Is white skin really pink?

Kévin Bideaux

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Edited by Veronica Marchiafava and Marcello Picollo

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

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Abstract
I will determine the shades associated with this idea of an 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, based on medieval texts, literary works and artists' writings, compared with pictorial and sculptural, figurative and abstractive artworks, but also with other cultural productions like fashion, comics or animation. It is also a question of seeing in which ways this association between pink color and complexion is also articulated with the system of race, since it indicates only the skin of the Whites — even symbolically —, understood as the color of the skin in general.

Keywords: Flesh color, Skin color, Pink, Race, History of Color.

Introduction

Used to designate the color of the skin, the term "flesh" is a synonym of "complexion", or "skin tone". It exists many links — lexicographically, visually, and symbolically — between the flesh color and the pink color from medieval painting manuals to contemporary arts and fashion trends. Also, several contemporary artists used pink as the color symbolically embodying the bodily experience common to all human beings. In these cases, pink refers to the flesh understood as mucous or as what is found under the skin. Pink can then biologically signify the organicity of the body, the experience of human life in a philosophical sense, or even the emotions perceived through the skin, giving color a psychological dimension. However, the color of white skin is neither really pink, nor the same from one individual to another (due to tan, age, health, etc.).

The purpose of this article is to show how pink became the generic color of the (white) skin, but also, how the white complexion alone became capable of signifying the concepts of flesh, life, and humanity. Based on a transmedia and transhistorical study, I will show how pink has become, over the centuries, the color emblem of white skin, then symbol of human color taken as a whole. I will also show how this construction is articulated with the concept of race, and therefore how pink participates in its own way in the symbolic superiority of Whites over Blacks

In the flesh: the flesh color in history of painting

In painting, the term "flesh" is employed as an equivalent to the rendering of the skin. "Flesh" understood as a color term then designates the only skin of White people, often the only dermatological type represented by Western artists and approached by treaties on the arts. Skin appearance is at the center of the concerns of Western artists, especially painters, because the restitution in painting of the appearance of the color of human skin is a complex and technical challenge, "an inaccessible chimera" (Pernac, 2008). From Greek and Roman Antiquity, the complexion was not limited to color, it was even rather a question of arrangement of shadows and lights to allow the rendering of volumes (Lichtenstein, 1999, p. 38), to transmit "the expression of the flesh" in all its dimensions, including tactile (Diderot and Le Rond d'Alembert, 1766, p. 11). The qualities of the flesh in paint are also described with the Italian term morbidezza which means "suppleness", "softness", "tenderness" and "blur", and which refers to the texture of the flesh and not to its color.

We would have to wait until the end of the Middle Ages for the rendering of the flesh to become a real object of technical study which would occupy artists as much as their commentators for centuries.

Indeed, the flesh would become more complex in *Duecento* with the application of a base of *verdaccio* on which was applied other layers which gave the illusion of volume. From the 14th century, the carnations produced by superimposing layers of colors, sometimes transparent (glaze) would have a finesse never obtained until then (Laneyrie-Dagen, 2006, p. 139), reaching a striking realism in artists such as Jan Van Eyck (Fig. 1) or Raphaël (Fig. 2). 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 solutions based on glue or egg. 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 (Fig. 3) (Magnain, 2009, p. 92).

Fig. 1 - Van Eyck, J. (1435) *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* [oil on canvas].
Fig. 2 - Raphaël (c.1509-1512) *Madonna of Loreto* [oil on wood panel].
Fig. 3 - Rubens, P. P. (c.1618), *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* [oil on canvas].

The exact color of the flesh color in painting remains difficult to define and 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 faithfully render the flesh colors (*e.g.* Cennini, c.1390/1859, p. 13). 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* would later give 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 (1876, p. 47). 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, p. 24). The lexicographer Mollard-Desfour does not succeed in precisely determining the shade corresponding to the French term *incarnat* (incarnate), and classifies it in her dictionary of red as "more or less bright red" (2009, p. 255), but also in that of pink, describing it as a "bright pink" (2002, p. 179-182).

Is white skin really pink? An explanation about pink as a flesh color

The skin is physiologically made up of several layers (epidermis, dermis, hypodermis), each with specific structural and chemical properties, but also with its 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 (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, the blue of the veins, to which are

added gray, brown and green tones (1848, p. 417). Thus, even the abstract works such as the pink monochromes of the American painter Marcia Hafif (*Roman Paintings*, 1986) are spectroscopically similar to that of real skin, because the superimpositions of successive layers of pigments (red, blue, and yellow) take up the stratified biological structure of the skin (Magnain, 2009, p. 95).

