



A Perfect Red

By Amy Butler Greenfield
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Introduction

A Perfect Red recounts the colorful history of cochineal, a legendary red dye that was once one of the world's most precious commodities. Treasured by the ancient Mexicans, cochineal was sold in the great Aztec marketplaces, where it attracted the attention of the Spanish conquistadors in 1519. Shipped to Europe, the dye created a sensation, producing the brightest, strongest red the world had ever seen. Soon Spain's cochineal monopoly was worth a fortune.

Desperate to find their own sources of the elusive dye, the English, French, Dutch, and other Europeans tried to crack the enigma of cochineal. Did it come from a worm, a berry, a seed? Could it be stolen from Mexico and transplanted to other colonies? Pirates, explorers, alchemists, scientists, and spies all joined the chase for cochineal, a chase that lasted more than three centuries. *A Perfect Red* tells their stories -- true-life tales of mystery, empire, and adventure -- in pursuit of the most

desirable color on earth.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did attitudes toward dyers begin to change in Europe in the thirteenth century, and in what ways did that shift reflect the changing social organization of dyers at the time?
2. How did the shades of red worn by Renaissance Europeans serve as markers of class, and what do these divisions reveal about the general appetite for the color red in this era?
3. How would you describe the process by which female cochineal insects produce the "perfect red"?
4. What role did the Spanish conquistadors of the New World, led by Hernán Cortés, play in the introduction of cochineal to Europe?
5. Which group do you think was more responsible for the popularization of cochineal -- Renaissance Europeans or indigenous Mexicans, and why?
6. What do Spain's efforts to preserve its global monopoly over cochineal suggest about the significance of cochineal to its economy and its national pride?
7. How do historical figures as diverse as the poet, John Donne; the English pirate, Francis Drake; the French explorer, Samuel de Champlain; the Dutch inventor of the microscope, Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, and Emperor Napoléon Bonaparte factor in the history of cochineal and the European fascination with the mystery of its origin?
8. To what extent was the 19th-century cultivation of cochineal in Spain seen by the Spaniards as a way of salvaging some of the wreckage of their vast empire?
9. How did the advent of synthetic dyes and chemical production of color affect producers of cochineal around the world?
10. How have politics and class influenced the status of the color red in contemporary times?

About the Author

Amy Butler Greenfield's grandfather and great-grandfather were dyers, and she has long been fascinated by the history of color. Born in Philadelphia, she grew up in the Adirondacks and graduated from Williams College. As a Marshall Scholar at Oxford, she studied imperial Spain and Renaissance Europe. She now lives with her husband near Boston.