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## Queer Futures, Violet Futures

Kévin Bideaux

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# **Color and Colorimetry Multidisciplinary Contributions**

**Vol. XVIII A**

Edited by Albana Muco and Filippo Cherubini



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Piazza C. Caneva, 4

20154 Milano

C.F. 97619430156

P.IVA: 09003610962

[www.gruppodelcolore.it](http://www.gruppodelcolore.it)

e-mail: [segreteria@gruppodelcolore.org](mailto:segreteria@gruppodelcolore.org)

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## **Queer Futures, Violet Futures: Queer Modernity Symbolism of Violet in West Culture**

Kévin Bideaux<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Laboratoire d'Études de Genre et de Sexualité – LEGS

<sup>2</sup>Centre Français de la Couleur – CFC

Contact: Kévin Bideaux, hello@roseincorporated.net

### **Abstract**

I bring together history of arts, gender studies and queer theories to analyse the artistic, cultural and political uses of violet since the discovery of mauveine by William H. Perkin in 1856. Looking back over the last 150 years of the history of violet, I seek to highlight the manner in which this colour has linked modernity and queerness since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when violet tones became an important characteristic of a whole section of fin-de-siècle fashion, painting, and literature. Violet also has a long history with feminisms and queer movements in Europe and North America, from the Suffragettes' emblem to the non-binary pride flag. Going beyond the visible spectrum, ultraviolet light can also become a metaphor for a “beyond of gender” referring to the end of feminine/masculine and homo-/heterosexual binarisms. Could the colour of the future be violet? And is that future definitely queer?

**Keywords:** Violet, Queer, Modernity, Colour Symbolism, Synthetic Colorants.

### **Introduction: A modern take on violet**

In 1856, the discovery of the synthetic dye mauveine by British chemistry student William Henry Perkin was a major turning point in the history of violet: until then its production had been difficult and expensive, but it was now possible to produce it inexpensively and quantitatively, sparking a veritable trend in fashion and painting at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Around the same time, the perception of homosexual men and women changed, under the impetus of sexology and psychiatry: violet then served to stigmatise these categories of people, who, through reappropriation, also used the colour as a cryptic queer emblem. The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was also the time of feminist struggles for suffrage, with violet becoming a major emblem of one of the most famous of these groups: the Suffragettes. A few decades later, violet became associated with queer struggles, and in the 2000's with transgender and non-binary struggles and identities, with the view to overcoming the binarisms of masculinity and femininity, homo- and heterosexuality.

At the heart of a revolution in organic chemistry and the textile industry, while accompanying the feminist and queer movements and contributing to the emancipation of women and other gender and sexual minorities, violet is thus a colour of modernity, understood as a forward-looking ideology linked to the concepts of progress, innovation and emancipation. Going back over the last 150 years of the history of violet, my aim is to show its close link with modernity, in an attempt to determine whether or not violet is the colour of the future, and whether this future is definitely queer. To achieve this, I will use the various studies carried out on the violet, to create bridges between the material, social, cultural, artistic and cultural history of this colour.

### **Mauve Decade: Mauveine, Fashion, and Feminism**

In 1856, while trying to synthesise quinine with the aim of finding an anti-malarial substance, Perkin realised that by cleaning up the organic waste from his experiments, he was obtaining a violet solution (Cova, *et al.*, 2017). The apprentice chemist had unwittingly developed the first synthetic dye, based on aniline, which he first called “aniline purple”. Later called “mauveine”, the success of this synthetic colour was dazzling, with Perkins borrowing money from his father to set up a factory in the year following its discovery, and also introducing the textile industry to the use

of his dye, capable of colouring wool and silk in different shades of violet (Fig. 1), which until then required expensive materials or processes (Beer, 1926). Fashion is therefore linked to the notion of modernity – even if it is sometimes opposed to it – “the strengthening of modern thought will be concomitant with the exponential development of the fashion industry, which will quickly affect the entire social body” (Liucci, 2008).



