

YOUR GUIDE TO AUTHENTIC

color

*A HANDBOOK FOR CHOOSING A HISTORICALLY
ACCURATE MEDIEVAL PALETTE
FOR YOUR WARDROBE*

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Learn to recreate medieval clothing that will captivate

A Guide to Authentic Medieval Color

From your friends at SewMedieval.com

An important consideration...

Keep in mind while reading, by necessity, we need to generalize about larger areas and cultures in order to present the subject coherently. For representation of specific personas and narrower time periods you will need to do research regarding more specific geographic areas, time periods and socioeconomic classes. This is intended as an overview to get started on the subject.



Introduction

The medieval world (approximately 500-1500 CE) was far more colorful than popular imagination often suggests. Color was not merely decorative but carried profound symbolic, religious, and social significance. This guide explores the authentic production, meaning, and use of colors during the medieval period across Europe.

Note: This guide focuses on European medieval color traditions, though parallel developments occurred in Islamic, Asian, and other cultures during the same period.



Images are from an Italian manuscript showing different aspects of fabric production. Trattato dell'arte della seta 1489, Biblioteca Laurenziana di Firenze Medieval Women Spinning



Part 1: general information about color usage and production in the Medieval era 500-1500

Color Production and Materials

Red

- **Vermilion:** Made from ground cinnabar (mercuric sulfide) or through chemical reaction between mercury and sulfur
- **Madder:** Extracted from the roots of the *Rubia tinctorum* plant
- **Kermes:** Derived from the dried bodies of female scale insects (*Kermes vermilio*)
- **Dragon's Blood:** Expensive resin from various tropical trees

Blue

- **Ultramarine:** The most precious pigment, made from ground lapis lazuli imported from Afghanistan
- **Azurite:** A copper mineral ground into powder
- **Woad:** Plant-based dye (*Isatis tinctoria*) used primarily for textiles

Yellow and Gold

- **Orpiment:** Arsenic sulfide mineral with a golden luster
- **Saffron:** Derived from the stamens of crocus flowers, extremely expensive
- **Ochre:** Iron oxide-rich clay, widely available
- **Gold leaf:** Hammered sheets of gold applied over paint or gesso

Green

- **Verdigris:** Created by exposing copper to acetic acid (vinegar)
- **Malachite:** Ground mineral containing copper carbonate
- **Green earth (Terra verde):** Clay colored by iron silicates

White

- **Lead white:** Made by exposing lead to vinegar and carbon dioxide
- **Chalk:** Natural calcium carbonate
- **Lime white:** Calcium hydroxide, used in fresco painting

Black

- **Carbon black:** Made from charred bones, wood, or oil lamp soot
- **Vine black:** Charred grapevines

Purple

- **Tyrian purple:** Made from the mucus of sea snails, extremely expensive
- **Folium:** Extracted from the plant *Chrozophora tinctoria*
- **Orchil:** Derived from lichen, used for manuscripts and textiles



Dyers soaking red cloth in a heated barrel - Des Proprietez des Choses (Volume II) (1482), f.269 - BL Royal MS 15 E III

Social and Economic Dimensions

Hierarchy of Colors

Medieval colors existed in a strict hierarchy reflecting their cost and difficulty of production:

1. **Gold and Purple:** Reserved for royalty, high nobility, and religious depictions of divine figures
2. **Ultramarine Blue:** Costlier than gold by weight, used for important religious figures (especially the Virgin Mary's robes)
3. **Vermilion and Kermes Red:** For nobility, wealthy merchants, and significant religious imagery
4. **Greens and Quality Yellows:** For prosperous individuals and decorative elements
5. **Earth Tones:** Accessible to common people

Guild Regulations

- Strict regulations governed which colors certain social classes could wear
- Professional guilds controlled access to pigment recipes
- Master craftsmen guarded color formulas as valuable trade secrets
- Dyers worked in separate areas by color due to different techniques and to prevent cross-contamination

Symbolic Meanings

Religious Symbolism

- **Gold:** Divinity, heaven, eternity
- **Blue:** Heaven, truth, the Virgin Mary
- **Red:** Blood of Christ, martyrdom, passion (but also sin)
- **White:** Purity, innocence, divine light
- **Green:** Growth, hope, fertility
- **Black:** Death, mourning, penance
- **Purple:** Royalty, imperial power, penitence

