Hilary Hope Guise: The Colour Red*****

‘Red’, says **Hilary Hope Guise,** ‘is unstoppable’. And so is she, as we set off on a roller coaster ride through the history of this most intriguing of colours.

I’ve never thought much about red before, but by the end of Hilary’s fascinating and entertaining lecture my mind is positively overflowing with new ideas. What is red? Why is it rarely seen in nature? Why was it so coveted by early artists? What does it symbolise? And how did its role change so dramatically in the 20th century?

Red, Hilary goes on to explain, is a powerful colour – not just in what it represents but also in its physical properties. Unlike blue or yellow, red does not break up – it simply goes through everything. Is this what has made it such a source of interest to artists through the ages? Or is it that for centuries no-one could make red paint? Nowadays chemists can manufacture almost anything, but until synthetics came along artists had to find red in the natural world – in plants, in shells, and in a tiny insect just 5mm long.

From 13th dynasty Theban wall paintings to Soviet agitprop art of the 1960s, Hilary illustrates her talk with some spectacular and unusual art. We see a red Ganesha standing on a blue rat in a 15th century Tibetan wall hanging – and we see him again 400 years later in a Mongolian painting. In ancient India red was associated with the divine, probably because it was so hard to make; a Chinese box decorated with imperial five-clawed dragons also sports red swastikas – for it was not until the 20th century that this auspicious symbol was hijacked by the Nazis.

The Romans originally saw colour as dangerous; bright colours arrived from the East to liven up the boring Roman spectrum, only to be slated by **Pliny** as a corrupting force – with red being the chief offender. Despite all that the Romans soon took to it, using red on the walls of houses, and even going in for a bit of divine face-painting – **Jupiter** was given the rouge treatment on special days, and triumphant emperors also had their faces done up for parades around the city (one of Hilary's many charming anecdotes describes how a servant would be employed to sit at Tiberius's feet reminding him that, red face or no red face, he was *not* a god).

The Phoenicians eventually worked out how to make red dye – but they wouldn't tell anyone else. They used sea snail shells, but it was an arduous process, with 12 thousand shells needed to make enough Tyrian 'purple' (a reddish colour) to dye one strip of decoration for a toga. Hence Tyrian purple became a status symbol – so much so that if you were caught wearing it when you weren't entitled to, that was the last time you'd be wearing anything.

Come the Middle Ages and people were still trying to make this most prized of colours – they achieved it using a variety of natural sources, including the dried bodies of the female kermes and her cousin *Margodes polonicus*, insects who were no doubt quite pleased when scientists worked out how to manage without them. In the breathtaking ***Commentary on the Apocalypse*** by Spanish theologian **Beatus Liebana** (c. 730-800) we see a magnificent use of both yellow (revelation, the Word of God) and red (majesty, authority, status).

Red became ever more symbolic in art as the years passed. 'Every picture' says Hilary 'told a story' – it had to, as very few people could read. If Christ went into the tomb dressed in white and came out in red **(Robert Campin *The Seilern Triptych*)** they knew this meant that He had redeemed us with His blood – with His love. Later, in **Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaeus,*** grapes in a basket represent the Eucharist, a

rotting apple the Fall, a pomegranate passion. A pilgrim wears a shell, the sign of his calling – and a rather feminine-looking resurrected Christ again wears red; the red of God.

Like most symbols in art though, red can mean many things – and not all of them good. It's associated with sin and sex (**Mary Magdalene** in a scarlet robe in **The Master of the Lehman's *Noli me Tangere***) – but also with the love that redeems sin. Moving on to secular art, Hilary cites **Velazquez's *The Rokeby Venus*** with its crimson curtain background – a picture that so moved suffragette **Mary Richardson** that she slashed it with a knife, later saying 'I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history'. The art critic **Natasha Wallace** comments that 'the classical setting is an excuse for a very material aesthetic sexuality'; all of the fabrics are rich and luxurious, the red is the red of desire.

Red began to take on a political meaning – in Rome a red cap had signified a freed slave, and by 1830 that same floppy hat had become a symbol of the French Revolution **(Delacroix *Liberty Leading the People*)** – the Roman *pileus* had become France's *bonnet rouge.* Fast forward to 1968; the street posters of the **Paris** student riots are red and white; they speak of resistance, of power, of rebellion. Red also features large in the agitprop of the **Soviet Union,** the bold, simple designs sending out a clear and straightforward message. Red is now the colour of socialism – and of communism. In his ***Little Red Book,*** **Mao Zedong** said 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun'.

Hilary concluded her talk with interesting references to **Chagall, Matisse** and in particular to the Italian painter and sculptor **Mimmo Paladino.**

An acclaimed artist herself, Hilary Hope Guise is an

outstanding speaker with an impressive ability to share her vast knowledge of art in a refreshing style. This hour flew by and left me wanting to know much more.

On **Thursday 11th August** at the Royal Overseas League, Hilary will give a second talk ***The Colour Blue: From Paradise to Poison;*** these lectures form part of **Royal Overseas League Arts** ***Music and More*** Fringe series of concerts, lectures, brunches and discussions. From ***Bach for Breakfast*** to ***Jazz & Harp Brunches, Mozart at Teatime*** and ***French Lates,*** the programme covers a wide variety of music, plus literary sessions on **Harry Potter, fictional detectives** and ***The Heroine Question.*** To see the full programme click here – or call in to the Royal Overseas League at 100 Princes Street and pick up a copy.