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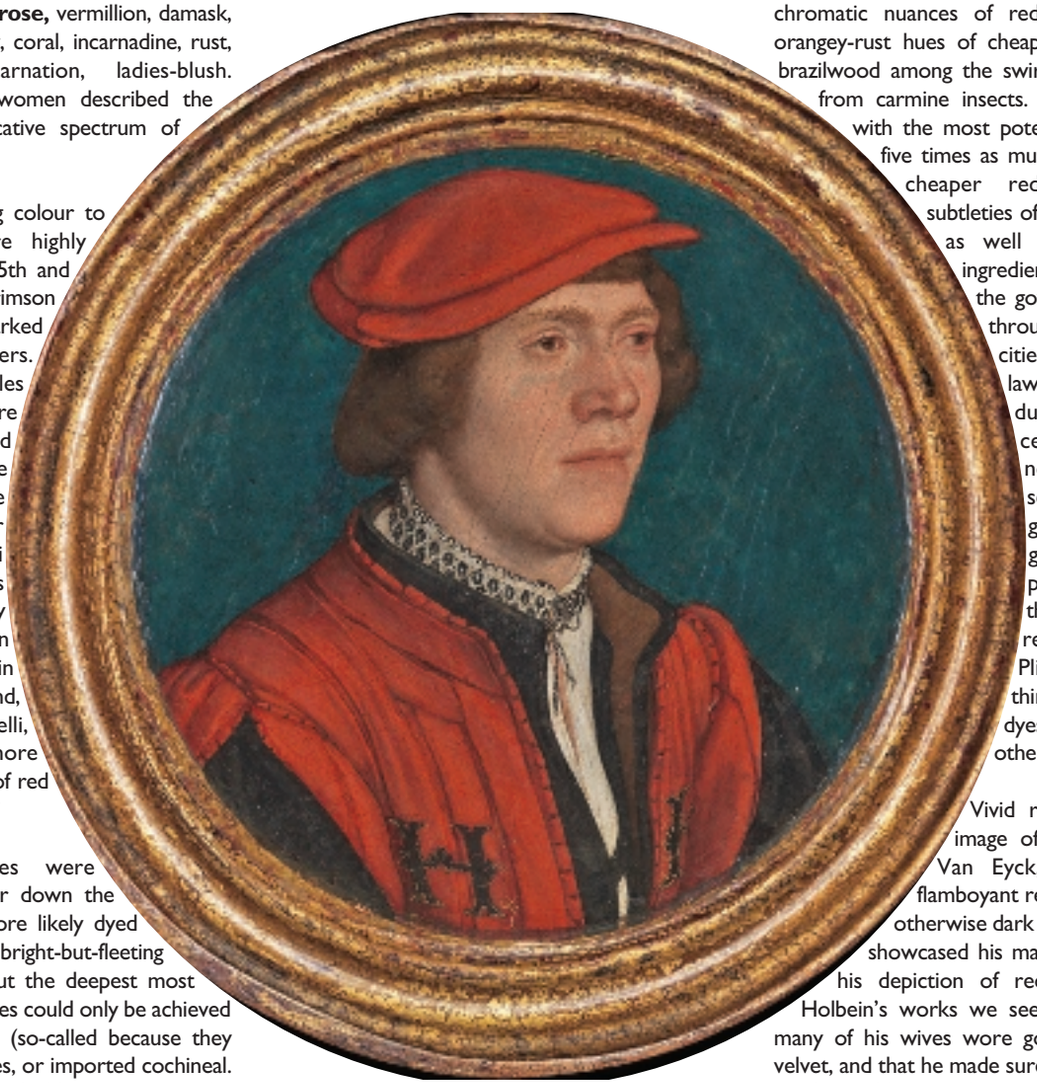
NATURALLY SANGUINE

The power of Renaissance red

Scarlet, faded blood, rose, vermillion, damask, brazil, siena, claret, lusty, coral, incarnadine, rust, murrey, morello, carnation, ladies-blush. Renaissance men and women described the colour red in an evocative spectrum of tones.

