couldn't buy real treasure!

Saffron was widely used for painting, but this stopped in the 18th century once synthetic yellows were invented. Luckily saffron had other uses like being used for perfumes, clothing dye, food flavouring and even medicine.



How do you make dark yellow?

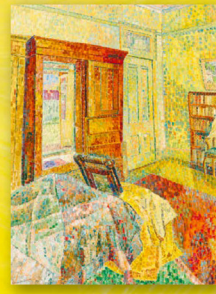
Trick question – you can't! Unlike the other primary colours, blue or red, yellow doesn't get darker when you add black to it. Instead, it becomes green.

The psychology of colour

Many scientists think yellow inspires positive feelings. Artists have strong opinions on colour and emotion, too. In her diary, Frida Kahlo noted down her associations with each colour. Yellow, she wrote, meant 'More madness and mystery . . . all the ghosts wear clothes of this color, or at least their underclothes . . .' Do you agree? What other emotions do you think yellow evokes?

Yellow IN ART

Yellow has always been important to artists, but it has not always been easy to perfect. For a long time, yellow hues were either dull or didn't last. Then from the mid-19th century, the modern chemical age began, leading to an explosion of sunny shades: chrome yellow, cadmium yellow, cobalt yellow and synthetic pigments like tartrazine.



Grace Cossington Smith's painting *Interior in yellow* (1962–4) is like stepping into a sunny morning where everything is golden and full of gentle energy. The walls, the light, even the shadows in this painting are bright and cheerful – like the whole room is smiling.



Australian artist Arthur Streeton's *Early summer – gorse in bloom* (1888) captures the uniqueness of Australian light. Streeton was inspired to paint outdoors by European Impressionist painters like Monet. Unlike them, he used bright and high key (light) colours to capture the strong sunlight.



- Scientists often say yellow is a happy colour. Why might that be?
- Frida Kahlo described yellow as mad, mysterious and even a little ghostly. How is this different from the scientific idea?
- Which description do you agree with more? Or do you think both can be true?
- What might have influenced Frida Kahlo's ideas about colour? (her life, experiences, imagination)
- If yellow could tell a story, what kind of story would it tell?
- Write your own imaginative colour journal with entries for four or five colours. Think about using unusual ideas and strong imagery. Remember, there is no right or wrong – everyone's view of colour is different and acceptable!

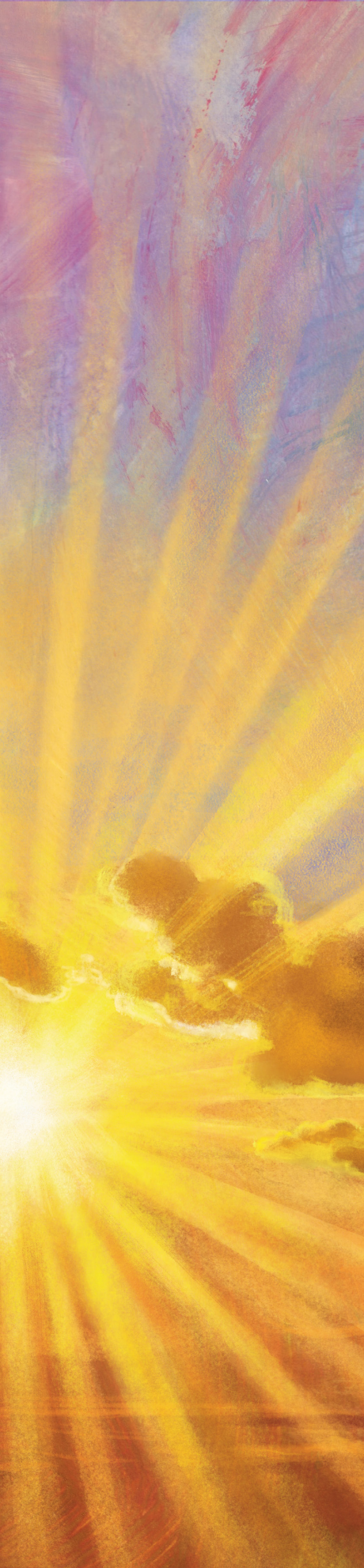
Abstract art

'Abstract art uses line, colour and shape without needing to look like anything real.' (page 21)



Untitled (Red), 1956, Mark Rothko
© Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko.
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- Look at the section on page 21 about abstract art. Find some more examples of abstract art and as a class discuss what you see when you look at them and how they make you feel.
- Create your own piece of abstract art. Before you start, think about what you are trying to achieve. What do you want to express? How do you want viewers to feel when they look at your art?



Colour superpowers

- On page 18, the author explains that synaesthesia is ‘a rare superpower where you experience one of your senses through another. Many artists and creative people have synaesthesia. They might “hear” colour when looking at an image, or “see” letters as different colours while reading or writing, or even “taste” certain flavours when they see a particular colour or shape.’
Think back to the colour you created in the earlier activity. What sounds or tastes might go with your colour?

- Create a soundscape to match the emotion of your colour. These YouTube videos may be helpful:
 - youtube.com/watch?v=JE0EBGqMMi4
 - youtube.com/watch?v=2s_293GNVB8
 - youtube.com/watch?v=NEp02aYYIA0

Colourful poems

Just like artists and scientists, poets explore colour in their own way, using words to paint pictures in our minds.

‘Colors’ by Shel Silverstein and ‘What is Pink?’ by Christina Rossetti are both poems about colour, but they express their ideas very differently.

- Which style do you prefer? Why?
- What colours are mentioned in the poems?
- What images do these colours create in your mind?
- Which poem feels more playful? Which feels more gentle or descriptive?
- How do the poets connect colours to things in nature or everyday life?
- Do the colours in the poems make you feel a certain way? Why?
- Which line or image is your favourite? Why?
- Write a poem about colour in each style (one funny, one reflective).



Future colours

- Page 46 discusses the discovery of new colours. What colours can you imagine being created or discovered in the future?
- Invent your own future colour.
 - Name it
 - Describe how it is made
 - Explain where it would be used

Final reflections

- Has your favourite colour changed after reading the book? Why?
- After learning about colour's history and culture, do you see colours differently? How?
- Which colour story surprised you the most?
- How might colours change in the future?

Further activities

The story of a colour

- Choose a colour and write its story:
 - Where does it come from?
 - Who used it?
 - Why was it important?

Ethical debate (for older students)

- Topic: Should humans have used animals and insects to make colours?

Colour me purple

- 'Purple is the most extravagant of colours' (page 36). Come up with your own adjectives for other colours (eg: blinding yellow, soothing green etc)

Visual literacy

- Analyse how illustrations contribute to meaning. How do colours guide the reader? How do they support the text?

Art + science (for older students)

- Create an artwork using only natural pigments. Document the process.

