

# Is white skin really pink? Flesh color as a pink color in Western art and culture

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I determine the shades associated with the idea of a unique flesh color, retrace its history and emphasize its inclusion in the field of pink. I carry out this analysis in a transhistorical and transmediatic way. I will go through medieval texts, literary works, artists' writing, pictorial and abstractive work, as well as other cultural productions like fashion, comics or animation. Based on this overview, I question the hegemonic position which leads to the long lasting association of pink color with complexion. I will also question this pervasive link with the system of race, since the use of pink indicates only the skin of white people — even symbolically —, understood as the color of the skin *in general*.

**KEYWORDS** Flesh color, Skin color, Pink, Race, History of Color

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## 1. Introduction

Usually used to designate the color of the skin, the term "flesh" is a synonym of "complexion", or "skin tone". Many links cross path between the flesh color and the nuance we now designate as "pink", from medieval painting manuals to contemporary arts and fashion trends. More specifically, pink is used as a "flesh color" when it comes to representations of Caucasian skin — seen as typical of the so-called "white skin" — in painting, but also in sculpture, cartoons and comics (think of the pink face of Disney's Cinderella). Contemporary fashion and cosmetics also designate by the word "flesh" a set of products whose colors are supposed to refer to the color of the (white) skin. Regarding the naming of make-up products, the word "flesh" has been replaced by the term "nude", which is supposed to refer to a certain idea of "natural", that is to say without artifice. In literature, authors use pink to describe white skin too. In the poem "À une robe rose" by Théophile Gautier, the pink fabric of a dress is associated with the "light pink" color of a woman's skin (Gautier, 1850). Likewise, from a lexicological point of view, the flesh color is also considered as a shade of pink, after the skin tone of white people (Mollard-Desfour, 2002; Kuriki *et al.*, 2017; Zimmermann *et al.*, 2015).

However, the color of white skin is really neither pink, nor the same from one individual to another (due to tan, age, health, etc.). This specific generalization and simplification of the complexion of a large social group is actually associated with the concept of race. Race is a system of categorization and hierarchization of individuals according to morphological and/or cultural criteria. Skin color is one of the main criteria for forming these categories and the category of white people, to which the color flesh pink refers, is then symbolically and socially opposed to a broader set of non-white people [1] (and thus not represented by flesh pink) (Blanchard, Boëtsch and Chev , 2008).

Similarly, several contemporary artists used pink as the one color that symbolically refers to the bodily experience common to all human beings. In these cases, pink relates to the flesh understood as mucous or as what is subcutaneous. Pink can then signify the organicity of the body, the experience of human life in a philosophical sense, or even the emotions perceived through the skin, therefore providing a psychological dimension to the color.

The purpose of this article is to outline how pink became the generic color of the (white) skin, but also how this generic color has become capable of signifying the very concepts of flesh, life and humanity. Based on a transmedia and transhistorical study, I will study how pink

has become, over the centuries, the color emblem of white skin in Western cultures, then symbol of human color taken as a whole. I will also show how this construction intersects with the concept of race, and therefore how pink participates in its own way in the symbolic superiority of white people over non-white people.

## 2. The Flesh Color in Western History of Painting

In painting, the term "flesh" is employed as an equivalent to the rendering of the skin. "Flesh" is understood as a color term which designates the skin of white people as a whole. It often remains the only dermatological type represented by Western artists and approached by treaties on the arts. Skin appearance is historically at the center of the concerns of European artists, especially painters. Indeed, the representation in painting of the appearance of the color of human skin is a complex and technical challenge, "an inaccessible chimera" (Pernac, 2008). Ever since the time of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, the complexion was not limited to selecting color, but was rather a question of arranging the shadows and lights in order to provide the illusion of volumes (Lichtenstein, 1999), and also to transmit "the expression of the flesh" in all its dimensions, including tactile (Diderot and Le Rond d'Alembert, 1766). The qualities of the flesh in paint are also described with the Italian term *morbidezza* which means "suppleness", "softness", "tenderness" and "blur", a range of words which refers to the texture of the flesh and not to its color.