Fig. 1 - Silk purple dress, dyed with Perkin's aniline purple dye (c. 1870-1873); **Fig. 2** - Winterhalter, F. X. (1854) *Empress Eugénie* [oil on painting, 130,8 × 96,5 cm]; **Fig. 3** - Phillip, J. (1860) *The Marriage of Victoria, Princess Royal, 25 January 1858* [oil on painting, 103,2 × 184 cm].

Public demand for shades of violet known as mauve, lilac or heliotrope increased further under the influence of Eugénie de Montijo, wife of Napoleon III (Fig. 2), who found mauve to perfectly match for her eyes, and Queen Victoria, at her daughter's wedding on 25 January 1858 (Fig. 3), who wore a mauve velvet train on the advice of Empress Eugénie (Garfield, 2000, pp. 58-59). Violet hues were such a craze in 19<sup>th</sup>-century European fashion that historians sometimes refer to the European and North America last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the “mauve decade” (Delevoy, 1978, pp. 45-68; Beer, 1926). However, the British newspaper *The Punch* negatively described this fashion as “mauve measles”, cynically apprehending it as a disease whose “ravages are principally among the weaker sex” (Anonymous, 1859).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, European women were already the favourite customers of fashion retailers; the link between fashion and women continued to strengthen with industrialisation, from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the United Kingdom, and until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in other European and North American countries (Chessel, 2012, pp. 69-82). The mechanisation of clothing manufacturing gave rise to ready-to-wear fashion, while the optimisation of printing led to the development of the “women's press”, and, above all, the creation of department stores made shopping the favourite pastime of middle- and upper-class urban women (Rappaport, 1999). Violet was a popular colour at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly associated with bourgeois women, but in a negative way, as it was also associated with “the vulgarity of cheap fashion, which the aniline revolution had precisely brought about” (Ribeyrol, 2021).

Associated with technological progress, violet is also associated with social progress, since it was the emblem of one of the most famous suffragist organisations: the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst, whose activists were quickly nicknamed the Suffragettes. In 1908, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence suggested choosing colours to differentiate WSPU, of which she was an activist, from other organisations, and Violet, white and green were chosen, each for its symbolic value: “Purple as everyone knows is the royal colour, it stands for the royal blood that flows in the veins of every suffragette, the instinct of freedom and dignity... white stands for purity in private and public life... green is the colour of hope and the emblem of spring” (1908). These three colours quickly became one of the most distinctive features of most feminist demonstrations, worn by activists in the form of ribbons, scarves, medallions or clothing, and disseminated via posters, leaflets and banners (Fig. 4; Fig. 5; Fig. 6). Across the Atlantic, suffragist



Elizabeth Blackwell is said to have found a cryptic message in the choice of these colours, the initials of the colour names coding different words: “Violet” for “Votes”, “Green” for “Give” and “White” for “Women”, thus forming “Give Women Votes”, the emblematic slogan of the feminists of the period (Florey, 2013, p. 80).



Fig. 4 - Elsie Duval's hunger strike medal (1912); Fig. 5 - WSPU postcard album (c. 1911); Fig. 6 - WSPU rosette (c. 1913).

These explanations alone do not explain this choice of colours: there was also a form of pragmatism, so that all suffragettes could easily wear the WSPU colours. As violet was fashionable – as was green (Matthews David, 2017) –, all the women had at least one item in these colours in their wardrobes, so they could assert their political allegiance without making an expensive purchase (Heller, 2000, pp. 172-173). Relying on fashion, for which women were thought to have a natural inclination, the suffragettes attempted to overcome the negative image of the feminist as “strong-minded”, *i.e.* masculine: “[they] used fashionable dress as a form of propaganada in the belief that ‘eccentricity’ would make the vote harder to obtain” (Ribeiro, and Blackman, 2015, p. 203). Moreover, by choosing fashion as a mode of communication, and using synthetic colours as an emblem, they were also positioning themselves as an avatar of modernity, associated with both novelty and progress, enabled by technological innovation.

