

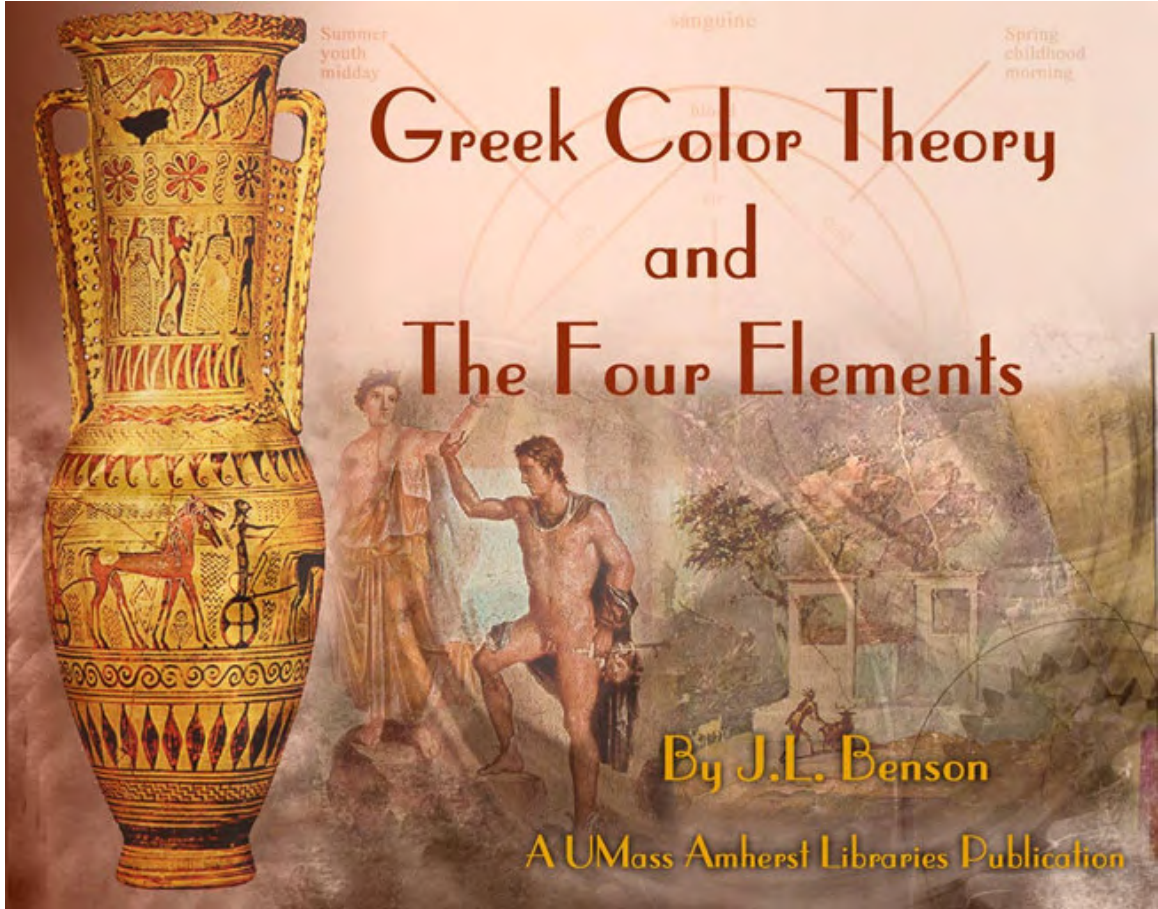
Art, Architecture & Art History
Greek Color Theory and the Four Elements

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Why does earlier Greek painting (Archaic/Classical) seem so clear and—deceptively—simple while the latest painting (Hellenistic/Graeco-Roman) is so much more complex but also familiar to us? Is there a single, coherent explanation that will cover this remarkable range? What can we recover from ancient documents and practices that can objectively be called “Greek color theory”?

Present day historians of ancient art consistently conceive of color in terms of triads: red, yellow, blue or, less often, red, green, blue. This habitude derives ultimately from the color wheel invented by J.W. Goethe some two centuries ago. So familiar and useful is his system that it is only natural to judge the color orientation of the Greeks on its basis. To do so, however, assumes, consciously or not, that the color understanding of our age is the definitive paradigm for that subject.

But could it be that the Greek understanding of color, if we can recover it in rational terms, has itself a paradigmatic quality offering unformulated but real reaches of meaning? And if so could we expand our consciousness of the nature of color and its evolving manifestations in history?

Greek philosophers thought in terms not of three, but of four, basic colors: black, red, yellow and white: yet little or no attention has been paid to this conception as a system of thought. Almost ironically, it is again Goethe's experiments in color, made in quite conscious opposition to Newtonian principles, which not only led him to color triads, but which also reveal that the Greek system of four colors is theoretically balanced by a second group of four colors: white, blue, violet and black. The earlier Greek painters were thoroughly absorbed in the first “tesserad” of colors, while later painters increasingly experimented with the second group.

Professor Benson has for the first time formulated in scientific terms a comprehensive explanation of four-color painting as well as of the larger issue of a Greek color theory implied in the cosmological vision of Empedokles. The theory itself is anchored in the essentially Greek concepts of polarity and complementation, which of themselves foster definite parameters of meaning for each color. This allows a completely new interpretation of Greek painting.

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**GREEK COLOR THEORY
AND THE FOUR ELEMENTS**

A Cosmological Interpretation

J. L. Benson

Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, 2000

HYMN TO THE FOUR ELEMENTS

Sirenen

Welch feuriges Wunder verklärt uns die Wellen,
Die gegeneinander sich funkelnd zerschellen?
So leuchtet's und schwanket und hellet hinan:
Die Körper, sie glühen auf nächtlicher Bahn,
Und ringsum ist alles vom Feuer umronnen;
So herrsche denn Eros, der alles begonnen!

Heil dem Meer! Heil den Wogen!
Von dem heiligen Feuer umzogen!
Heil dem Wasser! Heil dem Feuer!
Heil dem seltnen Abenteuer!

All-Alle

Heil den mildgewognen Lüften!
Heil geheimnisreichen Grüften!
Hoch gefeiert seid allhier,
Element' ihr alle vier!

Sirens

The waves are transfigured with fire-laden wonder,
They glitter in impact, in flame leap asunder
Here's shining and swaying, and spurting of light,
With forms all aglow in the track of the night,
And lapping of fire touches all things around:
Let Eros who wrought it be honoured and crowned!

Hail to the Ocean! Hail to the wave!
The flood with holy fire to lave!
Waters hail! All hail the fire!
The strange event hail we in choir!

All voices in concert

Hail light airs now floating free!
Hail earth's caves of mystery!
Held in honour evermore
Be the elemental four!

— JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

Faust II, Act 2, "Klassische Walpurgisnacht"

Translated by Philip Wayne

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