



The two faces of red

If a language had only three words to name colours they would be Red, White (light), and Black (Dark). This elementary triangle unites two essential contrasts: the presence and absence of luminosity and the presence and absence of tone. Of this last dimension, Red is the pre-eminent colour because it is the most chromatic and the most saturated. Red's recognisable superiority is such that, in many languages, the word describing its richest shades (*cramoisie* or crimson, *écarlet* or scarlet, for example) lends sumptuousness to any object. Red endows a sense of the brilliant, dazzling, magnificent, or, simply, beautiful. Until the 17th century, to say that someone was this or that *en cramoisie* (in crimson) in old French meant that he or she possessed a character flaw. A flaw and not a quality, because Red's eminent position in the system of colours does not always and everywhere give it a positive meaning.

Many indigenous societies in Australia, Africa, and America associate Red at times with fertility and life, at others with sterility and death. Specialists of the European Middle Ages point out that knights in *vermeil* (vermilion), that is to say Red, equipment and armour, were diabolical figures who came from another world to fight and kill the hero. At the same time, Red's negative connotations (e.g. scarlet women in England) did nothing to deter the Catholic Church from assigning shades of red, purple, and violet to mark the highest degrees of its hierarchy. In his *Treatise on Colours*, Goethe insisted on the ambivalence of Red, the most elevated of all, but which, as a pigment, could lead towards More or Less.

More recently, towards the middle of the 19th century, the Romantic Parisian poets, upon visiting the southwest of France near the Spanish border, were shocked by traditional Basque houses, whose red shutters, timbers, and beams gave them a 'bloody' and 'barbaric' look. On the contrary, contemporary visitors to Japan have been surprised and charmed by the red humpback bridges in its parks and gardens. As with the obi, whose colours contrast with those of the kimono it encircles, this audacious contrast with the surrounding greenery, seductive, and uncommon for us, has widened our aesthetic sensibilities. This experience might have inspired the use of a range of vivid colours for the decoration of the interiors of public places and transports. As a proof, France's newest trains were significantly called *corail* (coral), a shade of red. Among many other such debts, this may be the latest we owe to Japanese taste.

(Adapted from *The Two Faces of Red*, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Académie Française)

ACTIVITIES

1 Read the text and choose the correct answer.

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| 1 What is the writer's main aim? | A negative side. |
| A Discuss the meaning of colours, in particular their negative connotation | B personal quality. |
| B Inform the reader of the different meanings colours can have | C a weakness or fault. |
| C Decide which colours are best suited for situations | 4 Red has been given: |
| 2 Why is Red the pre-eminent colour? | A opposite meanings and connotations. |
| A Because it is translated from French. | B the same significance. |
| B Because it has few shades. | C the right role in history. |
| C Because its shades are particularly meaningful. | 5 Basque houses and Japanese bridges: |
| 3 A flaw is a synonym for: | A convey the same ideas and feelings. |
| | B shocked visitors. |
| | C provoked different reactions. |

2 The passage contains foreign words. List them and look for their meanings.