Secular Symbolism

- **Red:** Nobility, courage, passion
- **Blue:** Loyalty, justice (later periods)
- **Green:** Youth, love, inconstancy
- **Yellow:** Could signify both nobility (gold tones) or disgrace (sulfurous tones)



Jean BOCCACE de Certaldo of the clergy and noble women. Bibliothèque nationale de France 12420, fol 69r. c.1400

Color in Different Media

Manuscript Illumination

- Used carefully prepared pigments bound with egg white (glair) or gum arabic
- Gold leaf applied to manuscripts required special adhesives and careful burnishing
- Complex layering techniques created luminous effects
- Specific colors reserved for important figures and elements

Stained Glass

- Colored by adding metal oxides to molten glass
 - Copper for red and green
 - Cobalt for blue
 - Manganese for purple
 - Iron for green and yellow
- Lead strips joined pieces of different colored glass
- Paint details applied and fired onto the surface

Textile Dyeing

- Required different mordants (fixing agents) for different fibers
- Alum was the most common mordant
- Multiple dyeing processes created deeper colors
- Some colors required sequential dye baths (blue overdyed with yellow to create green)

Wall Paintings and Frescoes

- True fresco: pigments applied to wet plaster, chemically bonding to the surface
- Secco: painting on dry plaster with pigments in a binder
- Painters needed to understand how colors would change as the plaster dried

Regional Variations

Byzantine Influence

- Gold backgrounds representing divine light
- Rich, saturated colors with symbolic meanings
- Heavy use of purple for imperial imagery

Northern European

- More earth tones and organic pigments
- Later medieval period saw development of oil painting techniques allowing richer colors
- Flemish painters known for layered transparency effects

Southern European

- Influenced by Byzantine traditions
- Fresco techniques preserved from Roman times
- Trade connections provided access to exotic pigments

Challenges and Limitations

Color Fastness

- Many organic dyes faded with exposure to light
- Different pigments aged differently, changing the appearance of artwork over time
- Skilled artisans developed techniques to maximize longevity

Toxicity

- Many pigments were highly toxic (lead white, vermilion, orpiment)
- Artisans often suffered health problems from prolonged exposure
- Some workshops had shortened lifespans due to pigment toxicity

Compatibility

- Certain pigments could not be mixed together due to chemical incompatibility
- Some colors could not be used in fresco painting due to alkaline sensitivity

Evolution Through the Medieval Period

Early Medieval (500-1000)

- Limited palette focused on available minerals and earth tones
- Strong Byzantine influence in religious art
- Emphasis on symbolic rather than naturalistic color

High Medieval (1000-1300)

- Expanded trade networks brought new pigments
- Development of guild systems standardized color production
- Gothic art emphasized light and color as divine expressions

Late Medieval (1300-1500)

- Increasingly sophisticated color mixing techniques
- Growing interest in optical effects and naturalistic representation
- Early experiments with oil mediums which would revolutionize color use in the Renaissance

Conclusion

Medieval color was not just artistic expression but a complex system of technical knowledge, social signaling, and symbolic communication. Understanding the authentic production and use of color provides insight into the medieval

worldview where every hue carried meaning and where the brightness of a nobleman's robe or the blue in a manuscript illumination spoke volumes about wealth, status, and the divine order of the world.



Dyer tinting cloth blue in heated vessel. Mendel Hausbuch, f. 6v, c. 1425 Stadtbibliothek, Nürnberg

Part 2: Color in Medieval Clothing

Note: This guide focuses primarily on Western European clothing traditions. Byzantine, Islamic, and Eastern European color traditions followed different patterns of development and symbolism.