### **Violettes Flowers: Fin-de-siècle, Decadence, and Homosexualities**

These new shades of violet, which do not exist in their natural state, were particularly disturbing because of their synthetic production, that made violet such a popular colour in Decadentism, a fin-de-siècle literary movement (Palacio, 2011), named after the decadence of the Roman Empire (Ward-Perkins, 2005). The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had nothing in common with the turning point in Roman civilisation, but the feeling of decadence was felt enough to influence literary creation (Courapied, 2014, p. 48). For the historian Michel Winock, “[d]ecadence [...] is above all a vague idea, a pessimistic representation of the world, a nostalgia for what is no longer, a creation of the sullen, alarmist or downright desperate imagination” (2018, p. 4). This spleen so characteristic of the fin-de-siècle goes hand in hand with the fears engendered by the societal upheavals of the entry into modernity: the weakening of the Church, the social advances for women who were gaining access to new professions, the political organisation of the proletariat... (*ibid.*). The ambiguous term “decadence”, laden with negative connotations, was also used to stigmatise behaviours deemed immoral or unhealthy as a result of modernity and its progress (Kopp, 2019), including male homosexuality. It became the object of moral, psychiatric and legal studies, and was thought to be a symptom of industrialisation, which risked depopulating society and thus a decline of civilisation, as well as a “vice of luxury” associated with artistic and literary modernity (Tamagne, 2002). Rejecting the virile and moralising values of society, the decadents thus made the homosexual aesthete and the androgynous “a widespread subject, a constitutive element of Decadence” (Palacio, 2011, p. 188).

Decadentism then took the form of a revolt against nature in favour of art, or even the artificial, which was crystallised by the many references to artificial flowers, mass-produced at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and often coloured surrealistically with synthetic dyes. Literary researcher Romain Courapied points out that “[t]he decadent aesthete and the ordinary homosexual have a comparable use of flowers, chosen for their surprising colours” (2014, p. 407), particularly green, black, violet or dark red, that “indicates a predisposition to refinements and desires that are [...] the fruit of a perversion of natural conditions” (*ibid.*, p. 400). Violet flowers in particular were used to suggest depravity in a homosexual context, as in *Messes noires. Lord Lyllian* by Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen: in a scene taking place at the Salle Wagram, a guinguette frequented by homosexual men, young ephebes “had sown violets” on the tables (1905, p. 105). For Courapied, “the colour violet acts as a paradoxical indicator of a perverse content integrated into pleasing aesthetic forms” (2014, p. 409-410), referring to the liminal symbolism of violet, referring to the twilight hues when the sun sets; but it could also evoke disease or putrefied flesh, thus echoing masculine homosexuality as perversion.

Far from being just for men, violet was also, and even more so, a reference to lesbianism, particularly through the lesbian writer Renée Vivien. Called the “Muse of violets”, she was devoted to the spring flower that adorned her letterhead and books (1903), and that dotted her own writings. Her obsession with violet was undoubtedly linked to her youthful love Violet Shillito who died prematurely. This association between violet and lesbianism is perhaps even more recent, since around 1833 the Marquise Henriette de Mannoury d'Ectot published *Le Roman de Violette* (c. 1833), the first known erotic story written by a woman, notable in particular for the Sapphic scenes it describes.

### Indigomania: Impressionism, Artificiality, and Degeneration

Deeply influenced by colour theories that had proliferated since the publication of Isaac Newton's *Optics*, the Impressionists played on colour contrasts by juxtaposing complementary hues, using violet to paint shadows that contrasted with the light of yellow suns. Violet became so characteristic of Impressionist painting (Fig. 7; Fig. 8) that the British art critic George Moore once mocked Louis Antequin for painting “the street, and everything in it, violet—boots, trousers, hats, coats, lamp-posts, paving-stones, and the tail of the cat disappearing under the *porte cochère*” (1893, p. 95). The journalist and art critic Albert Wolff suggested in the newspaper *Le Figaro* that “Monsieur Pissarro should be made to understand that the trees are not violet, that the sky is not fresh butter” (1876); the Impressionists were particularly criticised for choosing colours based on their subjective perception, which no longer reflected nature and therefore seemed artificial, especially as they were now obtained synthetically using aniline (Ribeyrol, 2018).

