

etymologia

The Color Puce (*Pyüs*)

Clyde Partin

For those with synesthesia, in whom stimulating 1 sensory pathway gives rise to a subjective sensation of a different character, the word plague may chromatically resonate with puce. In pre-revolutionary France, an era of “evocative color nomenclature,” Marie Antoinette’s reign was precipitating intense criticism. Her countrymen were experiencing severe socioeconomic stress, thus her sartorial self-indulgence was much resented.

After discovering the Queen wearing a new gown, her husband, Louis XVI, the King of France, chided her, describing the dress’s unflattering purple–brown hue as “*couleur de puce*” (color of fleas). This admonishment had the unintended consequence of promoting puce as the exclusive color worn by the French court. Puce, the French word for flea, descends from *pulex* (Latin). Flea droppings leave puce colored “bloodstains” on bedsheets. The role of fleas, however, as a vector for bubonic plague was not proven until about 1895.

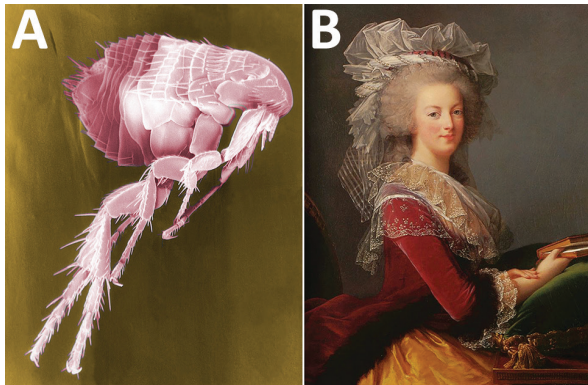


Figure. A) Digitally colored scanning electron microscopic image of a flea. Puce is a particularly difficult color to describe. Numerous shades of puce exist, some of which are associated with different anatomic areas of the flea. Image no. 11436: Janice Haney Carr/CDC. B) Portrait of Marie Antoinette painted in 1785 for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. Private collection, Public domain, <https://www.theawl.com/2017/10/the-sexy-gross-story-of-puce>. She seemed to have “preferred a shade leaning more toward ash-gray,” but is seen here modeling a more standard hue of puce.

Sources

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