It was not until the end of the Middle Ages that representations of the flesh became a real object of technical study which would occupy artists as much as their commentators for centuries. The flesh became more complex in the *Duecento* with the application of a *verdaccio* base [2] on which was applied other layers to give the illusion of volume. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the complexions produced by superimposing layers of colors, sometimes transparent (glaze), had a finesse never obtained until then (Laneyrie-Dagen, 2006), reaching a striking realism in the works of artists such as Jan Van Eyck (Fig. 1) or Raphael. Still in the Middle Ages, *tempera* emerged alongside the encaustic technique which had endured since Antiquity, becoming the majority technique. It allowed painters to widen their palette by diluting the pigments in different glue or egg-based solutions. The *tempera* technique was supplanted by oil painting at the end of the Middle Ages (around 1500), which allowed painters to obtain the most beautiful flesh in the history of painting (Magnain, 2009).



Fig. 1. Van Eyck J. (1435) *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*. Oil on panel, 66 x 62 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre (1271). Photo: The York Project, via Wikimedia Commons (CC 0).



Fig. 2. Lagrenée L.-J.-F. (1767) *Mercury, Herse and Aglauros*. Oil on canvas, 55 x 70 cm. Stockholm, Nationalmuseum (NM 839). Photo: Bodil Beckman/Stockholm Nationalmuseum (CC PD).

The exact color of the flesh color in painting remains difficult to define. It actually corresponds to a wide spectrum of shades, often clearer on representations of women (Frost, 2010), more or less reddish depending on the emotional state of the character (embarrassment, anger, etc.). Several treatises on medieval pictorial

techniques offered a wide variety of recipes with multiple mixtures based on green, blue, ocher, white and red, making it possible to imitate the flesh colors (e.g. Cennini, c.1390/1859). However, cinnabar red and whitewash are commonly used in these recipes, i.e. shades of pink (red mixed with white) (Gettens, Feller and Chase, 1972).

At the end of the Quattrocento, flesh color was called *incarnato* (from the Latin *carne*, “flesh”) and assimilated to red. *Incarnato* later gave the color term “incarnate” which Diderot used to describe the color of blood that shines through the skin of the characters in an oil on canvas by Louis-Jean-François Lagrenée (Fig. 2) (Diderot, 1876). The incarnate evokes indeed the blood which circulates under the skin and which tints it by transparency, as “under the blow of a categorical imperative of the in-between: between surface and depth” (Didi-Huberman, 2008). The French lexicographer Annie Mollard-Desfour does not succeed in precisely determining the shade corresponding to the French term *incarnat* (incarnate): she classifies it in her dictionary of red as “more or less bright red” (Mollard-Desfour, 2009), but also in that of pink, describing it as a “bright pink” (Mollard-Desfour, 2002).

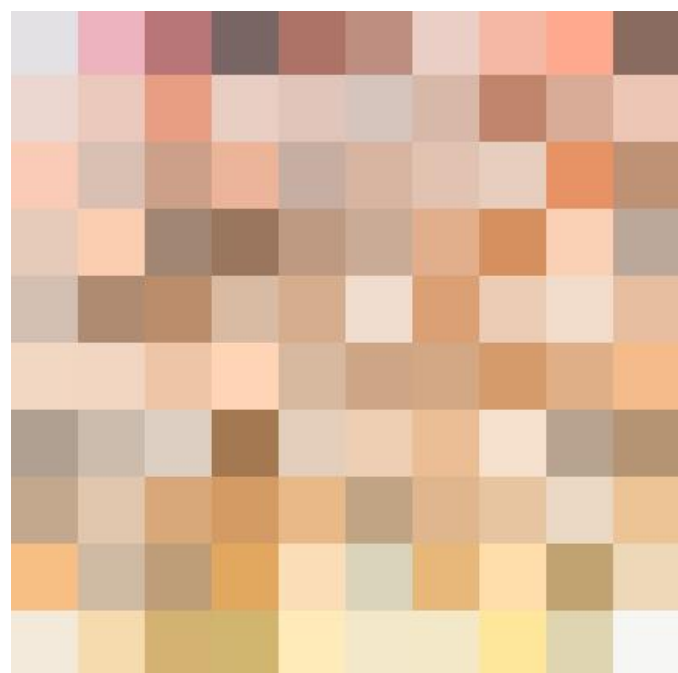
### 3. An explanation about Pink as a Flesh Color