As the most challenging colour to dye, red fabrics were highly coveted between the 15th and 17th centuries, and so crimson and scarlet gowns marked out high-status wearers. Aldermen and nobles across Europe often wore red gowns of state, and some crimsons were reserved for royalty. The Italian political writer Francesco Guicciardini quipped that patricians could easily be made 'by dressing the vile people in the crimson fabric made in San Martino.' His friend, the infamous Machiavelli, expressed it even more succinctly: 'two lengths of red cloth make a gentleman.'

Red coloured clothes were available to those lower down the social spectrum too, more likely dyed with ruddy madder and bright-but-fleeting brazilwood or orchil, but the deepest most beautiful and durable tones could only be achieved with rare 'grain' insects (so-called because they resembled seeds), kermes, or imported cochineal. People would have been highly sensitive to the chromatic nuances of red tones, spotting the orangey-rust hues of cheaper madder and faded brazilwood among the swirl of true scarlet dyed from carmine insects. Silks and wools dyed with the most potent kermes might cost five times as much as those dyed with cheaper red dyestuffs, making subtleties of hue a matter of purse as well as preference. Such ingredients were restricted to the governing elites not only through price but in some cities through sumptuary laws. In Siena, for example, during the late 16th century, women were not allowed to wear scarlet or crimson garments dyed with grain or kermes. It is perhaps no surprise that the first published dye recipe book, Rosetti's Plictho (1548), had thirty-five recipes for red dyes – far more than any other colour.