Introduction

In medieval Europe, clothing color was far more than mere decoration—it was a powerful form of visual communication that instantly conveyed one's social position, profession, wealth, and even moral standing. This guide explores the authentic production, regulation, and cultural meanings of colors in medieval garments from approximately 500-1500 CE. We will cover:

- How colors were actually produced from natural materials
- The social hierarchy of colors and who could use them
- Religious and secular symbolism of different colors
- How colors were used in different media (manuscripts, stained glass, textiles, etc.)
- Regional variations across Europe
- The technical challenges medieval artisans faced
- How color use evolved through the medieval period

Dyeing Techniques & Materials

The Dyeing Process

Medieval textile dyeing was a complex craft requiring specialized knowledge passed down through generations:

1. **Preparation:** Fibers needed thorough cleaning (scouring) to remove natural oils and impurities
2. **Mordanting:** Treating fabrics with metallic salts (mordants) to help dyes bind permanently
3. **Dyeing:** Immersion in dye baths, often requiring multiple applications
4. **Fixing:** Methods to ensure colorfastness, sometimes using urine, vinegar, or other fixatives
5. **Overdyeing:** Applying multiple colors sequentially to create complex hues

Common mordants included:

- **Alum** (potassium aluminum sulfate): Most versatile and common
- **Iron sulfate:** Darkened colors, created "sad" colors
- **Tin:** Brightened reds (used more in later medieval period)
- **Copper:** Created greenish tones
- **Tannins:** From oak galls, used especially for dark colors

Major Dye Sources by Color

Red

- **Madder** (*Rubia tinctorum*): Produced range from orange-red to deep red, relatively affordable
- **Kermes** (*Kermes vermilio*): From Mediterranean scale insects, created brilliant scarlet, very expensive
- **Polish cochineal** (*Porphyrophora polonica*): From insect parasites of plant roots

- **Brazilwood:** Imported from East Asia (and later Brazil), produced reddish-purple

Blue

- **Woad** (*Isatis tinctoria*): Native European plant producing indigo-like dye, required complex fermentation
- **Indigo:** Imported luxury from Asia, produced deeper blue than woad
- **Logwood:** Deeper blues and purples, available in later medieval period

Yellow

- **Weld** (*Reseda luteola*): Most common and colorfast yellow dye
- **Saffron** (*Crocus sativus*): Extremely expensive, from flower stigmas, bright golden yellow
- **Dyer's greenweed** (*Genista tinctoria*): Yellow to greenish-yellow
- **Turmeric:** Exotic import giving brilliant but fugitive (non-colorfast) yellow

Green

- Created by overdyeing blue with yellow, rarely from single-source dyes
- **Combinations:** Woad or indigo overdyeed with weld was most common
- **Green minerals:** Verdigris (copper acetate) occasionally used directly but was caustic to fibers

Brown/Black

- **Walnut hulls:** Rich browns
- **Oak galls** with iron: Greys to blacks
- **Tannins:** From bark of various trees

Purple

- **Lichen** (*Roccella tinctoria*): "Orchil" purple, affordable but not colorfast
- **Folium:** From the plant *Chrozophora tinctoria*
- **Tyrian purple:** From Mediterranean sea snails, prohibitively expensive, reserved for imperial use

Fabric Types and Dye Reception

Different fibers accepted dyes differently:

- **Wool:** Most receptive to dyes, produced richest colors
- **Silk:** Took dyes well, especially acid dyes, yielding luminous colors
- **Linen:** Resistant to dyeing, often left natural or bleached
- **Cotton:** Uncommon in medieval Europe, required special treatments to dye effectively

Social Hierarchy of Colors

Royal and Noble Colors

- **Purple:** Initially reserved for emperors and highest royalty, especially "Tyrian purple"
- **Scarlet** (kermes-dyed): For royalty and highest nobility
- **Crimson:** Deep red for high nobility

- **Deep blues:** Particularly from indigo, for wealthy nobles
- **Rich green:** Associated with aristocracy, especially in the 14th-15th centuries

Clergy and Religious Orders

- **Cardinals:** Deep red symbolizing willingness to shed blood for the faith
- **Bishops:** Purple robes for high ceremonies
- **Priests:** Black for regular clergy, white or colored vestments depending on liturgical season
- **Monastic orders:** Specific colors identified different orders:
 - Benedictines: Black
 - Cistercians: Undyed white or grey wool
 - Franciscans: Undyed brown wool
 - Dominicans: Black and white

Urban Elite and Merchants

- **Bright, saturated colors:** Shows of prosperity through expensive dyes
- **Rust, murrey (mulberry):** Popular among wealthy bourgeoisie
- **Parti-colored garments:** Multiple bright colors, often in geometric patterns
- **Tawny or yellowish-browns:** Common among merchants

