

color is ...

BY JUDE STEWART

Cheap, Boisterous, Fertile, Dangerous: Orange is the Uncommon Color of the Common Man

ORANGES GO 'ROUND THE WORLD

Here's how the global migration of oranges resembles a Q*bert tournament final. Picture a bouncing orange over China that skips springily to the Malay Archipelago, then to the east coast of Africa, skittering over the Middle Eastern deserts in Crusaders' returning wagons to arrive, pulsating, at the Mediterranean. Bonus round! Thousands of little oranges sprout all over the Continent, even touching Great Britain, until a few hardy oranges stow away in Christopher Columbus' ships to score a second jackpot in the New World. Pizarro brought them to Peru, Hernando de Soto to St. Augustine, Fla., and all those hairy-smocked Spanish missionaries to California. >>



IT STARTS WITH FRUIT

The first oranges in literature shine out, ringed in bamboo and grasses, in the second book of *Five Classics*, edited by Confucius around 500 B.C. Dust off the old *Shu Ching* (*The Book of Historical Records*) and read how Yü, earl of Hsiâ, surveyed every inch of territory in his new kingdom to find, deep within it, the poor shyly proffering him oranges:

"The fields of this province were the lowest of the lowest class; its contribution of revenue was the highest of the lowest class ... its articles of tribute were gold, silver and copper ... elephants' teeth, hides, feathers, hair and timber. The wild people of the islands brought garments of grass, with silks woven in shell-patterns in their baskets. Their bundles contained small oranges and pummeloes, rendered when specially required."



1 A.D.

500 A.D.

THE MADLY FERTILE ORANGE

Orange blossoms offer a near-perfect (if distinctly baby-machine) symbol for brides: Pale-white and delicate as flowers, they mature into heavy, fragrant fruits from trees that bear prolifically, year after year. Brides have clutched orange blossoms in the West since Muslims brought the custom from the Middle East to Europe—perhaps never so avidly as during a craze in Victorian England.

More racy, tantric yoga teaches that orange is the color of the fertile sacral chakra, or Svadhistana, just below the navel and tantalizingly close to the genitals.

Besides sexiness, oranges suggest a distinct freshness, too. Orange pomander balls cut the stench of public places in the days before air-conditioning. Gaunt Dickensian figures clapped hollowed-out orange rinds firmly to their noses before hitting the streets. Jamaicans slice oranges in half and scrub the floors with them; Mexican women relax after childbirth in baths of orange leaves.



ADAM, FELLED BY AN ORANGE (OR A BANANA)

The heated debate about the fruit Adam and Eve "actually" ate might be titled *Religious Scholars Tussle Over Fruit: Which is Most Evil?* The *King James Bible* points its shaking finger at generic *fruit*. Rabbis squabble in the Talmud over a wild range of possibilities: Was it a fig? Was it wine? Was it a grape? The Quran's Tree of Knowledge bore evil bananas. There is a pomegranate faction. Other scholars argue pragmatically for oranges, which grew lushly in biblical times throughout Asia Minor.



FUNNY-BUT-TRUE FACTS ABOUT ORANGES

In his citrine jewel of a book *Oranges* (1967), John McPhee takes the Florida orange-juice industry as his starting point to explore every succulent pip of the fruit. For instance: oranges get their color from cool air, not from ripening. As McPhee explains, "In some parts of the world, the weather never gets cold enough to change the color [from green to orange] ... in Thailand, the orange is a green fruit, and traveling Thais often blink with wonder at the sight of oranges the color of flame."

Citrus trees grow like Frankenstein's monster: The trunk is usually a Rough Lemon or Sour Orange plant, while the branches can be any citrus, grafted onto the trunk after blossoming. A tree heavy with lemons, limes, oranges, grapefruit, tangerines and kumquats all at once is entirely possible.

Oranges are sweeter if they grow on the top of the tree versus the bottom, or on the south side of the tree versus the other directions. Pluck an orange precisely from this zone, then sink your teeth into the blossom end for the sweetest bite of all.