The skin is physiologically made up of several layers (epidermis, dermis, hypodermis), bearing each specific structural and chemical properties, but also their own color. The complexion perceived by our visual apparatus then results from the superposition of these layers perceived through transparency. Physicist Caroline Magnain has established a relationship between the dermatological structure of the skin and the pictorial representations of Caucasian skin tone, by analogy between the superposition of skin tissues and the layers of matter deposited on the canvas (Magnain, 2009). Hegel also pointed out that the color of the flesh in painting reflects the different colors of the organic layers of the body: the transparent yellow of the skin, the red of the arteries, and the blue of the veins, to which are added gray, brown and green tones (Hegel, 1848). Thus, this even apply with abstract works. The pink monochromes of the American painter Marcia Hafif (*Roman Paintings*, 1986) are spectroscopically similar to real skin, due to the superimpositions of successive layers of pigments (red, blue, and yellow) taking up the stratified biological structure of the skin (Magnain, 2009).

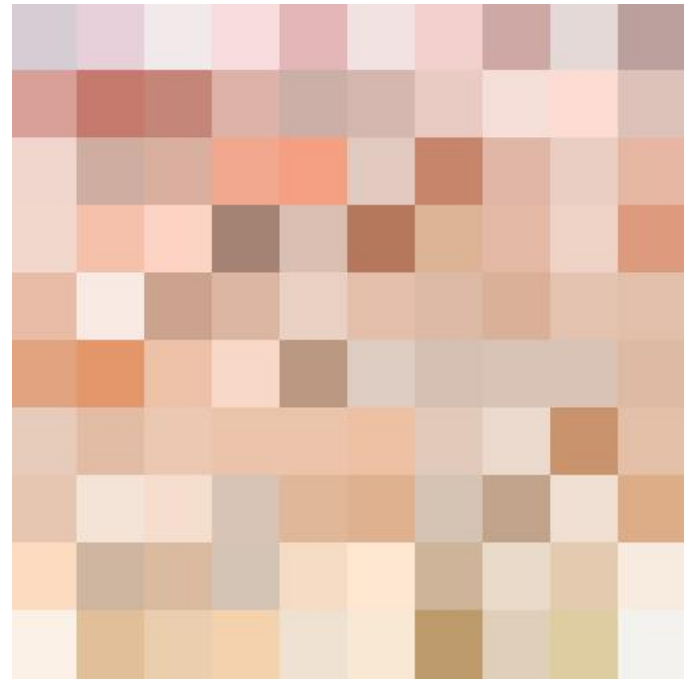
There is therefore a biological reason for the multiple visual representations of white skin by pink shades in Western artistic and cultural productions. However, even if we intend to exclusively restrict our focus on white skin,

this only outline that all skin tones do not have the same color. Accordingly, painters have thoroughly criticized the shades of “flesh color” offered by the merchants of colors for being too pink to be able to account for the entire white complexions (Magnain, 2009).