Common People and Peasants

- **Earth tones:** Browns, tans, greys from inexpensive vegetable dyes
- **Russet:** Reddish-brown homespun wool
- **Blue:** Woad-dyed clothing became increasingly common among commoners by late medieval period
- **Undyed materials:** Natural wool (white, grey, brown), unbleached linen

Sumptuary Laws and Color Regulations

Sumptuary laws regulated who could wear which colors and materials:

Examples of Color Restrictions

- **1294, France:** Only nobles with annual income exceeding 6,000 livres could wear scarlet
- **1337, England:** Purple and gold restricted to royal family
- **1366, England:** Only knights and ladies could wear bright blue
- **1403, Venice:** Only noblemen registered in the Golden Book could wear scarlet or crimson
- **15th century, Florence:** Bright colors prohibited for servants and lower-class women

Purpose of Color Regulation

- Maintain visual distinction between social classes
- Prevent "wasteful" spending by lower classes
- Protect domestic textile industries from foreign imports
- Restrict consumption of expensive dyestuffs needed for other purposes

Cultural and Symbolic Meanings

Regional Color Preferences

- **Italian states:** Bright, saturated colors showing Mediterranean dye access
- **Burgundy:** Rich, deep tones; burgundy red named for this preference
- **England:** More subdued palette with growing preference for deep green in 14th-15th centuries
- **Germanic regions:** Strong preference for striped and parti-colored clothing

Color and Identity

- **Livery colors:** Lords and their households wore specific color combinations
- **Guild colors:** Many craft guilds had distinctive colors
- **City militias:** Identified by specific color combinations

Religious and Moral Associations

- **White:** Purity, innocence (worn by novices)
- **Black:** Solemnity, humility, grief
- **Red:** Could signify both sin and martyrdom
- **Yellow:** Often had negative connotations (forced on prostitutes and Jews in some regions)
- **Green:** Youth, love, but also associated with changeability and untrustworthiness
- **Blue:** Increasingly associated with constancy and loyalty by late medieval period

Fashion Trends and Evolution

Early Medieval (500-1000)

- Limited palette of natural colors
- Little distinction between class through color alone (more through material quality)
- Regional variation based on locally available dyes

High Medieval (1000-1300)

- Crusades and trade expansion brought new dyestuffs
- Greater color differentiation between classes emerged
- Rising importance of blue as a prestigious color

Late Medieval (1300-1500)

- Explosion of color variety and technique
- Parti-colored (mi-parti) fashion became popular among nobility
- More complex hues through overdyeing
- Development of "color families" in aristocratic fashion

Special Techniques and Effects

Patterned Dyeing

- **Resist dyeing:** Using wax or pastes to create patterns

- **Ikat-like techniques:** Tie-dyeing yarn before weaving
- **Block printing:** Applying mordants or dyes with carved blocks

Surface Treatments

- **Glazing:** Applying translucent color washes to finished textiles
- **Painting:** Direct application of pigment mixed with binders
- **Embroidery:** Adding colored thread to enhance or modify garment color

Color Protection

- Colors often faded quickly, especially blues and purples
- Garments stored away from direct sunlight
- Expensive garments sometimes reversed or remade as color faded

Practical Examples

Aristocratic Wardrobe (Late 14th Century)

- **Houppelande** (outer garment): Deep blue wool lined with fur
- **Cotehardie** (fitted garment): Scarlet wool for special occasions
- **Parti-colored** hose: Family colors in geometric patterns
- **Ceremonial** garments: Rich crimson or purple silk velvet

Merchant's Attire (15th Century)

- **Gown:** Dark tawny wool for everyday, murrey (mulberry) for special occasions
- **Hood:** Often in contrasting color to the gown
- **Hose:** Solid colors, typically brown, blue, or red
- **Sleeves:** Sometimes in different color from main garment, often detachable

Peasant Clothing (13th Century)

- **Tunic:** Undyed or naturally colored wool
- **Apron/overdress:** Possibly blue from woad (for slightly wealthier)
- **Headcovering:** Natural linen or wool
- **Special occasion** garment: Possibly russet (reddish-brown) wool

Conclusion

Medieval clothing color was a complex visual language that conveyed immediate information about the wearer's place in society. Far from the monochromatic stereotypes often depicted in modern media, medieval people—especially from the 13th century onward—inhabited a world where color was both a practical craft and a powerful social signifier. The artistry and technical knowledge required to produce these colors represents one of the medieval period's most sophisticated achievements, combining chemistry, botany, and artistic vision in the creation of everyday visual culture.