>> With few exceptions, the color orange was on shaky ground as its own hue—"bytween reed and yalwe," fumbles Holland's Pliny in 1601—until the fruit shows up, clinching the name, the shade and the fruit, all in tight symbiosis.

THE HOUSE OF ORANGE

Orange became the pennant-color of downtrodden Everymen with William I of Orange, founder of the House of Orange-Nassau in Holland. The taciturn Action-Jackson of his era, "William the Silent" flung off Spanish rule of the Netherlands in a protracted battle from 1568 until he was assassinated in 1584. The House of Orange grew famous for rabid Protestantism, peasant solidarity and a predilection for opening the dikes to flood out enemies.

A hundred years later, the waterlogged House of Orange took root on the British Isles when William III rebuffed French king Louis XIV and married Mary, enabling the English to dodge a Catholic heir-apparent and scoring Orange a nice new chunk of territory.

All those Williams of Orange also explain why so many American towns, founded by Scotch-Irish Protestants, took the name Orange—not to mention the identikit decorating scheme of so many Irish bars.

PROTESTING THE BEIJING OLYMPICS

Danish sculptor Jens Galschiot tapped orange as the color to protest China's human rights violations. A common color for Tibetan monks' robes, orange has also stood for protest in movements as far-flung as the Ukrainian Orange Revolution and Kenya's Orange Democratic Movement. Part art-happening, part legitimate protest, The Color Orange (www.thecolororange.net) spurred dustups between flame-clad crowds and police in Greece and provoked debate about whether China could, in fact, ban all things orange from the stadiums—the Dutch national teams excepted.



ORANGE SPELLS CHEAP!

Turns out HoJo/Home Depot orange has been screaming cut-rate for centuries: Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* calls orange "the ancient color appropriated to clerks and persons of inferior condition; it was also the color worn by the Jews." Which explains the zinger buried in what otherwise sounds like a kicky summertime look, described by Lord Francis Bacon in his 1597 *Essays*: "Usurers should have orange-tawny bonnets, because they do Judaize."



1500 A.D.

2008 A.D.

ACHTUNG!

It seems we now live on permanent Orange Alert: stumbling over orange cones in our Devo-orange jumpsuits, jostling hunters in blaze orange and wink-winking at similarly hued prisoners in the yard. Safety orange draws its strong visibility from its contrast with a blue sky, or perhaps the way it makes the eyes swim weakly with tears. Few other colors so gamely tread the line between exuberance and stridency, nature and artifice, freedom and authoritarianism.



A CLOCKWORK ORANGE

Anthony Burgess' famed 1962 tale of ultra-violence takes its name from the Cockney expression "as queer as a clockwork orange"—roughly equivalent to our mistrust of a three-dollar bill. Drawing on his experiences in the British Colonial Office in Malaysia, Burgess was also tickled by the fact that the phrase could punningly refer to a mechanically responsive (clockwork) human being (*orang*, Malay for man).

In the introduction to the 1986 edition of his novel, he remarked that a creature who can only perform good or evil is "a clockwork orange—meaning that he has the appearance of an organism lovely with color and juice, but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil; or the almighty state."



THE COLOR OF EGGHEAD

A subset of the science crowd graduate their doctorates with a streak of orange in their hoods: straight orange for engineers, apricot for nurses, maize for agriculturists.

WHAT RHYMES WITH ORANGE?

A favorite poets' parlor game is faking your way towards that all-but-impossible rhyme: the one that goes with *orange*. Players keep a running list of near-rhymes: lozenge, flange, Stonehenge, porridge or (controversially) door hinge.

Up the ante with a sly reference to one of the few proper nouns that really do rhyme: *Blorenge*, a hill in Wales; *Dorence*, a town in France; or *Gorringe*, a surname too convenient to this exercise not to raise a skeptic's eyebrows.

The shameless (or highly tipsy) might pass off one of these scurrilous rhyming candidates as their own:

The four eng-
Inners
Wore orange
Brassieres.

—Willard Espy, "The Unrhymable Word: Orange"

Eating an orange
While making love
Makes for bizarre en-
Joyment thereof.

—Tom Lehrer