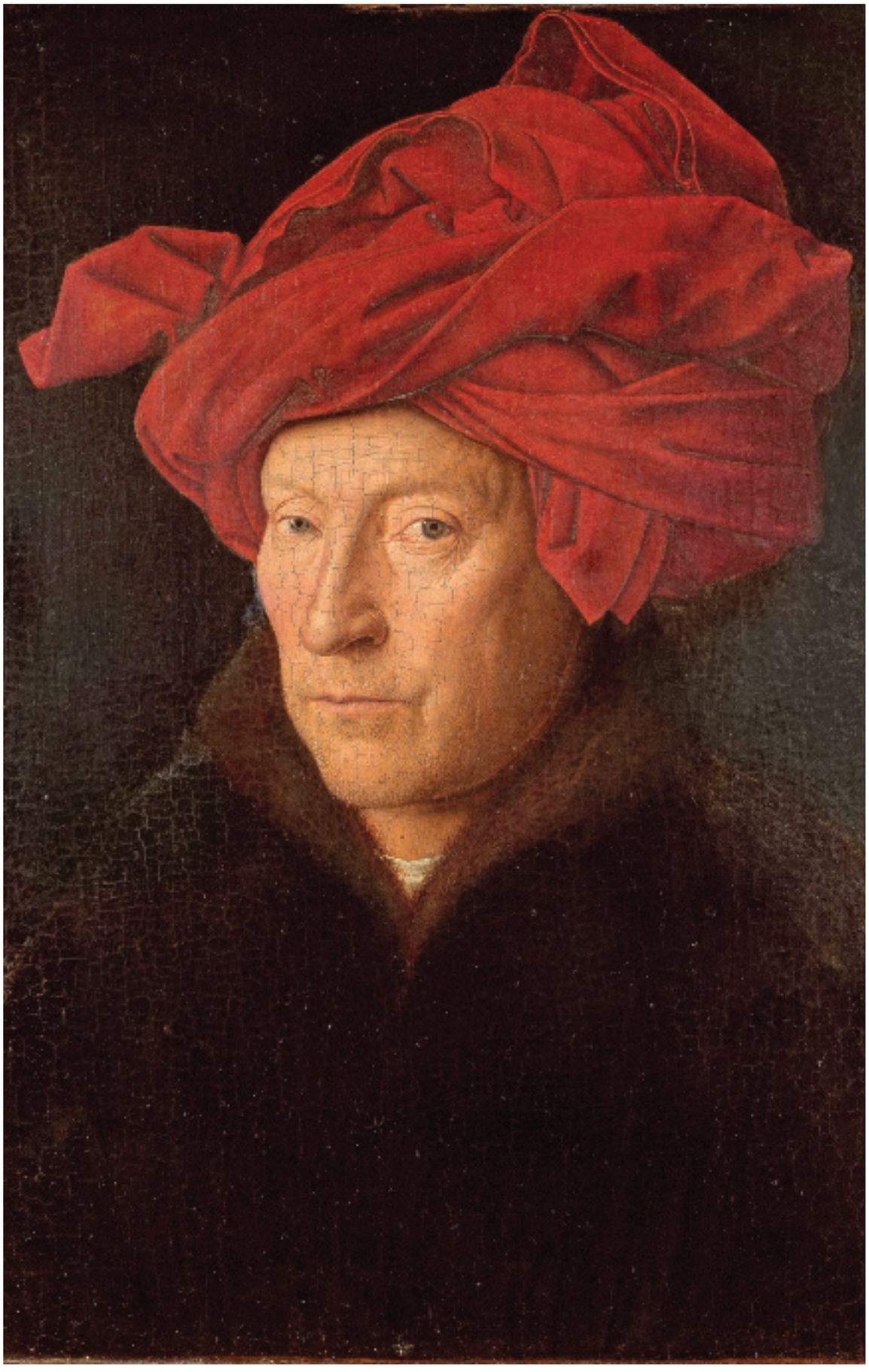


Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA

Vivid reds define our visual image of the Renaissance. Jan Van Eyck, chose to wear a flamboyant red chaperon hat for his otherwise dark self-portrait, and Titian showcased his mastery of paint through his depiction of red draperies. In Hans Holbein's works we see how Henry VIII and many of his wives wore gowns of red and gold velvet, and that he made sure his attendants looked regal in red livery jerkins and wool caps.

Pomegranate patterned silk velvets woven in Lucca, Florence and Genoa came in a rainbow of hues, but those woven of crimson red with gold were the most coveted. Red was not just visually appealing, it was considered powerful, provoking emotional and physical responses in those who saw or touched it. As the Milanese painter and colour theorist Giovanni Lomazzo explained, reds 'cause courage, providence, fierceness and boldness by stirring up the mind like fire.' Wearing red clothing was a potent way of harnessing this chromatic energy.

Red textiles imparted good health and warmth by causing the sanguine humours to move. Renaissance physicians largely followed ancient medicinal writings that suggested the body was dominated by four fluids, which influenced emotions, looks, and personality. The secret to good health was balance; though those who had an excess of blood were considered sanguine, the warmest and most jovial of all. Red fabrics were cheering, they provided heat, and got the blood flowing. The colour's effects worked not just by sight, but by proximity. Even when the outer garments were sober blacks or muted tones, red was favoured next to the skin. In his 1542 advice book, *A Dyetary of Heatlh,* Andrew Boorde advised his readers to wear a scarlet petticoat in order to keep healthy. Surviving inventories and wills reveal that among non-elite English women, red was by far the most common colour for petticoats. Mothers wrapped their babies in red swaddling bands to help them survive the most dangerous period of infancy, and red bed hangings were considered to impart health benefits for those who slept inside them. After diagnosing her with smallpox in 1562, Elizabeth I's German physician prescribed red flannel wrappings for the Queen, who soon recovered from her fever.



Previous Page Left: Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap, 1532-35, oil on wood, Hans Holbein the Younger, , German, oil on wood 12.7cm with frame
Previous Page Right: Signboard of Guild of dyers in Venice, Italy, 18th century, detail
left: Portrait of a Man, oil on oak, 1433,26x19 cms,

Red's power to stir the blood was, however, considered dangerous for some. Many learned renaissance men still followed the writings of 11th century Persian philosopher and physician Avicenna, who warned that 'one must not let a person suffering from nose-bleeding see things of a brilliant red colour.' For all of its benefits, red also signalled danger, and not just for nose-bleeders. As Europe fought fractious religious wars, red was allied with the Catholic cause because it was prominently worn by Papist cardinals. Red, and red hair, was also tainted by association with Judas's betrayal of Jesus Christ. In Shakespeare's As You Like It, Rosalind fears that Orlando will be disloyal because 'his hair is of the dissembling colour.' In books on colour symbolism, red clothing and jewellery could signify prowess and power or bloody defiance, depending on who you were reading. Red's nuanced and sometimes contradictory symbolism meant that clever dressers could harness its sartorial ambiguity. When Catholic Mary Queen of Scots removed her sombre black gown before the executioner's block in 1587, she revealed a dark red velvet petticoat and satin bodice. Was her clothing a bold statement of confessional defiance within Protestant England, or was it to give her courage and warmth to face her wintery execution with dignity?