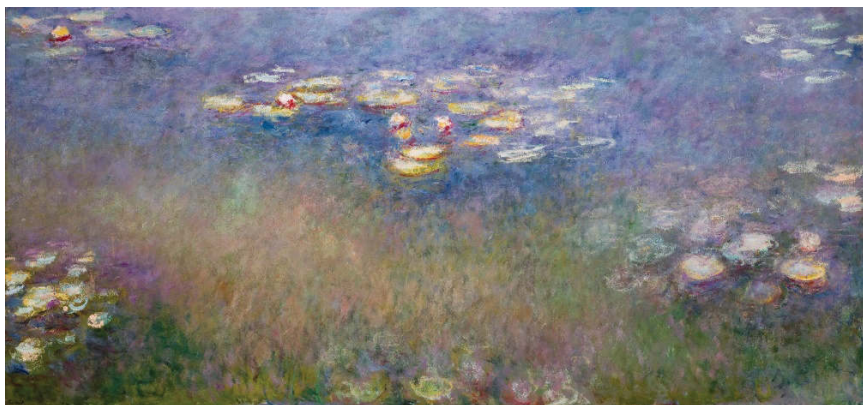


Fig. 7 - Monet C. (c. 1915-1926), *Nymphéas* [huile sur toile, 200 × 426,1 cm]; Fig. 8 - John Singer Sargent J. S. (c. 1885-1886) *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* [huile sur toile, 174 × 153,7 cm].

Taking up *The Punch's* pathologising approach to the popularisation of mauve among women (Anonymous, 1859), art critics viewed Impressionist painting less from an aesthetic or artistic angle than from a medical and physiological one (Reutersvärd, 1950). French critic Joris-Karl Huysmans thus spoke of an “indigomania [*indigomanie*] that has wreaked such devastation on the ranks of painters” (1883, p. 107). Referring to the work on hysteria by the neurologist Jean-Martin Charco and the ophthalmologist Xavier Galezowski (*ibid.*, p. 104), Huysmans associated the Impressionists’ “manic” use of violet with neurotic-type psychological disorders, which would make the retinas sick, limiting the perception of green in favour of blue and violet (*ibid.*, pp. 90, 104). By associating Impressionism with mental disorders, he joined the idea of the decadence of fin-de-siècle society and the degeneration of art described by the physician and art critic Max Nordau, who saw in industrial acceleration and modern art a degeneration of society (1882, pp. 30-31). The considerations given to the Impressionists are therefore similar to those given to the Decadents, at a time when sexology was emerging and homosexuality was becoming an object of psychiatric study (Courapiéd, 2014); the difference is that the Decadents took a stand on this theme, whereas the Impressionists never addressed it, or too subtly.

### **Ultraviolet: Queer Communities, Activism, and Social Change**

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of 'modern homosexuality', with lesbians and homosexual men becoming increasingly visible – sometimes perhaps unwillingly – as a result of growing medical interest, and the emergence of a 'homosexual world' in the big cities – notably Paris, London and New York – which was still, however, an underworld (Latimer, 2005; Revenin, 2006). Violet could then be used as a code to signify homosexuality and to identify each other as homosexuals, without this sign necessarily being understood by heterosexuals. After the First World War, these associations between violet and homosexuality were perpetuated and strengthened: in Germany and Austria, “the colour purple became the code of the [lesbian and male homosexual] subculture” in the 1920s (Hacker, 2015), while in English-speaking countries, the slang expression “a streak of lavender” was used to designate an effeminate man (Pollock, 1935, p. 115). The homosexual meaning of violet then became popular in the 1930s, and in the 1950s, the homophobic US senator Everett Dirksen used the expression “lavender lads” to refer to homosexual men (Johnson, 2004, p. 18). On 31 October 1969, violet was once again associated with homosexuality, when journalists from the San Francisco Examiner threw violet ink at queer activists who had come to protest a homophobic article (Bideaux, 2023a, p. 425).