Women carding, spinning and weaving. Giovanni Boccaccio - Gaia Caccilia, British Library 16 G V, f. 56, illuminated manuscript c1440

Part 3: The Evolution of Color Trends in Medieval Clothing

Introduction

Medieval clothing colors were not static but evolved dramatically over the thousand-year span of the Middle Ages (c. 500-1500 CE). These changes reflected technological innovations, expanding trade networks, shifting power structures, and evolving cultural values. This guide traces the chronological development of color trends throughout the medieval period, showing how the visual landscape of European society transformed over time. Covered in this section:

- The evolution from the limited palette of the Early Medieval period (500-1000 CE) to the sophisticated color schemes of the Late Medieval era (1300-1500 CE)
- Major color revolutions like the 13th century rise of blue and the 14th century "black revolution"
- How technological breakthroughs in dyeing techniques enabled new colors and trends
- The impact of expanding trade routes, especially after the Crusades and during the Pax Mongolica
- Regional differences in color preferences (England, France, Italian states, Germanic regions)
- The influence of powerful courts, particularly Burgundy in the 15th century
- How cultural exchanges transformed European color aesthetics

Early Medieval Period (c. 500-1000)

The Post-Roman Color Palette (5th-7th centuries)

The collapse of Roman trade networks severely limited access to exotic dyes and pigments:

- **Predominant colors:** Undyed wools (whites, greys, browns), locally-sourced plant dyes
- **Elite preferences:** Preserved Roman purple traditions where possible
- **Byzantium:** Maintained imperial purple and gold standards while Western Europe saw simplification
- **Regional variation:** Strong tribal and regional color preferences (Anglo-Saxon, Frankish, Gothic)

Textile Evidence and Sources

- Sutton Hoo burial (Anglo-Saxon, 7th century): Remnants show preference for red-browns and yellows
- Merovingian grave goods: Show preference for reds among nobility
- Early manuscripts depict largely earthy color palettes with occasional bright accents

Carolingian Revival (8th-9th centuries)

Charlemagne's empire brought renewed cultural exchange and attempts to revive Roman luxury:

- **Royal preferences:** Blue gained importance as a royal color alongside purple
- **Ecclesiastical colors:** Increasingly formalized, with white for purity, red for martyrs
- **Trade revival:** Renewed access to Mediterranean dyestuffs
- **Technology:** Revival of Roman dyeing techniques in specialized workshops

Key Developments

- Establishment of monastic workshops specializing in textile production
- Blue (from woad) emerged as an important color rather than just a base for overdyeing
- Early development of color symbolism in ecclesiastical contexts

Viking Influence (9th-10th centuries)

Norse expansion brought distinctive color preferences to affected regions:

- **Norse preference:** Bright reds, strong blues, and vibrant yellows
- **Luxury items:** Viking traders brought exotic dyestuffs from as far as Byzantium and the Islamic world
- **Regional distinction:** Areas under Norse influence showed more color variation than typical early medieval communities

Archaeological Evidence

- Oseberg ship burial textiles show sophisticated dyeing techniques
- York excavations reveal widespread use of madder red and woad blue in Norse settlements
- Evidence of overdyeing techniques to create more complex hues

High Medieval Period (c. 1000-1300)

The First Crusades and Eastern Influence (11th-12th centuries)

Crusades and expanding Mediterranean trade brought dramatic changes to European color palettes:

- **New dyestuffs:** Introduction of new dye materials from the Byzantine and Islamic worlds
- **Color hierarchy:** Increasingly complex system of color status began to emerge
- **Royal colors:** Purple remained prestigious but bright reds (particularly kermes scarlet) gained status
- **Religious orders:** New monastic orders developed distinct color identities (Cistercian white, Benedictine black)

Key Color Developments

- Kermes red (true scarlet) became the most prestigious secular color
- Yellow declined in status in many regions, increasingly associated with marginalized groups
- Introduction of alum from the Middle East revolutionized mordanting techniques
- Blue began its ascent as a fashionable color beyond just royal contexts

