"ORPIMENT: IT WAS ONLY USED UNTIL THEY FOUND OUT HOW POISONOUS IT WAS!"

BUSTED!!

Orpiment, also known as arsenic sulfide, is a brilliant yellow pigment that exists naturally. It is extremely light-fast, very opaque, and almost painful with its brightness. It is toxic, as are all arsenic compounds, but medieval artists didn't let a little thing like eventual heavy-metal poisoning dissuade them from its use.

Orpiment was originally thought to have gone out of fashion around the 9th century, due primarily to the fact that the distinctively bright yellow was not often found on later manuscripts through the 12th to 15th centuries. However, it's hard to keep a good pigment down.

Arsenic Sulfide wasn't just used as a yellow, but also as vergaut, a green formed by mixing indigo with orpiment, and it also appeared in its orange forms realgar and pararealgar. The vergaut green is less destructive than verdigris on manuscripts and can produce beautiful deep greens. Raman spectroscopy recently proved that orpiment was a particular favorite of Insular manuscript production, appearing both as yellow and as vergaut on the Lindisfarne gospels[8], the Book of Kells[2], and two other 8th century manuscripts.[8] Orpiment alone was found on a 10th century Irish manuscript, but both orpiment and vergaut were found on the Spanish manuscript "Beato de Valcavado" dated 970 A.D. Orpiment, realgar, and vergaut appeared again on the Paris Bible[5] in 1275, and also on the Skardsbok[1] created in 1360 in Iceland. It does seem to go out of fashion around 1430 to 1515, replaced by lead-tin yellow, though it is found on a fifteenth century Greek icon[7], in pararealgar form. It is also used on a Persian Codex[10] dated 1537, and in 16th century Italian manuscripts. Though no chemical analysis has been done to prove it, orpiment is theorized to have been used on the Visconti Hours (1402-1412), as that brilliant yellow is hard to mistake. It's also mentioned in the Mappae Claviculae[3] (821- 822, Reichenau), Theophilus' *De Diversis Artibus*[6] (ca. 1125, Germany) and in Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte*[9] (ca. 1399-1405, Italy).

To summarize, we find orpiment being used not only as a primary color, but also in admixtures of greens and oranges, in multiple geographic locations and through a fairly consistent time line. It was also occasionally mixed with lazurite or azurite, but not nearly as often as it was mixed with indigo. This could be explained by the fact that indigo mixed with orpiment would result in a smoother pigment and easier application thereof, since orpiment can be ground very finely, and indigo is a vegetable dye.

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