The sampling carried out on images answering the keywords “flesh color” and “nude color” collected on the internets allows identifying shades corresponding to the flesh color nowadays [3]. Such methodology obviously has many limitations, such as the restriction to digital images or the subjectivity in determining the main color of each image. Nevertheless, the point is not as much to define what is flesh color or nude, but more to circumscribe a non-exhaustive set of colors corresponding to the effective uses of these designations. Moreover, the collecting of digital images that this methodology implies seems appropriate, since the designation “flesh color” is nowadays mainly used in fashion (especially underwear) and cosmetics (no photograph of painting is included in the sample) [4]. This analysis thus shows that the flesh (or nude) color corresponds to a wide spectrum of shades, which includes a certain amount of pink or pinkish shades, but also a lot of brown, orange, yellow and gray ones (Fig. 3; Fig. 4). We observe also a simplification of numerous skin tones to the single term “flesh color” (which is often describes as pink), analogous to the simplification of people with Caucasian complexions to the single designation “white people” (who are anything but white).



*Fig. 3. Color chart obtained from the collection of hundred pictures answering the keywords “flesh color” on the internets. January 2020. Photo: K. Bideaux (CC BY-NC-ND).*



*Fig. 4. Color chart obtained from the collection of hundred pictures answering the keywords “nude color” on the internets. January 2020. Photo: K. Bideaux (CC BY-NC-ND).*

#### **4. Flesh color, Race and Whiteness**

The existence as well as the recurring use of a single term to designate all complexions, leads me to question flesh color in articulation with the concept of race. Skin color has indeed always participated in the construction of individual and collective identities, related to the racial system of classification of individuals according to their complexion (Blanchard, Boëtsch and Chev e, 2008). Mechthild Fend specifies that it is no coincidence that the term “skin color” appeared in the second half of the 18th century simultaneously in theory of French art and racial anthropology: both discourses grant the symbolical and social superiority of white skin as the universal ideal and standard of beauty (Fend, 2005).

White skin has indeed been associated since Antiquity with beauty — especially the female one (Pelletier-Michaud, 2016) —, and youngness (Garo, 2008). It is still deemed as a beauty ideal to be reached in black African communities (Emeriau, 2009). The blushing skin of embarrassed white women has also become a means for painters to bring eroticism to their canvas, also linking white skin to desire and sexuality (Fig. 5).

In addition, the history of Western art is also ethnocentric: critics and institutional exhibitions or acquisitions visibilizes the production of Caucasian artists, who themselves have mainly represented Caucasian characters (Fernandez-Sacco, 2001). Furthermore, when non-white people were depicted in paintings, they have

historically been portrayed through a racial and colonial perspective (Lafont, 2019; Lewis, 1996).



Fig. 5. Honthorst (van) G. (1625) *Smiling Girl, a Courtesan, Holding an Obscene Image*. Oil on canvas, 81,3 x 64,1 cm. Saint-Louis, Saint-Louis Art Museum (63:1954). Photo: Saint-Louis Art Museum (CC 0).

Whiteness not only dominates in the field of representations, but also gives the impression that it is a norm. This last element would explain why the color term “flesh” was constructed only on the color of white people, given that they represent a majority or even universal model. We can therefore say that the flesh color has a relationship with whiteness, a concept that designates the white social, cultural and political hegemony faced by ethno-racial minorities, as well as a mode of problematizing social relations of race (Garner, 2007). Using flesh color in cultural and artistic productions, as well as considering that everyone has the same complexion, *i.e.* a white one, could be consequently considered as a symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970) for non-white people. This enduring vision still allows the maintenance of an unequal hierarchy based on race, by incorporating social, cultural and aesthetic classifications according to skin color. The French anti-racist activist Rokhaya Diallo recalled for

example that pink-beige color of sticking plasters, as well as the “nude” trend in fashion, was designed for the comfort of white people. These plaster indeed matches their skin color, while they are extremely visible on black skins (Diallo, 2018).

