

Cochineal: At the Intersection of Cloth and Paint

Museum Workshop



Summary

Explore the relationships between a family of painters and their ancestral ties to the cloth dying industry in Venice. Delve into the origins of the family nickname “Tintoretto” (“the little dyer”) for the Robusti family of cloth dyers and Renaissance painters by getting hands-on experience with cochineal red. Since the vegetable and insect-based dye-stuffs for textile dyes and paints are the same, the Tintoretto name shifted in significance from one generation to the next. This workshop is recommended for curators and art historians interested in painting and/or textiles who would like to learn how to create pigments and try their hand at oil painting and cloth dyeing.

Objectives

Through lectures, demonstrations, and activities, participants will:

- Discuss the context of the Tintoretto family and its history
- Gain an overview of technical study on the paintings by Jacopo and Domenico Tintoretto
- Experience the creation of an organic red lake pigment
- Experience the process of textile dyeing using prepared wool
- Experiment freely with oil paint
- Compare and contrast organic dyes and pigments
- Experiment with extracting dye from colored fabrics

Workshop Outline

- Gallery tour highlighting the era, region and history of Italian Renaissance painting with an emphasis on the technical study on the paintings by Jacopo and Domenico Tintoretto
- Powerpoint introduction to organic pigments and the art history of cochineal red
- Demonstration of the creation of cochineal dye
- Demonstration of the making of oil paint
- Experiment with extracting dye from fabric

Activities

- Extract the brilliant red-purple dye from cochineal insects as part of a demonstration on the creation of pigments
- Use cochineal dye to color prepared wool
- Create and experiment with oil paint while attempting to emulate the techniques of the Tintoretto
- Conduct an experiment to extract red lake from dyed cloth shearings

Materials

Red Lakes

Cochineal insects
Mortar and pestle
Alum
Potassium carbonate
Glass beakers
Glass stirring rods
Hot plate
Funnel
Cheesecloth
Silk

Oil paint

Linseed oil
Dropper
Palette knife
Muller
Glass palette
Odorless mineral spirits
Assortment of brushes
Canvas board
Paper palette

Wool Dyeing

Raw wool
Dish soap
Washing bowl
Large pot or saucepan
Hot plate or kettle
Large tongs
Clothesline
Clothespins

Resources

Internet Resources:

[Video: “Cochineal Red: The Art History of a Color” Sunday at the Met lecture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Elena Phipp](#)

[Video: “In Search of Lost Colour: The Story of Natural Dyes”](#)

["Organic Pigments" on the Kress Reconstruction Website](#)

Books and Articles:

Butler Greenfield, Amy. *A Perfect Red: Empire, Espionage, and the Quest for the Color of Desire*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

Burmester, A., and C. Krekel. “‘Ázurri oltramarini, laache et altri colori fini’: the quest for the lost colours.” In *Tintoretto: The Gonzaga Cycle*. C. Syre ed., 193-211. Munich: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2000.

[Phipp, Elena. *Cochineal Red: The Art History of a Color*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010](#)

Plesters, Joyce, and Lorenzo Lazzarini. “Preliminary Observations on the Technique and Materials of Tintoretto.” In *Conservation of Paintings and the Graphic Arts: Preprints of Contributions to the Lisbon Congress, 9-14 October 1972*, 153–180. London: International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1972.

[Saunders, David, and Jo Kirby. “Light-induced Colour Changes in Red and Yellow Lake Pigments.” *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 15 \(1994\): 79-97.](#)

Wilson, Carolyn C. “Domenico Tintoretto’s *Tancred Baptizing Clorinda*: A Closer Look.” *Venezia Cinquecento* 3, no. 6 (July-Dec 1993): 121-138.