



Yellow

Beyond Van Gogh's Colour



Please return to the information desk

Contents

Van Gogh and Yellow	5
Sunlight and warmth	9
Modern and daring	17
Shades of yellow	29
Divine and sensitive	38
Vote for the best yellow scent!	48
Olafur Eliasson	51
What does yellow sound like?	53

Yellow

Beyond Van Gogh's colour

Yellow is warm, exuberant and radiant. Yellow is daring, intrusive and sometimes even sickly. According to his artist friends, yellow was also the colour of Vincent van Gogh: the hue of the sunflowers, the wheatfields and the sizzling sun of southern France.

This is the first exhibition to explore the different meanings that the colour yellow held for Van Gogh and his contemporaries. Colour is essentially a phenomenon of light recognised by our brains after a complex neurological process. We assign meaning to colours depending on the time we live in, our culture, or our own personal experience.

This exhibition is a journey through sun-drenched landscapes. Along the way, you will encounter modern women and the mystical atmospheres of the art, fashion, music and literature of the period around 1900. On the floor above, Olafur Eliasson (1967) will immerse you in yellow light and play with your perceptions. Finally, students from the Amsterdam Conservatory will present compositions they have made to accompany some of the works in this exhibition.

Video

Yellow plays an important role in religion, politics, identity, art and creativity. These images show how this colour has been used in various cultures and disciplines throughout the centuries.

Van Gogh and Yellow

‘It was, you will remember, his favourite colour, the symbol of the light that he sought in people’s hearts, as well as in works of art.’ The artist Emile Bernard wrote these words shortly after the death of his friend Van Gogh.

Naturally, Van Gogh used other colours to depict the world around him, but he soon became associated with yellow thanks to the iconic works he made in the South of France.

Yellow played a particularly crucial role during the period Van Gogh spent in Arles. The sunny landscape of wheatfields and ochre coloured houses inspired him to use a lot of yellow. The colour also challenged Van Gogh as an artist. His famous Sunflowers paintings are symphonies in either blue and yellow, or just yellow. He wrote that he had to use everything at his disposal to achieve ‘the high yellow note’. No other colour occupied him to such an extent.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Sunflowers, 1889

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

It takes courage to make a painting that is almost completely yellow - bright yellow. Van Gogh wrote that he used all his energy 'to melt those golds and those flower tones'. This still life of sunflowers radiates warmth, vibrancy and lust for life, but at the same time, the withering flowers point toward decay. Despite this, the yellow outshines every sombre feeling.

Van Gogh built up the colour in several layers using a range of brush strokes and thicknesses. He did not use yellow merely as a colour, but also as something more tangible. In doing so, he would turn yellow into the actual subject of the painting.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Wheatfield, 1888

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

A small, overgrown field, ripe with yellow ears of wheat under a turquoise sky that promises a sunny day. This is one of the numerous studies that Van Gogh made of wheatfields in the area surrounding Arles. For him, yellow was the colour of summer. Describing the landscape in June, he wrote about ‘...tones of gold of every shade, green-gold, yellow-gold, red-gold, ditto bronze, copper, in short from lemon yellow to the dull yellow colour of, say, a pile of threshed grain’.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

The Yellow House (The Street), 1888

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Van Gogh thought that you should not use yellow or orange without blue, and vice versa. These two colours reinforce each other, amplifying expression and impact – exactly what he sought. ‘That’s a really difficult subject! But I want to conquer it for that very reason. Because it’s tremendous, these yellow houses in the sunlight and then the incomparable freshness of the blue. All the ground’s yellow, too.’

Sunlight and warmth

Yellow has long been the colour used to depict the sun and sunlight. Van Gogh went to the South of France in search of clearer light and the warmth of the sun. He wrote: 'Sunshine, a light which, for want of a better word I can only call yellow – pale sulphur yellow, pale lemon, gold. How beautiful yellow is!'

The sun actually emits white light, but this white light is composed of all the colours of the rainbow. The light is diffused as it passes through the atmosphere. The result is that the sky appears blue and the sun yellow. At sunrise or sunset, the sky takes on many shades of yellow. Countless artists have tried to capture this magical effect.

The 19th century saw the introduction of several new sources of light, including gaslight and electric light. From then on, even indoor spaces could be infused with a radiant yellow.