The Rise of Blue (13th century)

A fundamental shift occurred as blue rose from a relatively common color to one of the most prestigious:

- **Royal adoption:** French monarchy's association with blue (particularly the fleur-de-lis on blue field)
- **Marian connections:** Blue's association with the Virgin Mary enhanced its prestige
- **Technological advances:** Improved woad processing techniques in Northern Europe
- **Expanding production:** Establishment of major blue-dyeing centers in Toulouse, Erfurt, and Amiens

Fashion Trends

- Blue became fashionable among nobility throughout Western Europe
- Bright, saturated blues achieved through multiple dye baths became status symbols
- Parti-colored garments (with blue often as one component) began to appear among the elite
- Celestial blue associated with heavenly virtues gained popularity in courtly contexts

The Mongol Empire and New Trade Routes (13th century)

Pax Mongolica opened up unprecedented trade routes from Europe to the Far East:

- **New dyestuffs:** Increased availability of exotic colorants from Asia
- **Color combinations:** Introduction of new aesthetic combinations from Eastern traditions
- **Elite distinction:** Increasingly complex color combinations distinguished the elite from common people
- **Heraldic developments:** Standardization of heraldic colors created new cultural significance for certain hues



Illustration showing the infancy of Christ. Dyer (to whom Christ was said to be apprenticed). English, Medieval Manuscript, circa 1315-1325. MS. Selden Supra 38, pt. 1 Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

Late Medieval Period (c. 1300-1500)

The Black Revolution (14th century)

One of the most dramatic color shifts in medieval fashion history:

- **Black ascendancy:** Black transformed from a humble, monastic color to the height of luxury and sophistication
- **Technological breakthrough:** Development of techniques for rich, deep black using multiple overdyeing processes
- **Regional leadership:** Pioneered in Italian and Iberian courts, later spreading north
- **Status inversion:** What had been an "absence of color" became the most difficult and expensive to produce

Cultural Context

- Burgundian court's adoption of black as a signature color
- Italian city-states' development of sumptuous black velvets and wools
- Growing association between black and solemnity, authority, and refinement
- The "beautiful black" aesthetic requiring multiple dyeing processes with expensive imported dyestuffs

The Burgundian Influence (15th century)

The court of Burgundy became Europe's most influential fashion center:

- **Signature colors:** Deep burgundy reds, rich blues, and luxurious blacks dominated
- **Color combinations:** Complex complementary color schemes
- **Material distinction:** Color increasingly linked to specific luxury textiles (velvets, brocades)
- **Visual competition:** Escalating luxury displays among rival courts

Fashion Innovation

- Development of "broken colors" (complex hues achieved through overdyeing)
- Subtle tone-on-tone color schemes among the most elite
- Slashing techniques revealing contrasting colors beneath
- Highly complex parti-colored designs requiring advanced tailoring

The Green Renaissance (Mid-15th century)

Green experienced a significant revival in aristocratic fashion:

- **Technical advances:** Better mordanting techniques created more stable greens
- **Courtly love:** Associations with love, youth, and vitality in courtly literature
- **Visibility:** Green became a fashionable choice for tournaments and public appearances
- **Regional preferences:** Particularly popular in English and northern French courts

The Dawn of Renaissance Color (Late 15th century)

The transitional period between medieval and Renaissance aesthetics:

- **Broader palette:** Expansion beyond traditional medieval hues to include more delicate, nuanced colors
- **Bright accents:** Vibrant colors used as strategic accents rather than full garments
- **Italian influence:** Florentine and Venetian color innovations spreading northward
- **Class distinction:** Even more complex sumptuary laws attempted to regulate the visual hierarchy



Women carding, spinning and weaving. Jean BOCCACE de Certaldo of the clergy and noble women. Bibliothèque nationale de France12420, fol 71r. c.1400

Factors Driving Color Evolution

Technological Innovation

Major technical breakthroughs shaped color availability:

- **Mordanting advances:** Better understanding of alum and other mordants expanded color range
- **Vat dyeing improvements:** More consistent results from woad and indigo
- **Overdyeing techniques:** Creating more complex hues through multiple dye baths
- **Finishing processes:** Glazing and other treatments to enhance color intensity

Trade and Economics

Changing trade patterns dramatically affected color availability:

- **Alum trade:** Control of alum supplies (essential for dyeing) shifted political and economic power
- **Hanseatic League:** Northern European trade network standardized color production
- **Italian maritime dominance:** Access to Eastern Mediterranean dyestuffs
- **Specialist centers:** Development of cities known for specific colors (Venetian scarlet, Lincoln green)

Cultural Exchange

Contact between different cultures transformed color preferences:

- **Islamic influence:** Sophisticated color theories and techniques from Islamic territories
- **Byzantine preservation:** Maintaining classical dyeing knowledge through the early medieval period
- **Mongol exchange:** New aesthetic combinations from Asian traditions
- **Regional specialization:** Development of distinctive local color traditions (Flemish, Italian, Spanish)



Weaver at work. Mendel Hausbuch, 156r, c. 1425 Stadtbibliothek, Nürnberg

Case Studies: Color Trends by Region

England

- Early period: Strong preference for reds and browns
- 13th century: Adoption of "Lincoln green" as renowned specialty
- 14th century: Preference for bright, clear colors longer than Continental fashion
- 15th century: Strong green trend among nobility, particularly in Lancastrian period

France

- Early Capetian: Adoption of blue as royal color
- 13th century: Led blue fashion trend across Europe
- 14th century: Embraced deep, rich colors with multiple overtones
- 15th century: Burgundian influence dominated noble fashion

Italian States

- 13th century: Leadership in scarlet production
- 14th century: Pioneered the luxury black revolution
- 15th century: Developed more subtle color palette anticipating Renaissance aesthetics
- Throughout: More vibrant colors than northern Europe due to Mediterranean dye access

Germanic Regions

- Early period: Strong preference for bright colors and contrasts
- 13th century: Developed major woad production centers
- 14th-15th centuries: Maintained preference for parti-colored designs longer than other regions
- Court fashion: Adopted Burgundian influences but maintained distinctive local color preferences

Conclusion

The evolution of color in medieval clothing reflects the broader cultural, technological, and economic transformations of the period. From the limited palette of the early medieval era to the sophisticated color theories of the late 15th century, changes in clothing color reveal a society increasingly concerned with visual distinction, symbolic communication, and artistic refinement.

What appears at first glance to be simply a matter of fashion was in fact a complex visual language that evolved over centuries, reflecting shifting power structures, technological innovations, and cultural values. Understanding these color trends provides valuable insight into how medieval people viewed themselves and their society, making the history of medieval color a window into the medieval worldview itself.

What's particularly fascinating is how certain colors dramatically changed in status - blue went from a common color to prestigious, black transformed from humble to luxurious, and green experienced cycles of popularity.



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Women gathering silk cocoons and weaving. Giovanni Boccaccio - *De claris mulieribus* – British Library MS Royal 16 G V, fol. 54v, c1440

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Online Resources and Databases

- "The Medieval Dress & Textile Society." <http://medats.org.uk/>
- "CIETA: Centre International d'Etude des Textiles Anciens." <https://cieta.fr/>
- "Medieval Textile Blog - Textilis." <http://textilis.net/> (Resource on medieval textile techniques)
- "Historical Textile Database." The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search#!?material=Textiles>
- "Database of Archaeological Textiles." University of Copenhagen, Centre for Textile Research. <https://ctr.hum.ku.dk/>
- "Clothing and Textiles Research Group." University of Southampton. <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/archaeology/research/groups/clothing-textiles.page>
- "The Tudor Tailor." <https://tudortailor.com/> (Late medieval and early Renaissance textile resources)

Museum Collections with Significant Medieval Textile Holdings

Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, Switzerland
Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, Germany
Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, USA
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA
Musée de Cluny - Musée national du Moyen Âge, Paris, France
Musée des Tissus et des Arts décoratifs, Lyon, France
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA
Museum of London, London, UK
Textile Museum, Washington D.C., USA
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK

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Note: This bibliography focuses on scholarly works available in English or with English translations, though many important studies exist in other languages, particularly French, German, and Italian. For additional specialized bibliographies, consult the journal "Medieval Clothing and Textiles" (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/series/medieval-clothing-and-textiles/6D0E858B13BEAB759ADC62EC174C3272>) which publishes annual volumes with extensive bibliographic information.



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