When we see scarlet velvet sleeves, crimson satin kirtles, and silky coral curtains in renaissance portraits now hanging in museums, we should remember that red textiles meant more to men and women 500 years ago than just beautiful signs of conspicuous consumption. Power, prestige, belief, emotion, and health could be promoted, upheld, and communicated in rich red fabric. ••• **Sophie Pitman**

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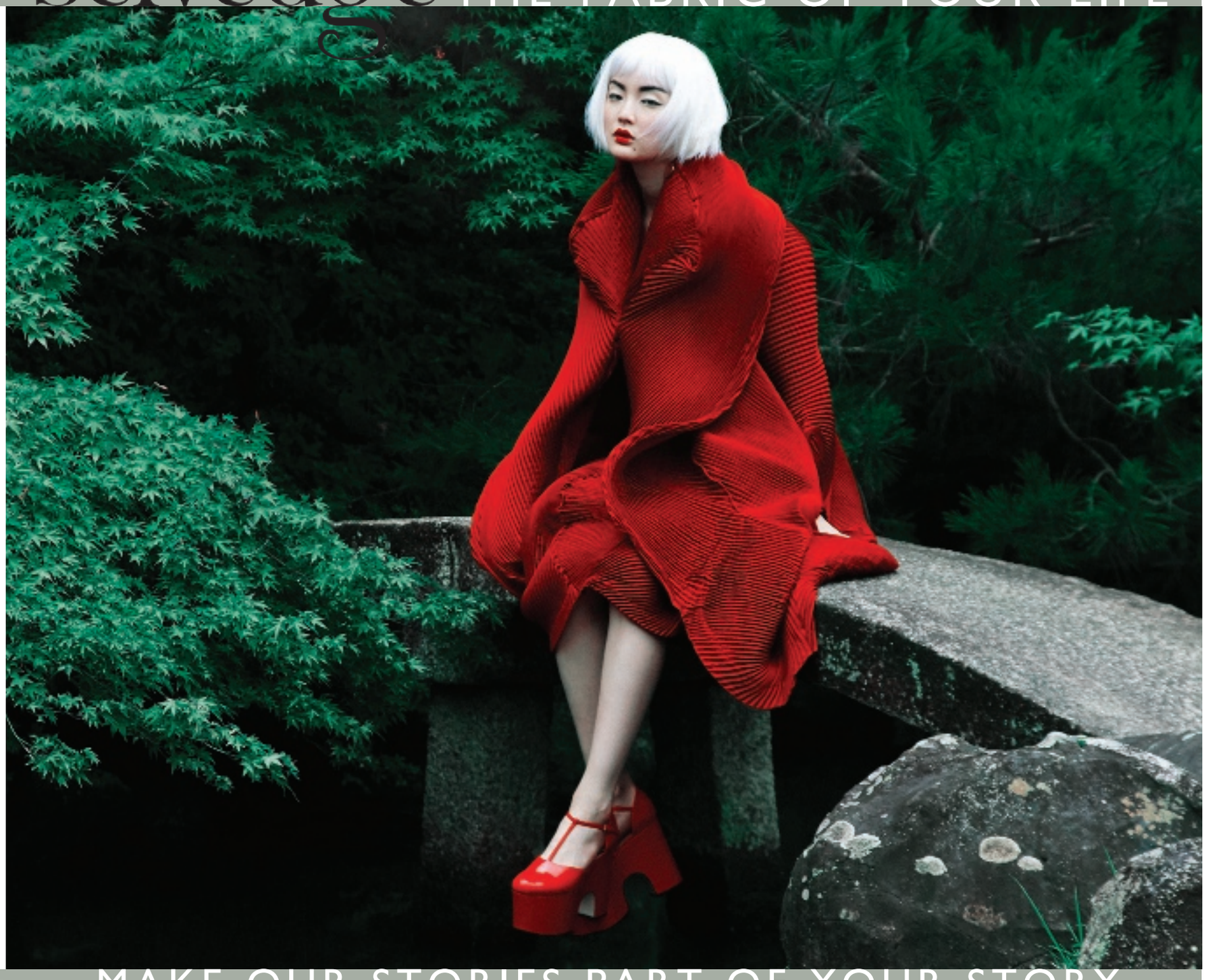

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