What does the yellow of sunlight and warmth smell like?
Developed by olfactory experts from Robertet, Grasse.

Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851)

Going to the Ball (San Martino), exhibited 1846

oil on canvas
Tate, London

Net als Van Gogh aanbad Turner de zon. 'De zon is God', zei hij ooit. Het geel van de ondergaande zon staat in dit late werk centraal. De gebouwen van Venetië doemen op uit de sluier van licht. Het is diffuus en mysterieus. Om de vluchtigheid van het zonlicht te vangen, werden Turners schilderijen steeds experimenteler en abstracter - met geel als zijn signatuur. Critici schreven dat hij aan 'gele koorts' leed of met mosterd schilderde.

Satirical cartoon of J.M.W. Turner,
Almanack of the Month, June 1846

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Wheatfield with Reaper, 1889

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

You can almost feel the heat. In *Wheatfield with Reaper*, Van Gogh's sun shimmers in a greenish-yellow sky. The warm yellow wheat contrasts against the pale purple of the shadowy hills. Light yellow brush strokes surround the sun. This painting has a deeper meaning: the reaper symbolises the transience of life. Yet, the atmosphere is not gloomy, thanks to 'a sun that floods everything with a light of fine gold' as Van Gogh described it.

Paul Signac (1863-1935)

Setting Sun. Sardine Fishing. Adagio. Opus 221, 1891

oil on canvas

Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Bequest of Mrs. John Hay Whitney, 1998

In an attempt to capture the sparkling light, Signac painted the last rays of the day's sun in a palette of yellow, orange and pink dots. The yellow-orange of the sky and its reflection in the water form a contrast with the fishermen's boats in blue and purple. The balanced colours and pointillist technique evoke the evening calm like a gentle piece of music; an adagio.

Parasol, c. 1910

silk with embroidery
Modemuseum Hasselt

An umbrella offers protection from the rain, a parasol from the sun. In the 19th and early 20th century, a parasol was an indispensable fashion accessory, together with gloves and a hat. Pale skin was the beauty ideal. This soft yellow silk parasol would have cast a warm glow on the face of the person using it.

Piet Mondriaan (1872-1944)

Dune I, 1909

oil on cardboard

Kunstmuseum Den Haag. Bequest of Salomon B. Slijper

Mondrian depicts the effect of sunlight on a dune near Domburg, in Zeeland, using horizontal lines of colour, painted very loosely. The clear yellow clashes against the other colours and lights up the canvas. Light, sky and sand all flow together. The simplification of shapes and colours reveals an intense, inner experience of light. Mondrian's ultimate goal was to create a universal art that transcended the visible world to express a spiritual one.

Marc Chagall (1887-1985)

La chambre jaune (The Yellow Room), 1911

The Yellow Room

Fondation Beyeler, Beyeler Collection, Riehen/Basel

This room simmers with a strange energy. It is not only due to the curious figures and the cow, but also to the lavish hues of green and yellow. Chagall made this work shortly after leaving Russia for Paris. The young artist was blown away by the bustling city of bright lights, colours and new art. The Yellow Room may be filled with the light - both artificial and metaphorical - of all these impressions. In the middle of the warm glow, a white samovar (Russian kettle) shines brightly.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Portrait of Camille Roulin, 1888

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Van Gogh painted Camille Roulin, the son of the local postmaster, sitting in a room lit by gaslight. He painted the white wall behind the boy yellow, with loose yellow brushstrokes across part of his face to create the effect of gaslight flickering over the canvas. Van Gogh had gas installed in the Yellow House in Arles so that he could continue to paint in the evening.

Modern and daring

In the late 19th century, the colour yellow was associated with everything that was modern, daring and decadent. This association also clung to the yellow novels by groundbreaking writers such as Emile Zola that were published in France. Van Gogh and his contemporaries would have regarded these novels as symbols of the modern age. Women who read them were considered independent and rebellious.

In England, a magazine inspired by the reputation of the yellow novels was published, entitled *The Yellow Book*. People later referred to the period as 'the yellow nineties'; a period in which stifling Victorian moralism gave way to the 'scandalous' French influences of beauty, individualism and decadence.