There is therefore a biological reason for the multiple visual representations of white skin in pink shades in Western artistic and cultural productions: in painting (Fig. 4; Fig. 5), but also in sculpture (*e.g. Three Horizontals* (1998) by Louise Bourgeois), cartoons and comics (think of the pink face of Disney's Cinderella). Fashion and cosmetics also designate by “flesh” a set of products with colors supposed to refer to the color of the (white) skin (Fig. 6). More recently, it has been replaced by the term “nude”, more specifically for make-up, evoking an idea of "natural", that is to say without artifice. In litterature, pink is used to describe white skin too, as in the poem “À une robe rose” of Théophile Gautier associating the pink fabric of a dress with the “light pink” color of a woman’s skin (1850). From a lexicological point of view, the flesh color is also considered as a shade of pink, after the carnation of Whites (Mollard-Desfour, 2002, p. 152-153), but which is not to be confused with the generic term “pink” (Kerttula, 2002, p. 240; Kuriki *et al.*, 2017; Zimmermann *et al.*, 2015).

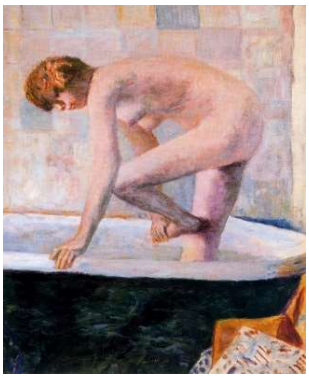

Fig. 4 - Boucher F. (1759) *Pan et Syringe* [oil on canvas].
Fig. 5 - Bonnard P. (c.1924) *Pink Nude in the Bathtub* [oil on wood panel].
Fig. 6 - A pair of nude shoes. Creative Commons Zero.

However, even if we restrict ourselves to only white skin, all skin tones do not have the same color. Painters have although criticized shades of “flesh color” offered by the merchants of colors Sennelier or Marin, for being too pink to be able to account for all the white carnations (Magnain, 2009, p. 92). There is actually not exactly one shade of flesh color, but many shades of pink: sampling carried out on images answering the keywords “flesh color” and “nude” collected on the internet shows the color would be circumscribed to a set of predominantly pink shades (see Hughes and Wyatt’s methodology, 2015), but that it also exceeds it as evidenced by the shades of brown, orange, yellow and gray (Fig. 7 ; Fig. 8). There is not exactly a flesh (or nude) color, but a large spectrum of flesh colors which are majoritarily pink shades, which shows that there is a strong association between pink and white skins, even if no one would say that indeed, Whites are not really pink.

Fig. 7 and 8 - Color chart of flesh and nude colors, obtained from the collection of hundred pictures answering the keywords “flesh color” and “nude color” on the internets. January 2020.

The shadow of the White: Pink, race and whiteness

As a shade of pink, there is no doubt that the flesh color refers only to the white Caucasian skins. However, the existence and recurrent use of a single term to designate the complexion, which is a white complexion, leads me to question pink flesh in articulation with the concept of race. Skin color has indeed always participated in the construction of individual and collective identities, and is done in the system of classification of individuals according to their skin color (Blanchard, Boëtsch & Chevé, 2008, p. 8-10). Mechthild Fend also specifies that it is no coincidence that the term “skin color” appeared in the second half of the 18th century in the theory of French art, simultaneously with racial anthropology, both discourses granting the superiority of white skin as the universal ideal and standard of beauty (2005). White skin has indeed been associated since Antiquity with beauty — especially female one (Pelletier-Michaud, 2016, p. 198), and youthness (Garo, 2008, p. 31), always considered an ideal of beauty to be attained in Japan (Wagatsuma, 1967), but also 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 whiteness to desire and sexuality (Fig. 9; Fig. 10).

Fig. 9 - Honthorst (van), G. (1625) *Smiling girl, a courtesan, holding an obscene image* [oil on canvas].
Fig. 10 - Fragonard J.-H. (c.1755) *La coquette fixée* [oil on canvas].

