

The Eleven-Color Scale

Every culture, religion, and tradition provides its own version of color symbolism. However, they all share a common background: the combat (or dance) between light and darkness gives birth to color. The appearance of the color scale depends on whether light or dark is predominant.

When the time comes to classify the colors, we should remember that the Tarot shows them in all their variety without suggesting any specific order—in contrast to the structure of the cards, which, as we just saw, provides us many clues concerning the numerology and orientation of the Tarot.

Any classification of the Tarot will therefore have to be put into perspective, and we can adopt different structures at will to help us interpret them. Colors are always ambivalent; their meaning cannot be purely positive or negative. With respect to their symbolic meaning, their significance will vary depending on cultures, and there again we are not able to reduce them to a system of strict equivalents. The clues in the trail suggested here are therefore open propositions that make no claim to exhaust the study of colors.

THE SYMBOLOGY OF COLORS

Here are several useful clues for getting one's bearings in the reading of the Tarot.

Black. This color refers to two opposing and complementary notions. On one hand, there is the idea of the void: the total absence of light or any color. Zen monks wear black clothing. Similarly, in *The Dark Night of the Soul*, St. John of the Cross is basically saying that to reach God, it is necessary to go where one is not. One is reduced to emptiness, one disappears, one stops thought and returns into nothingness.

But, on the other hand, black is also the creative magma containing all the seeds of life, the primal matter: the alchemical *nigredo*, an amorphous rotting mass that serves as compost for purity. It is the chaos in which order begins; all life first germinates in darkness.

White. Opposite to black, white is the luminous union of all the colors, a realization in which everything arrives at perfect union and purification. It is the antithesis of flesh and black. From the negative point of view, white also refers to the mortal cold of snow and fear. It is the color of God or the color of death.

White and black determine the extremes between which the other colors are deployed. One can place the color of flesh in the middle.

Flesh. This is the specific color of human flesh in the Western cultural region where the Tarot is active. The flesh color represented here is the color of living flesh and evokes the present life—just as black can very easily speak of the past and white of the future if one likes. It cannot be said that the flesh color is innately positive or negative: it adopts all the mental forms of the human being, both good and evil. It is the preeminent example of the ambiguous. We contain both Heaven and Hell within, violence and peace. All the opposites are reunited in the color of flesh.

Red and green are found in the domain of material life.

Green. The vital color of exuberance, green evokes dominant Nature, eternal birth, and perpetual transformation. The prophet Muhammad adopted it as the color of eternity. Green is the bursting of life in one place; plant life is active only where it has buried its roots. This is the reason why green can also mean absorption and being engulfed. In the unconscious, green symbolizes attachment to the mother. While Mother Nature gives us life, there is a risk that she will bind us, deprive us of our freedom, and bury us.

Red. This color could represent the active part of the Earth: the central fire, blood, and warmth. It is the preeminent color of activity. Negatively, red is evocative of spilled blood, danger, and taboo. If red is on the outside, it signifies death, whereas when it is circulating inside the body, it represents life.

We find blue and yellow among the celestial colors.

Blue. The preeminent color of reception, blue is the color of the sky and the ocean, and also evokes attachment to the father. Its negative dimension could be one of immobility and asphyxia: when blood is no longer being purified by oxygen, it becomes blue.

Yellow. The light of the intellect and consciousness, yellow has been compared with gold, the symbol for spiritual wealth. The philosopher’s stone of alchemy transmutes all metals into gold. Its negative quality could be aridity.

Violet. This color is the blend of red, the most active color, with blue, the most receptive. This union of the two extremes represents supreme wisdom. When Christ began to speak to his disciples, he was clad in red, but he was wearing violet when he was crucified, symbolizing his attainment of complete wisdom. However, violet is also the color of sacrifice and is identified with funeral rites. But in reality, this involves the death of the ego. Very little violet is found in the Tarot, as it represents the greatest of secrets: domination of the ego to attain an impersonal life.

With these as our foundations, we are able to draw up the table that appears on the next page.

SEVERAL “MANDALAS” OF COLORS

There are eleven different colors in the restored Tarot: black, deep green, light green, red, flesh, deep yellow, light yellow, deep blue, azure, white, and several rarely occurring spots of violet. The question is, how to organize them together?