Yellow became popular in fashion, interiors, advertisements and even literature. One journalist wrote: 'It was the colour of the hour, the symbol of the time-spirit.'

Smell the scent of modern, daring yellow.
Developed by olfactory experts from Robertet, Grasse.

Vittorio Matteo Corcos (1859-1933)

An Afternoon on the Porch, 1895

oil on canvas
private collection

It's a sunny summer afternoon. While the young man is engrossed in his newspaper, his companion seems to be gazing directly at the viewer. Scattered on the floor beside her are several yellow books. These were considered rather daring at the time, and Vittorio Corcos is using them to convey a message: this young woman is modern, self-assured and unapologetic about her choice of reading material. The painting seems sweet and innocent at first glance, but this knowledge lends it a more thrilling edge.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Piles of French Novels

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Van Gogh loved contemporary French literature, and depicted books in several of his paintings, as seen here. Most are the well-known yellow novels published by Charpentier in Paris. For Van Gogh, these novels, which dealt with raw themes such as prostitution and alcoholism, represented the reality of modern life. Other artists also expressed their forward-thinking attitudes by depicting the yellow books in their paintings

French novels, 19th-early 20th century

Library collection Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
and private collection

Ramon Casas (1866-1932)

Decadent Young Woman (After the Dance), 1899

oil on canvas

Museu de Montserrat, Barcelona.

Gift by Josep Sala Ardiz, 1980

A fashionable young woman reclines with a yellow book in her hand, recovering from a night out. Casas's contemporaries would have immediately recognised the book as a French novel by Emile Zola or Joris-Karl Huysmans, or worse still, an erotic novel in an anonymous yellow cover. As the title suggests, the woman is 'decadent'. In other words, she loves style, beauty and pleasure and rejects bourgeois standards of decency.

The Yellow Book, 13 volumes, 1894-1897

Library collection Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

‘It will be charming, it will be daring, it will be distinguished. It will be a book’, read the announcement for The Yellow Book. This English magazine flouted many conventions: it was bright yellow, looked like a book, and featured many contributions from women. In addition, the illustrations were separate from the text, as can be seen in the table of contents at the back. Its boldness was particularly evident in the covers and illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley. His smiling female figures and masked characters in ambiguous situations were both shocking and seductive.

James Tissot (1836-1902)

Evening (The Ball), 1878

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Yellow might have been a fashionable colour at the end of the 19th century, but it was not entirely without risk. The colour had been associated with prostitutes for centuries. A yellow dress could look youthful and joyous, but a slight difference in shade and it might become garish and provocative. Tissot's *Evening* shows the ambiguity of yellow. A young woman appears at a ball in a golden yellow dress that is simultaneously concealing and extravagant. She is on the arm of a much older man: her father or her lover?

Ball gown, c. 1895

Velvet, gold braid, ostrich feathers and satinet
Amsterdam Museum

This evening gown belonged to Marie van Someren Brand-Zoethout (1866-1897). She probably wore it either at her wedding in 1895 or during the opening of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where her husband was the curator. The warm yellow colour, combined with the rich velvet fabric, ostrich feathers and impressive train, exudes an air of quiet luxury. The extremely narrow waist (54 cm) was very fashionable. In the evening, the dress would have sparkled even more in candlelight or electric light.

Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947)

Poster for the brand France-Champagne, 1891

colour lithograph on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (State of the Netherlands)

Pierre Bonnard was just 22 years old when he designed this advertising poster for a French champagne brand. It was an instant success. He depicted a vivacious young woman with playful contours, almost exclusively in yellow and black. Everything sparkles and bubbles. Yellow was often used for posters because it is a colour that grabs the eye. Bonnard had also recently seen Gauguin's strikingly yellow Volpini series (displayed nearby) at an exhibition.

Paul Gauguin (1848 -1903)

Breton Bathers, Joys of Brittany, Pastorales, Martinique & Old Maids, Arles, from the series Volpini, 1889

zincograph on paper

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Shortly after his stay with Van Gogh in Arles, Gauguin created a series of prints intended to raise his profile. In 10 zincographs, he presented his style and themes in the manner of a calling card. The large sheets of paper in an intense yellow colour were unusual. This distinguished Gauguin as an idiosyncratic artist, setting him apart from the rest. His choice of yellow may have been inspired by Van Gogh's paintings.