In addition, the history of art is also ethnocentric, that is to say that it visibilizes in the West essentially the production of White artists who themselves have mainly represented White characters, both by critics and by institutional exhibitions or acquisitions (Fernandez-Sacco, 2001). Furthermore, when Black people were presents on painting, they were represented for a long time from a racial and colonial angle (Lafont, 2019). Whiteness not only dominates in the field of representations, but also gives the impression that whiteness is a norm. This last element would also explain why the color

term "flesh" was constructed from the color of Whites only, because 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 problematization of social relations of race (Garner, 2007). Using pink as the color of flesh in cultural and artistic productions, considering that everyone has the same complexion, *i.e.* a white one, could be consequently considered as a symbolic violence for non-White people (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970), which 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 or the "nude" trend in fashion was designed for the comfort of Whites to be mixed up with the their skin color, but are extremely visible on black skins (2018).

Under the skin: Flesh color as human being symbol

Sometimes, pink used as skin color by contemporary artists can have 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 exemple, the pink plaster painting-sculptures of 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, giving the rendering of the flesh that only oil usually does. He rightly referred to the skin, 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). Colors and emotions are indeed linked as many studies have shown (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, nonreflectively) in an immediate nervous response" (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, p. 35). In the film *Pieles* (2017), the Spanish director Eduardo Casanova follows several protagonists with bodies considered to be out of the ordinary (burnt face, eyelessness, dwarfism, etc.) in their intimacy, exploring various themes such as desire, reification, discrimination, rejection or the search for authenticity. The skin evoked by the title appears as a metaphor for intimacy, sexuality, but above all in relation to the other, and the omnipresence of pink in the decorations, costumes and visuals of communication as a way of symbolizing this skin, but also emotions and intimacy.

Pink as the color of the flesh can therefore also signify the affects and emotions that pass through the flesh/skin. Thus conceptualized, the flesh can then be evoked by the artists without any physiological consideration and hence emancipate themselves from representation. Pink in the work of French artist Yves Klein particularly embodies a highly accomplished conceptualization of flesh: known for his ultramarine blue monochromes, he has however also produced numerous pink monochromes (named *Monopinks*) evoking the skin. In opposition to the immateriality of the blue, Klein's pink refers to material world: the flesh is thus thought not in terms of corporality, as making direct reference to the body and its organicity, but indeed to the flesh as a concept, referring to materiality perceived not as a form, but as an experience (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; see Santa Lucia, 2016) or the Austrian Pamela Rosenkranz (installation *Our* Product, 2015; see Launay, 2015) 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, a pink symbol of life and humanity. This association between pink as flesh color and human being was also developed by theories of the anthroposophist esoteric current: its creator Rudolf Steiner did not strictly write a theory of colors, he nevertheless proposed a meaning of colors as representing the forces in action in nature: green is the color of plants, white that of light, black that of darkness, and the peach-blossom color (*Pfirsichblütfarbe*) that of the human soul. 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 (1921/2010, p. 10).

Can we really disconnect the flesh color as a symbol of humanity, from the flesh color representation of white bodies? Perhaps it is necessary to think of the flesh not as indicating the color of the skin, but rather what lies below: the muscles and organs, or even the mucous. The art historian Dominique Grisad said for example about the serie *Second Skin* (2017) of the Swiss artist Nici Jost that "[p]ink is both skin-deep and flesh and blood" (2019, p. 18), the artist herself saying 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 (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 which colors the muscles, which flows when the body is opened or injured. Even when the flesh thought as underskin organic matter is represented in pink, the red of the blood is always intrinsically associated with it, both visually and symbolically (Salamandra, 2018, p. 131). American artist Derek Jarman rather wondered if Steiner (as a reminder, Klein, Humeau, Rozenkrantz or Steiner are also White people) would have chosen the color of the peach blossom as the color of human existence if he himself had been Black (1994/2003, p.194). One can 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. 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.

Conclusion

If the use of pink in representations of white bodies responds to a logic (admittedly simplified) of transcription of the real, its use as a symbol of the skin tone in general or of humanity as a whole is more problematic, because it fits from a racial perspective, shaped by history and representations, which it is impossible to ignore. In the same way, if pink can signify flesh thought of as what is common to human existence, its symbolic construction is anchored in a Western and white history of art, and cannot claim any universality. This analysis of a part of the symbolism of pink thus reveals how the relations of power (here of race) between dominant and dominated intervene in the history of colours and enrich their symbolism.

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