

A Green To Die For

Today you can walk into any old clothes shop and see a whole rainbow of colours. From pastel pinks and powder blues to luminous yellows and earthy deep reds, we're pretty spoiled for choice. However it's only been quite recently that we've been able to produce such a wide array of coloured garments. Historically we've tried over and over again to try and replicate the colours we see in nature as well as create some of our own. But this longing search for colour didn't come without some deadly consequences.

We all know Victorian England was booming with the industrial revolution as manufacturing and scientific discoveries began to change the landscape of not just business but also inside the Victorian home. Out were the minimal, simple ways of the early 1800s, and in came the decades of abundance. A well off Victorian home looking almost like a brick-a-brack store with material goods galore, boasting with a wealth of needless commodities. Of course, when the new institutions of machine made goods combined cheap human labour came about, why wouldn't take advantage and fill your house with pointless things just to show off your social status. Ah times really haven't change that much have they. But I digress.

In his 1866 lecture "traffic" artist John Ruskin states that "what we like determines what we are" in other words in Victorian England the material possessions you favour and the performed gestures you are drawn to are a direct reflection of exactly who you are. He goes on to make these imagined interactions, saying "You, my friend in the rags, with the unsteady gait, what do you like?" This person Ruskin has configured replies "A pipe, and a quartern of gin." And Ruskin then says "I know you." From just a couple of very face value statements Ruskin believes he then knows exactly who that person is, amplifying this Victorian notion that one needed all this material excess to present, to almost perform who they wanted to position themselves as in Britain's ridged social hierarchy. This need for excessive consumption and pressures of societal structures can give us some insight as to why the Victorians wouldn't be put off their material goods and lavish clothes, even if they knew it was poisonous.

And that brings us onto the infamous pigment of Scheele Green. Scheele green which went by many other names such as Emerald, Schweinfurt, Paris or parrot green was made by mixing potassium and white arsenic in a solution of copper vitriol. And no you didn't mishear me I did say arsenic, yes that extremely poisonous chemical element, yes that one. It was the invention of Swedish pharmaceutical chemist Carl Wilhem Scheele who recorded his findings in his 1778 paper on "green pigment" and died shortly after in 1786 at the age of 43 from inhaling the poisonous gases.