## 5. Flesh Color as “Human being” symbol

Sometimes, pink used as skin color by contemporary artists can bear a symbolic dimension, which is dissociated — at least in part — from the strict representation of the skin. It is a question of transmitting the idea of flesh/skin, and of associating a precise symbolism with it. For example, the impasto of colored plaster by the Italian artist Ettore Spalletti are mineral and powdery, and at the same time give an impression of life through a play of depth and subtle nuances. His work shows the rendering of the flesh that only oil usually does. Spalletti himself rightly referred to the skin when talking about his work, stressing the link between the pigment and dermatological variations: “pink has no fixity: it is the pigment of the skin that changes according to our moods” (Boudier, 2018).

As many previous studies have shown, colors and emotions are indeed linked (Simmons, 2011; Clarke and Costal, 2008): theorist of affects Brian Massumi explains that colors are capable of directly affecting the body, “[r]eflexively (that is to say, non-reflectively) in an immediate nervous response” (Massumi, 2005). The skin is therefore an interface between the inside and the outside, at the intersection of the Self and the Other and thus becoming a field of expression, experimentation and confrontation (Dagognet, 1998). In the film *Pieles* (2017), the Spanish director Eduardo Casanova follows in their intimacy several protagonists with bodies considered to be out of the ordinary [5]. The movie explores various themes such as desire, reification, discrimination, rejection or the search for authenticity. The skin is hinted by the title, and the omnipresence of pink in the decorations, costumes and visuals of communication works as a way of symbolizing skin as a metaphor for emotions and intimacy..

The use of pink as the color of the flesh can therefore signify the affects and emotions that pass through the flesh/skin. Flesh thus becomes a concept that artists use as a symbol and no longer for the purpose of representing the skin as an organic part of the body. Pink in the work of French artist Yves Klein particularly embodies a highly accomplished conceptualization of flesh. If he is mainly known for his ultramarine blue monochromes, he has however also produced numerous pink monochromes (named *Monopinks*) evoking the skin.

Klein's pink refers to material world, in opposition to the immateriality of the blue. The flesh is thus thought not in terms of corporality, as making direct reference to the body and its organicity, but to the flesh as a concept. It refers to materiality perceived as an experience, not as a form (Morineau, 2006), echoing the Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh, thought ontologically as an extension of the body, as a part of the world (1979). Other artists such as the French Marguerite Humeau (exhibition *FOXP2* at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2016) [6] or the Austrian Pamela Rosenkranz (installation *Our Product*, 2015) [7] have developed this same discourse by using pink as a symbol of the flesh, understood as a common material shared by all human beings. In short, these artists refer to pink as a symbol of life and humanity.

This close association between pink (as the very color of flesh) and human being as a whole was also the grounds on which the esoteric anthroposophical current based its theory. Its creator, Rudolf Steiner, did not strictly write a theory of colors. He nevertheless proposed to assign a meaning to each colors, understood as representing the forces in action in nature: green as the color of plants, white that of light, black that of darkness and the peach-blossom color (*Pfirsichblütfarbe*) that of the human soul. Among them, peach-blossom is a shade of pink that Steiner described with reference to the "color of human flesh, which of course is not exactly the same for different people", admitting therefore that pink cannot signify all skin tones (Steiner, 1921/2010). However, can we really disconnect the flesh color as a symbol of humanity, from the flesh color representation of white bodies? English artist Derek Jarman wondered whether Steiner would have chosen the color of the peach blossom as the color of human existence if he himself had been a black man (Jarman, 1994/2003). We could indeed wonder if the pink flesh as being able to designate the whole of humanity would not have to do with the whiteness of those who make this association (as a reminder, Klein, Humeau and Rosenkranz are also white people).

## **6. Pink as "organic flesh" color**

Perhaps it is necessary to think of the flesh not as indicating the color of the skin, but rather as indicating to what lies below: the muscles and organs, or even the mucous. The art historian Dominique Grisard said for example about the series *Second Skin* (2017) of the Swiss artist Nici Jost that "[p]ink is both skin-deep and flesh and blood" (Grisard, 2019). The artist herself says that pink is a color of "equality and unification" because no matter the skin color, size, ethnicity or gender, our

mucous are all the same color (Jost, 2016). However, if the mucous, certain organs or certain meats can effectively be pink or considered as pink colored, it is more the red, which represents our organic interiority: that of the blood coloring the muscles, flowing when the body is opened or injured. Even when the flesh thought as subcutaneous organic matter is represented in pink, the red of the blood is always intrinsically associated with it, both visually and symbolically (Salamandra, 2018).

