

Zeitschrift: Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique
Herausgeber: Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'Antiquité classique
Band: 66 (2020)

Vorwort: Introduction
Autor: Ierodiakonou, Katerina

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 03.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

INTRODUCTION

Ancient colour vision remains one of the oldest and most contested problems in classical scholarship. Colour studies in the Graeco-Roman world first attracted serious scholarly attention in the early nineteenth century with Goethe's theory of defective colour vision among the Greeks, an idea promoted by the British prime minister and Homeric scholar W.E. Gladstone. But although this view has been fiercely debated by classicists and anthropologists well into the twentieth century, the issue of the imprecision of ancient colour terminology and the difficulty in mapping it onto that of modern languages has never been satisfactorily settled. Thus, during the remainder of the twentieth century scholars in different disciplines and working from different perspectives have continued to investigate what the Greeks and Romans had to say about colours. Classical philologists have been doing research on the origin and use of Greek and Latin colour terms in literary texts. Archaeologists have been examining the approaches of ancient artists to the choice and mixing of colours, but also the traces of colours on the surfaces of Greek and Roman sculptures. Historians of philosophy have been reconstructing the ancient philosophers' doctrines about the metaphysics and epistemology of colours, that is, about what colours are and how we perceive them. Historians of medicine have been studying ancient writings on the anatomy and physiology of the human eye, while historians of science have been trying to comprehend Euclid's and Ptolemy's optical theories on the nature and propagation of light.

This century has thus far seen a revival of interest in ancient colour perception, with a remarkable series of conferences and publications investigating the richness of Graeco-Roman colour discrimination as well as the sophistication of ancient literary and artistic engagement with colours. But there are still areas in

this wide-ranging field that have not so far been systematically explored. Our *Entretiens* on “Colour Psychology in the Graeco-Roman World”, which took place at the Fondation Hardt in August 2019, revisited the problem of ancient colour perception and focused on a neglected aspect of colour studies in antiquity, namely colour psychology. For there is hardly any attention given to what the ancient Greeks and Romans experienced and conceptualised as implications of colour vision for their emotions, actions, and modes of cognition.

Covering this gap in our knowledge of antiquity was the main objective of our *Entretiens*, with the participation of eight prominent scholars from academic institutions in Europe and the USA, who have previously done research on ancient colour studies in four different fields — classical philology, ancient history, archaeology, and ancient philosophy; in addition, it proved helpful and informative to have among us a modern cognitive psychologist, who is an expert on modern theories of colours and emotions. During the August week we spent at the Fondation Hardt, we examined closely and discussed systematically what the ancients thought about:

- (i) the ways colours influenced their emotions;
- (ii) the ways certain colours were used to express their emotions; and
- (iii) the ways their emotions changed their own colours.

Although it was not possible to deal with all the relevant issues in all periods of antiquity, I think that our *Entretiens* managed to promote constructive discussion and cross-fertilisation among scholars interested in ancient colour studies, both within and across disciplines and areas of research. In this way, we hope to have enriched our reading of ancient authors, for whom the sense of vision and the discrimination of colour were of significant concern, as well as to have introduced the dimension of colour psychology to the vibrant interdisciplinary field that aims at advancing our understanding of colour vision in the ancient world.

Needless to say, this volume would not have been possible without the generous support of the Fondation Hardt and, in particular, its director Pierre Ducrey, the indefatigable care of Gary Vachicouras, the meticulous copy-editing of Pascale Deron, and the warm hospitality we received from all the staff at the beautiful Fondation Hardt. We thank them profusely! Mille mercis!

Katerina IERODIAKONO