In every human culture, at the commencement of intelligence, there is a concept of the universe. In this concept, humans live between Earth and the stars. Currently, the tradition we now live in tells us that Earth is the mother and the Sky is the father. But the opposite concept existed in much older cultures, such as those in Egypt and Africa. Humankind therefore takes a position between these two authorities that produced it, either to separate them or to help them communicate.

In our tradition, which is that of the Tarot of Marseille, the Heavens are the symbol of spirituality, and the Earth is that of material life. The human being is situated between the two.

The Colors of the Tarot

Color	Positive Meaning	Negative Meaning
VIOLET	Impersonal, wisdom	Sacrifice, death
WHITE	Purity, ecstasy, immortality	Mortal chill, egotism

AZURE (Light blue)	Receptivity to the celestial powers	Dependence upon the father, immobility
DEEP BLUE	Receptivity to earthly powers	Despotism, tyranny
LIGHT YELLOW	Clairvoyance, awareness, active intelligence	Aridity, cruelty, dry mind without emotion
DEEP YELLOW	Awareness, receptive intelligence	Madness, destruction
FLESH	Humanity, life, carnal pleasure	Materialism, carnal repression
RED	Animal realm, activity	Criminal violence
LIGHT GREEN	Nature connected to the celestial powers, the plant realm	Dependence upon the mother, envy
DEEP GREEN	Nurturing Nature connected to the terrestrial powers	Engulfment, absorption
BLACK	Creative magma, work in the depths	Chaos, regression, death impulse

If we accept describing orange as a deep yellow, we can say that three colors can be divided into light and deep tones: blue, green, and yellow.

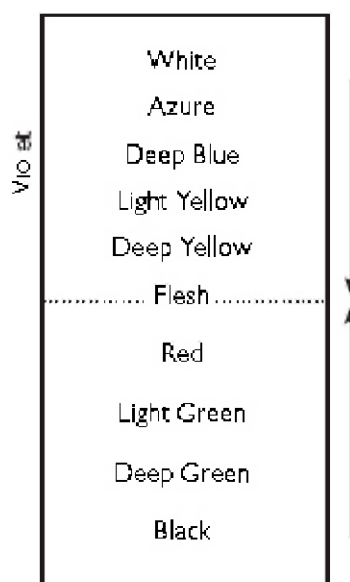
Black, white, and violet are hues that have no subtleties. With respect to the colors red and flesh, meanwhile, their kinship is interesting: to a certain extent we can consider the color flesh to be a lighter shade of red. The red of animality, which is purely terrestrial and active, becomes spiritualized in the flesh color that signifies the human being. But we can also consider these two colors to be completely separate entities.

This allows a group of five “bold” colors to stand out that have no light or dark subtleties. These colors are black, white, red (the three most common colors of the alchemical work), flesh (human), and violet (the androgyne).

Organized this way, the flesh color sits at the center just like the human horizon of the Tarot. At the highest part of the Heavens we have the color white, which contains all the colors and represents purity, life, euphoria, immortality, and an almost inhuman degree of perfection. Out of the divine white is born the celestial blue color, azure, then the yellow that is reminiscent of the vibration of the sun.

The color flesh forms the horizon, the line of separation or union between Earth and sky. It symbolizes the human realm, pleasure, and its repression.

At the very bottom of the Earth, at its uttermost foundation, we place black, a vibration containing no color, the creative magma of the depths of the unconscious. Above it the plant world, the color green, takes birth. In light green, Nature is involved with celestial forces, and dark green represents the nurturing nature of the terrestrial forces. Green is then succeeded by red, the violent, vital, and creative power possessing the gift of life or death.



Violet is envisioned as the frame of the rectangle and is like The Fool hidden beneath The World in the Tarot mandala, as it props up the entire structure.

The flesh color can also be interpreted as an orange blended with white. The color of flesh also represents the human being, vitality permeated by consciousness, whereas orange would be the color of vital, active growth without divine awareness.

Yellow would then become the color of celestial light and red that of terrestrial magma—pure activity.

In this hypothesis the “bold” colors are black, red, yellow, and white (the four colors of the alchemical work), and violet, the mysterious union between action and reception.

This provides the organizational arrangement of the colors as depicted in the table below.