Meanwhile, violet remained a feminist emblem in Europe and North America, and still is today. Creating a filiation with the Suffragettes’ emblem, the feminists of the 1960s-1970s gave it another meaning: as violet is a mixture of blue and pink, the traditional colours of layettes, it signified the desire to do away with gender stereotypes, and the goal of gender equality (*ibid.*, p. 304). Choosing violet was also a way of differentiating themselves from other political movements that already had their own colour emblem (red for communists, black for anarchists...). Splits within feminist movements were even symbolised by different shades of violet: the lesbians of the National Organization for Women (NOW) were described as a “lavender menace” by its president Betty Friedan, who feared that their masculine appearance and hatred of men would undermine the movement (Brownmiller, 1999, p. 82), while the black feminist activist Alice Walker associated violet, on the one hand, with a “white feminism” that rejected the integration and intersection of gender and race issues, and, on the other hand, purple with an intersectional feminism promoted by black women, which she called “womanism” (1983, pp. XI-XII).

At the end of the 1990s, the symbolism of violet became more queerised, incorporating new symbols that were no longer limited to homosexuality. It now includes bisexuality, with the bisexual pride flag consisting of three coloured stripes: a pink stripe signifying homosexuality, a blue stripe signifying heterosexuality and a violet stripe – a mixture of the first two – to symbolise bisexuality (Fig. 9; Page, 1998). In the 2000s, violet also became the emblem of transgender

struggles and identities, chosen again for being the mix of the traditional “pink for girls” and “blue for boys” in one of the transgender pride flag (Fig. 10; Pellinen, 2002), and in the following decade it appeared alongside yellow, white, and black in the non-binary pride flag (Fig. 11), then representing people in between masculine and feminine gender identities (Rowan, 2014). The violet then sort of mutates into ultraviolet, a light with a wavelength outside the spectrum visible to the human eye, becoming a metaphor for a search for a “beyond gender” that refers to the end of feminine/masculine and even homo-/heterosexual binarisms.



Fig. 9 - Page, M. (1998) Bi Pride Flag; **Fig. 10** - Pellinen, J. (2002) Transgender Pride Flag; **Fig. 11** - Rowan, K. (2014) Non-binary Pride Flag.

### Conclusions: Twilight Visions of Queer Futures

Violet symbolically associates, on the one hand, technological progress, artistic innovation and the renewed novelty of fashion, and, on the other hand, new conceptions of homosexuality, struggles for the rights of gender and sexual minorities, and the possibility for women and queer people to live freely. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has been the “subversive color of modernity”, as much as that of queer utopian perspectives. Even today, violet is used to evoke better futures, where progress is combined with the development and freedom of the individual; it is thus the color most associated with cyberspaces – now called metaverses –, perceived as a liminal color, the fusion of the digital world – symbolized by the blue of the internet – and the physical world – symbolised by red blood of our flesh (Bideaux, 2023b). Imagining the metaverse in violet is also seeing a digital worlds as queer spaces where anonymity allows one to free oneself from questions of gender or sexuality to fully experience one's individuality (Lau, 2014).

The last light in the visible spectrum to be perceived before darkness, violet is also the colour of twilight, the liminal colour between day and night, between the visible and the invisible, and, as we have seen, the colour that symbolically plays with the limits of femininity and masculinity, of homo- and heterosexuality. As a colour associated with modernity, violet also marks the transition between the present and the future, but it can be both a queer utopia as well as a straight dystopia. Indeed, modernity has not always been synonymous with queerness: the discovery of mauvéine served to stigmatise bourgeois women (Ribeyrol, 2021), advances in psychiatric medicine accompanied the oppression and repression of homosexuals (Courapied, 2014), certain feminist achievements may have overlooked racialised women (Walker, 1983) and transgender women (Worthen, 2022), just as gays and lesbians may lack solidarity with bisexual and transgender people, or even discriminate them (Weiss, 2011). If it seems to me that modernity cannot be achieved without participating in the emancipation of everyone, then there is no guarantee that the future will be queer; but if we envisage it rightly, then violet – and even more so ultraviolet – looks set to remain the symbol of queer modernity – at least in the West.

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