Images: Film ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’, 2022, based on the story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1892

Directed by Petra Zélie

Alexandra Loreth (as Jane)

Produced by Hysteria Pictures and Emerald Giant Productions

The main character in *The Yellow Wallpaper* describes the wallpaper in her bedroom as ‘repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight’. Her husband has confined her to total rest as a treatment for her ‘nervous depression’, a situation echoing the author’s own experience. The woman becomes obsessed with the yellow wallpaper and a female figure that seems to be trapped behind the pattern. She becomes convinced that she has to free the woman. The yellow wallpaper symbolises the patriarchy that oppresses women.

It is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things. But there is something else about that paper—the smell!

Shades of yellow

As yellow as fresh butter, sickly lemon yellow or golden tones: this is how Van Gogh described the yellows in his paintings. Thanks to the latest synthetic pigments, he and his contemporaries had various shades of yellow at their disposal. In addition to natural yellow ochre, there was Naples yellow, expensive cadmium yellow and the somewhat cheaper chrome yellow, which came in three variations. These modern colours were bright and vivid, but sometimes discoloured over time.

Nineteenth-century artists often chose their colours based on colour theory. Michel-Eugène Chevreul's complementary colour theory, for example, was highly influential. Van Gogh often combined contrasting colours, such as yellow-blue and yellow-purple. This made the colours appear even more powerful, yet balanced. He also achieved harmony by using different tones of a single colour, resulting in experimental, almost monochrome paintings.

Various yellow pigments and piece of ochre

Collection Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) | Rijkserfgoedlaboratorium, Amsterdam, Old Holland Paint Factory, Driebergen. Collection Charlotte Caspers

Pigments are tiny, insoluble grains that impart colour. To make paint, they are mixed with a binding agent, such as linseed oil or egg yolk. Chrome yellow was Van Gogh's favourite yellow; it was very bright and opaque. A French chemist discovered the element chromium at the end of the 18th century, and the pigment became available around 1810-15. Turner was a pioneer in the use of chrome yellow. The oldest existing yellow pigment is yellow ochre, a mineral found in the ground. It has been in use since prehistoric times.

Edouard Manet (1832-1883)

The Lemon, 1880

oil on canvas

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The Lemon is a mini-masterclass in the use of yellow. Manet focused on just one lemon. The clear yellow of the fruit contrasts against a simple dark plate and background in the style of the 17th century painters. Manet worked with subtle effects of light and shadow and reflections to create his solitary lemon. If you look carefully, you will see many different shades of yellow.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Quinces, Lemons, Pears and Grapes, 1887

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Van Gogh painted this almost monochrome yellow still life in 1887, even before he travelled to the South of France and began work on his famous Sunflowers. Short, loose brushstrokes in various shades of yellow give the painting rhythm and energy. Only here and there does a contrasting colour accent break through. Van Gogh even painted the frame yellow. He used mainly chrome yellow, sometimes mixed with zinc yellow. But the intensity he achieved was not permanent: the chrome yellow has darkened – just as it did in Sunflowers.

Cuno Amiet (1868-1961)

Female Head, Annel, 1906

oil on canvas

Kunsthaus Zürich. Donated by Ottilie W. Roederstein, 1920

In this portrait of his wife Anna, Cuno Amiet immersed the canvas in yellow. He applied the paint with loose, separate brushstrokes, making the dark yellow dots clearly visible against the lighter background. Anna's hat almost seems to disappear into this pattern, until a few pink, green and light yellow accents restore its contours. In 1906-1907, Amiet painted more portraits in which he experimented with different shades of a single colour.

Red lacquer box containing balls of wool

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Van Gogh learned that the effect of a colour depends on the colour next to it. But which colour combinations have the strongest effect and how many variations exist within a single colour? Instead of using expensive paint, Van Gogh tested these effects with coloured woollen yarns. He kept the balls of wool in this box, the yellow balls match the still life with quinces.