WHITE	Purity
Azure	Spiritual receptivity
Deep Blue	Intuitive, terrestrial receptivity
YELLOW	Intelligence
Flesh	Human realm, conscious life
VIOLET	Horizon line of union and border between action/reception and Heaven/Earth
Orange	Vital domain of pure receptivity
RED	Activity
Light Green	Celestial nature
Deep Green	Terrestrial nature
BLACK	That which is buried, hidden, and unconscious

We can also organize the colors in accordance with two other diagrams corresponding to the numerology of the Tarot. One is based on the double square; the other fits into a circle and is inspired by the symbolic pattern of Arcanum XXI, The World.

THE CIRCULAR DIAGRAM

This pattern corresponds to a vision of the world that consists of depicting the whole not as a rectangle but as a circle, the universe in constant expansion, born from a single central point. This circle is then crossed by a horizon that, like the one in Genesis, separates the Heavens from the Earth (fig. 1 on p. 101).

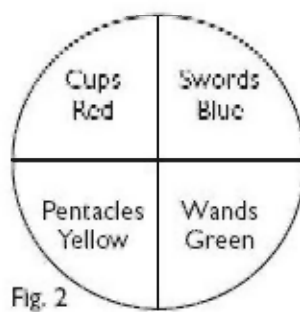
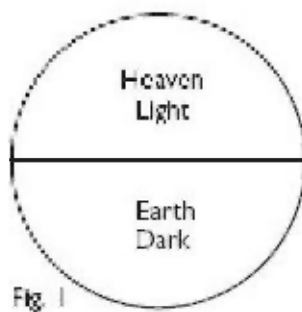
The vertical left/right subdivision then separates the receptive “feminine” from the active “masculine”: this is Eve born from Adam’s rib while he sleeps. This divides the circle into four quarters to which, following the outline proposed by Arcanum XXI (see p. 49), we can attribute the four elements corresponding to the four Suits of the Minor Arcana: Pentacles or corporeal center; Wands or sexual, creative center; Cups or emotional center; and Swords or intellectual center. Each color will find its correct place depending on the symbol one has chosen to attribute to it (fig. 2).

We may choose to associate Pentacles with the yellow of gold, the green of natural activities with Wands, the red of divine love with Cups, and celestial-air blue with Swords. Black remains at the foundation of the Earth and White at the zenith of the Heavens, while Violet, the color of the androgyne (the central figure on Arcanum XXI), is placed at the center of the circle. It then becomes obvious that the lighter shades are closer to the sky and the darker shades are closer to the Earth. In this diagram, the color flesh is associated with light red (fig. 3).

This gives us the following correspondences:

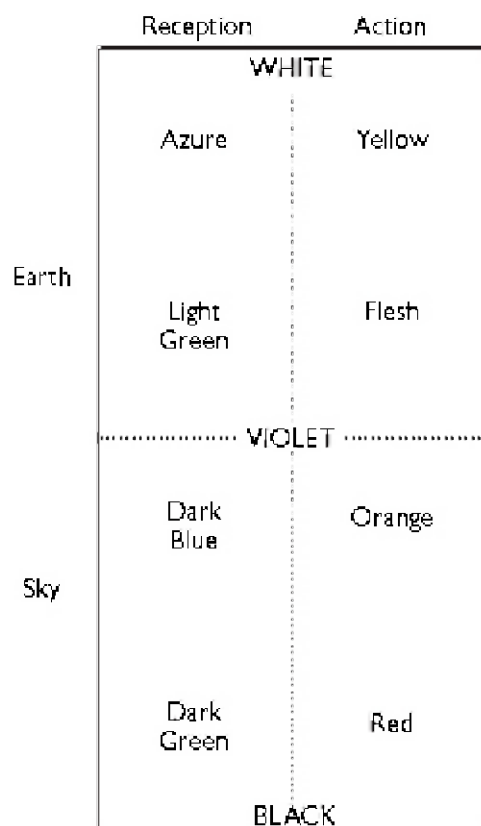
- Earth/active: light green and dark green
- Earth/receptive: yellow and orange
- Heaven/active: sky blue and dark blue

- Heaven/receptive: red and flesh
- Center: violet
- Zenith: white
- Nadir: black.



THE RECTANGULAR DIAGRAM

The rectangular diagram, with which we are already familiar, includes a receptive left side and an active right side. If we assume that so-called cold colors are receptive and so-called warm colors are active, we can divide them up inside a double square, respecting the Tarot's laws of orientation:



This shows us that there is not a single and exclusive way to organize the colors. According to the reading, these different structures can help us interpret the symbols, but it would be wrong to claim it is possible to organize the colors into a single diagram that restricts their meanings.