## **7. Conclusion**

This analysis of the connotations associated with the color flesh reveals the way in which the relations of power (here of race) between dominant and dominated are involved in the history of colors as well as enrich their symbolism. If the use of pink as flesh color in the representations of white bodies corresponds to a logic (admittedly simplified) of transcription of reality, its use as a symbol of complexion *in general* is more problematic. Flesh color is effectively part of a racial perspective, shaped by history and social representations, which we cannot ignore. Similarly, while pink can signify flesh considered as what is common to human existence, it cannot claim any meaning of universality because its symbolic construction is anchored in a white Western art history. This is not to say that artists, theorists or even marketers are racist, but more to contextualize our symbolic systems, the way we deploy them — in particular through color —, and their real effects on individuals.

The ambition of this article was to propose a transmedia and transhistorical vision of the uses of the "flesh color" in the art and the Western culture. The conciseness of the paper's format has forced me to proceed to a synthesis of the examples presented and to a simplification of the analyses. Additional investigations are therefore necessary in order to highlight the variations in the use of flesh color, according to the periods, the geographical areas, but also according to the support.

## **Conflict of interest declaration**

I wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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## Short biography of the author

Kévin Bideaux is PhD candidate in arts and gender studies at the Laboratoire d'études de genre et sexualité (LEGS, UMR 8238, University of Paris 8). His doctoral research focuses on a better understanding of the uses of pink in the visual arts, marketing, sciences and politics. He is also a visual artist, working essentially with the color pink.

## Notes

[1] This includes black people, but also those sometimes referred to as "brown people", a term that refers to people from the Middle East, North Africa and the Indian subcontinent.

[2] *Verdaccio* is a mixture of black, white, and yellow pigments resulting in a grayish or yellowish soft greenish brown.

[3] I used the methodology used by Kate Hughes and Donna Wyatt to determine the nuances associated with breast cancer (Hughes and Wyatt, 2015). This involves determining skin tones from a sample of digital images collected from internets, responding to a specific keyword. I collected about a hundred unique images responding to the keywords "flesh color" and "nude color" (identified using the Google image search engine), I then determined in each image the significant shade of flesh using an image editing software, and I finally classified each of these shades according to its hue (H), its saturation (S), and its value (V), the HSV model being particularly relevant when it comes to digital images. After having carried out this sampling work, I gathered and condensed all the shades obtained into two hundred-color charts.

[4] These images are most often disseminated on the Internet by commercial sites or photographs of haute-couture shows or celebrities.

[5] A young woman born without eyes is a prostitute to support herself, and counts among her clients an obese woman who lives her lesbianism in secret. A pregnant dwarf is the exploited star of a children's show in which she plays a pink bear. A woman with a deformed face is in a relationship with a man whose skin has suffered severe burns; another young woman has a deformity that has caused her mouth and anus to be inverted. One last character is an exception: a teenager with an able body who dreams of losing his legs to become a mermaid.

[6] For this exhibition, Humeau created white sculptures in the shape of elephants, which she arranged on a pink carpet. The carpet was made especially for the exhibition, from a recipe developed by the artist using the chemical components of a human being (carbon, oxygen, sulphur, calcium, etc.), of which she respects the percentages and quantities (Santa Lucia, 2016).

[7] This installation consists of an impressive basin filled with two hundred and forty thousand liters of a pinkish-colored liquid. The color chosen by Rosenkranz is based on the standard colors of cosmetic industry foundations, which are understood from their shades to be mainly designed for whites people only (Launay, 2015).

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