Michel-Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889)

The Laws of Contrast of Colours & Method for Defining and Naming Colors (appendix), 1889

Charles Blanc (1813-1882)

The Grammar of Painting and Engraving, 1867

Library collection Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

The French chemist M.E. Chevreul first wrote about the 'law of simultaneous colour contrasts' in 1839. This theory explores how colours influence each other when viewed simultaneously and how certain colours complement each other. Art historian Charles Blanc published a practical guide book explaining these ideas. In his colour wheel, the primary colours (yellow, blue, red) are opposite their complementary colours (purple, orange, green). When complementary colours are placed next to each other they reinforce each other.

František Kupka (1871-1957)

Form of Yellow (Notre Dame), 1911

oil on canvas

Collection Gabriele und Werner Merzbacher, long term loan to
Kunsthaus Zürich

In this painting, Kupka examines the effect of yellow and the connection between colour and form. He uses a series of warm shades of yellow, with some brown here and there, contrasting them against cooler shades of white, purple and blue in line with Chevreul's colour theory. Kupka has arranged the abstract forms like rays of sunshine, so that the yellow seems to extend beyond the confines of the canvas. The 'Notre Dame' of the title refers to the visual effect of stained glass windows in a cathedral.

Sample Book: The Aniline Colours of the Badische Anilin- & Soda-Fabrik (BASF), 1900

Library collection Textielmuseum Tilburg

Girls' Shoes

leather, silk and satin
Kunstmuseum Den Haag

These small, bright yellow shoes are proof that the revolution brought about by synthetic colours changed not only painting, but also the world of fashion. The introduction of artificial (aniline) dyes gave designers and manufacturers access to a whole new palette of vibrant colours. These evening shoes still shine as brightly as if they were made yesterday.

Divine and sensitive

Around 1900, various artists thought that colour could also have a meaning in itself, separate from reality. It became an important means by which to communicate thoughts, emotions and ideas.

Artists often drew on social codes or Christian traditions for their colour symbolism. Yellow was associated with spring and Easter, divine light and new life. Other major influences were Theosophy, a spiritual movement, and the ideas of writer and thinker, Johann von Goethe, who wrote about yellow, saying: 'In its highest purity it has a serene, gay, softly exciting character.' However, he thought that yellow could easily become contaminated, in which case, it could be unpleasant.

Wassily Kandinsky incorporated much of this into his ideas about colour. He described yellow as a 'typically earthy colour' reminiscent of the shrill sound of trumpets. Van Gogh did not assign any fixed meaning to yellow, but often associated it with an emotion that he wanted to express in a specific painting.

What is the scent of divine and sensitive yellow?
Developed by olfactory experts from Robertet, Grasse.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

The Raising of Lazarus (after Rembrandt), 1890

oil on canvas

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

In this work, Van Gogh 'translated' a black and white print of a painting by Rembrandt into colour. Strikingly, he left out the main figure: Christ. Instead, his focus is on Lazarus, his sisters and a large rising sun. It seems as if it is the power of the sun, not Christ, that is bringing the dead man back to life. With his red beard, Lazarus bears a close resemblance to Van Gogh, who was resident in a psychiatric institution at the time.

Aristide Maillol (1861-1944)

The Child Crowned, c. 1890-1892

oil on canvas

Collection Dina Vierny - Musée Maillol, Paris

In *The Child Crowned* the eye is drawn to the yellow background, a colour associated with youth and life on the verge of blossoming. It is a perfect fit with the young girl being crowned with a wreath of leaves and daisies. This spring ritual has an almost religious or mystical quality. Like many other artists around 1900, Maillol used simple shapes and vivid patches of colour to convey a deeper, symbolic meaning.

Cuno Amiet (1868-1961)

The Yellow Hill, 1903

tempera on fabric

Kunstmuseum Solothurn, Dübi-Müller-Stiftung

Swiss artist Cuno Amiet exhibited this painting of a bright yellow hill in 1905. It made a deep impression on the young artists of the Die Brücke group, a new movement that Amiet also joined. The bright colours seem unnatural, but stem from earlier, more realistic works featuring meadows overflowing with yellow dandelions. In this painting, Amiet has distilled the landscape into flat areas of colour without detail. For Amiet, yellow stood for spring, new life and the exuberance of nature.

