



Goethe's Theory of Colour

By Maria Schindler

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In 1810, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe published a 1,400 page treatise on color. Written in six parts, Theory of Colours challenges the theories established by Newton, and continues to explain the larger phenomena of color throughout life, as it appears in nature on plants, animals and minerals and in the design of objects. Goethe was really trying to write a kind of encyclopedia including all of the aspects of color imaginable. He addresses both the psychology and the "moral associations" of color as well as its relation to "other pursuits" including philosophy, mathematics, psychology and even music; natural versus chemical colors; and the appropriate use of color throughout. Apparently Goethe did not fully understand Newton's experiments, so his work disproving Newton has been discredited. Where Goethe did make interesting progress is in his consideration of human perception and color. He understood that not only light affects color, but the individual's ability to see must also be taken into consideration. Newton wrote of color and light and the human eye, but Goethe extended that process beyond the eye to the brain. Overall this is an incredible testament to the understanding of color written in the literary master's signature style, making it a pleasure to read.

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