

Finlay, Victoria
COLOR: A Natural History of the Palette [pointer]
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A well-rounded exploration of the properties and associations of colors from an engagingly personal vantage.

Finlay has worked for Reuters and was the *South China Morning Post* arts editor. She is a British citizen who lives in Hong Kong, where she is a regular contributor to both local newspapers and London's *The Sunday Times* on art and travel, the twin subjects of the current volume, which is her first. Beginning with the earthy hues first employed by humans in their earliest expressions of art and moving through the spectrum in proper order, Finlay presents what amounts to each color's *story*. She draws upon many sources in both the hard and soft sciences, art history, and even theology. Not least among these are her own experiences and cogent observations while on the trail of each color. Her journeys take her from the Australian outback in search of the ochre the Aborigines once mined and collected in dishes made of bark to the red of cochineal beetles cultivated on Chilean plantations to a conference demonstration in Amsterdam on how to obtain legendary Tyrian purple from a vat of fermenting snails. Though she manages to make even that fascinating, the author's investigations involve more than the chemistry required to produce the various pigments. She also delves into the cultural connotations of the hue in question, such as when, referring to a remark by newly-installed Cardinal Edward Egan, she calls red the color of "both life and death—a beautiful and terrible paradox." The book is not overwritten when it would, given the plethora of material for consideration, be easy to overwhelm the reader in ancillary discussions or an enumeration of how many disconnected facts the author can recite. In Finlay's case, her journalistic background prevents her from succumbing to such excesses. The writing is tight, yet her warm, anecdotal approach keeps the reader engaged while she deftly slips in a few bits of information. And while it may be insufficiently obtuse for the professor of optics, the layman, and particularly the artist, are bound to see colors differently.

A labor of love and a lifetime's interest expressed in a series of integrated essays that are substantial without being weighty.

[8-page color insert, not seen]