Hilma af Klint (1862-1944)

Parsifal, No. 61, 62, 69, 70, 79, 85, 1916

watercolour and graphite on paper

Courtesy Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm

Af Klints' Parsifal series consists of 144 multi-coloured, abstract works. The title refers to the medieval legend of King Arthur, in which the knight Parsifal goes in search of the Holy Grail. Af Klint depicted the search for spiritual knowledge and the divine as a journey in colour through different dimensions and levels of consciousness. In theosophy, the colour yellow signifies 'strong insight', and these yellow areas may mark a particular moment in Af Klint's own interior journey. Some contain text indicating a direction, such as 'bakåt' (backwards).

Annie Besant (1847-1933)
& C.W. Leadbeater (1854-1934)

Thought-Forms, 1905

C.W. Leadbeater (1854-1934)

Man Visible and Invisible, 1903

Library collection of the Theosophical Society, Naarden

In 1875, Helena Blavatsky co-founded the Theosophical Society in New York. Her ideas on eternal divine wisdom and the ways in which it could be unveiled, resonated with many artists, as did the illustrations in these publications. These books illustrate how clairvoyants see certain thoughts and emotions in the form of colours and shapes. Bright yellow represents 'high intelligence', yellow spots indicate 'intellectual abilities', and yellow 'squiggles' represent the desire to understand something. Both Kandinsky and Af Klint drew on these ideas from theosophy in their work.

Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935)

Assumption of a Saint, 1907-1908 and Nude with Hands Raised, 1908

pencil and tempera on cardboard

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, on loan from the Stichting Khardzhiev

There is much to see in these small drawings in which yellow predominates, mixed with green and orange. The colour and format are reminiscent of the golden icons from the Orthodox Christian tradition: religious representations that reveal a heavenly reality. Religious and mystical elements crop up everywhere in *Assumption of a Saint* and *Nude with Hands Raised*: saints wearing haloes, angels, embryos, a source of radiant light. Malevich used yellow as a symbol for rebirth and enlightenment in what may be a reference to the Christian story of Easter.

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)

Grosse Studie (Large Study), 1914

oil on canvas

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

According to Kandinsky, colour was the ideal way to connect with the viewer's soul, to make it 'vibrate', as he put it. He explained his ideas in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912). Yellow and blue were important opposites: one was earthy and active, the other spiritual and profound. Kandinsky challenged the viewer to discover hidden spiritual realities by using colour contrasts or unexpected colours, as in this work.

Audio: Alfred Schnittke. Yellow Sound, after Wassily Kandinsky, 1974

Courtesy of Toccata Classics, 2009

Images: Performance of Wassily Kandinsky's The Yellow Sound, Bayerische Staatsoper, 2014

Courtesy of Michael Simon

In his first experimental play, *Der Gelbe Klang* (The Yellow Sound), Kandinsky wanted to promote a universal artistic language that would appeal to all the senses. It was to be a 'synthetic' spectacle without any logical story. The main characters, yellow giants, can be seen as personifications of yellow and its characteristics: earthy, present and powerful. The piece was never performed in Kandinsky's lifetime. Later renditions have been interpretations of Kandinsky's very brief text. This also goes for Alfred Schnittke's composition from 1974.

‘Between the rocks the giants are standing, whispering to each other noiselessly. The stage is black for a moment. Then a faint yellow light flows onto the stage, gradually becoming more and more intense, until the whole stage is intensely lemon yellow.’

Vote for the best yellow scent!

Three olfactory designers from the Robertet group based in the south of France, developed three unique scents for this exhibition. They used natural ingredients such as citrus, bergamot, jasmine and camomile. The fragrances enrich the experience of the art works, and the colour yellow. Which scent do you think fits best with yellow?

Want to know more about Robertet, a company based in Grasse that has been making natural ingredients for perfumes, aromas and cosmetics since 1850?



Marie Huguenot

“A solar burst of citrus, warming into glowing jasmine.”

Title: Summer Sun

Ingredients:

BERGAMOT EO*

LEMON EO*

TRANSPARENT FLOWERS

JASMINE EGYPT E ABS FFL*

TOBACCO ABSOLUTE*

CEDARWOOD ATLAS EO*

INCENSE SOMALIA EO*

Karine Vinchon-Spehner

“A glow of wild daffodil, softening into patchouli - the feeling of a silk drape over warm skin.”

