



Amy Butler Greenfield

A Perfect Red
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Twelve Amazing Facts about the Color Red and Cochineal

1. Red has been sacred to humans since Cro-Magnon times, when people used red ochre for burial rites and cave paintings.
2. Most colors have very different meanings in different cultures, but red has a curious universality: around the world people identify it as the color of passion, energy, heat, and excitement.
3. The color red stimulates the human nervous system, making our eyes dilate and our heart beat faster.
4. Roman warriors wore red tunics because the color hid bloodstains and made them appear invincible. The color red was sacred to Mars, the Roman god of war.
5. In medieval Europe, red thread was said to ward off witches, and red cloth was said to prevent smallpox.
6. Throughout most of Renaissance Europe, only aristocrats and wealthy elites were allowed to wear scarlet. By law, peasants were forbidden to wear the color.
7. Native to Mexico, cochineal is the most potent natural red dye in the world.
8. During the Renaissance, the red dye cochineal was so expensive that it was New Spain's most valuable export after silver.
9. Cochineal was used to make lavish gowns, royal robes, and soldiers' uniforms, including the battle gear of Russia's Imperial Guard, Scotland's warriors, and Britain's redcoats.
10. Artists such as Vermeer, Rembrandt, Rubens, Gainsborough, and J. M. W. Turner used cochineal in their paintings.
11. Spain's monopoly on cochineal was so valuable that Spanish law invoked the death penalty against foreigners caught smuggling the dyestuff.
12. When the Gobelins family began using cochineal scarlet in their famous French tapestries, the dye was so beautiful that Parisians whispered that the Gobelins had obtained it from the devil himself.