

Colors in the Middle Ages

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Medieval Scholars once believed there were only 7 colors (as did the Ancients). Those colors were White, Yellow, Red, Green, Blue, Purple, and Black. They believed that Green was the most soothing color as it was the middle color between White and Black. In actuality, there was an entire rainbow of colors available, thanks to dyes made from plants, roots, lichen, tree bark, nuts, crushed insects, mollusks, and iron oxide. Dyes faded quickly if they were not set properly with a mordant, such as salt, urine, and lime. Bolder colors require longer dyeing times and/or expensive dyes. The higher costs of the bolder and brighter colors meant the poorer classes could not afford them, but this did not mean they lived colorless lives. Beautiful colors were available to them, out of their own gardens and the forests. The colors beige and off-white were the most common undergarment colors for the peasant class. Blue was the most common color for all classes of people thanks to Woad, which

was readily available, cheap, and popular. It was so popular with both professional and home dyers that it was called Dyers Woad.

Popular Dye Colors

1. Red- made from Madder root, Rubia Tentorium, Kermes, or Grana from insects.
2. Blue- made from Woad leaves, Isatia tinctora
3. Violet- Orchil from Lichen
4. Crimson- made from Brasilwood from an East India Tree
5. Purple- made from Brasilwood from an East India Tree, Mollusks
6. Yellow- made from Weld, Dryer's Rocket, Turmeric, Saffron, Onion Skin, Marigold, Chamomile
7. Green- made from Indigo, Weld, Turmeric
8. Brown- made from Walnut Shells, Bark

A Note on Color

Madder Red Dye was an expensive dye as it can only be harvested once a year.

Woad Blue Dye was extremely easy to procure as the plant grew in many places and could be harvested several times a year. This made it an inexpensive dye to get and could even be made easily at home.

Bright colors were deemed unsuitable for the peasant class by the Church, who encouraged them to stick to shades of grey, browns and blues. Scarlet was not only a color but was also a very expensive fabric. The cost of this fabric was so high it was limited to the highest echelons of society. Scarlet fabric could be Red, Grey, Black, Dark Grey, and Dark Blue.

It takes 10,000 Murex Shellfish to make 1g of Imperial Purple.

Interesting Colors

Bowdy- Scarlet Red
Celestrine- Light Blue
Checkery- Checked Cloth
Cyclas- Purple
Gingerline- Reddish Violet
Goose-Turd- Yellowish Green
Gros de dos d'asne- Donkey Grey
Hair- Bright Tan
Incarnate- Red
Milk and Water- Bluish White
Popinjay- Green or Blue
Puke- Purple of Reddish Tone/ Dirty Brown
Rats- Dull Grey
Sheeps Colour- Neutral
Turkils- Turquoise
Watchet- Pale Greenish Blue