Title: Decadent Modernity

Ingredients:

ROCKROSE SPAIN ABS*

WILD DAFFODIL ABS*

TUBEROSE INDIA ABS*

YLANG NOSY BE EO*

PATCHOULI INDONESIA HE*

CEDAR VIRGINIA HE*

LIQUID UPCYCLED VANILLA*

Sidonie Lancesseur

“The energy of pink pepper meets the depth of incense and woods to evoke a new form of sacred.”

Title: Incense Origin

Ingredients:

PINK PEPPER EO*

INCENSE EO*

INCENSE ABS*

CEDARWOOD EO*

SANDALWOOD

LABDANUM*

Olafur Eliasson

'I see red, I see blue, but I experience yellow', says Eliasson (1967) when describing the feeling that yellow evokes in him. He has combined several earlier elements into a new installation.

Colour experiment no 78 (2015) is shown here with monofrequency lamps that emit light as a single wavelength within the yellow spectrum, effectively washing out all colours except shades of yellow and black. This deliberate limitation of colour perception heightens awareness of the act of seeing itself. Finally, the enchanting Who's afraid of yellow flowerball (2006) can be viewed in a separate room.

Take your time - allow yourself to experience it fully.

Duration: 2.22 minutes

This installation by Olafur Eliasson has been made possible thanks to the generous support of Piet van der Slikke & Sandra Swelheim

Olafur Eliasson (1967)

Colour experiment no. 78, 2015

Courtesy of the artist neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York ©2015 Olafur Eliasson

Olafur Eliasson (1967)

Who is afraid yellow flower ball, 2006

Courtesy of the artist neugerriemschneider, Berlin; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York ©2015 Olafur Eliasson

What does yellow sound like?

This exhibition features a one-of-a-kind collaboration between the Van Gogh Museum and the Conservatory of Amsterdam. Yellow has not only found a place in visual art, but also in music. Kandinsky, for example, associated musical tones with specific hues.

Four study programmes have joined forces: Composition, Pop, AEMA and Live Electronics. 20 students from these study programmes have composed new pieces to accompany works from the exhibition. You can listen to three of these compositions in the next room.

All the pieces are available online via the playlist.



Take a pair of headphones, choose a painting, and tune the headphones to the correct channel. Each channel has its own unique colour.

- Cuno Amiet, The Yellow Hill Blue
- Marc Chagall, The Yellow Room Red
- William Turner, Going to the Ball (San Martino) Green

Please place the headphones back on the rack after use.

The Yellow Hill

This composition was created by: Tatiana Smirnova, Katka Woelderink, José Dias Miranda and Sofia Gomes

In this painting, yellow stands out sharply against the surrounding colours. It draws attention through its intensity and brightness. In the music, this is echoed by the horn, layered in the foreground. Around it, a second layer emerges, formed by cello, piano, bass clarinet and processed voices. Together they create a soundscape that follows the painting's colour palette and deepens the experience of yellow.

Based on: Cuno Amiet (1868-1961)
The Yellow Hill, 1903
tempera on fabric
Kunstmuseum Solothurn, Dübi-Müller-Stiftung

The Yellow Room

This composition was created by: Guusje Walstra
Additional piano by Jeremy Franklin

This composition responds to the unsettling yellow atmosphere of Chagall's The Yellow Room. The music is built around a repeating motif. It evokes associations with Paris and Belarus, and the image of an artist far removed from his roots. Fragments of speech and melody slowly shift and blur, mirroring distance and longing. As you listen, the music guides you through the room's strange corners, inviting you to feel its tension, warmth, and quiet unease.

Based on: Marc Chagall (1887-1985)
The Yellow Room, 1911
oil on canvas
Fondation Beyeler, Beyeler Collection, Riehen/Basel

Going to the Ball and Back

This composition was created by: Oliver Roldán and Tymon Zgorzelski
Recordings by Antón Sanmartín (French Horn) and Alkyona String Quartet

‘Going to the Ball and Back’ is an expansion of a painting by Turner. What happens after the sun sets? What might a morning look and sound like in this painting? The music follows a continuously repeating rhythm of day and night, inviting a fully immersive listening experience. The flow of time is marked by city bells in the distance. As you listen, try to discover at what moment of the day or night you encounter this music.

Based on: Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851)
Going to the Ball (San Martino), exhibited 1846
oil on canvas
Tate, London

