Top Ten Fun Facts About Colour

Clive Gifford wrote a book all about how colours have been made, used and bought and sold in the past. His book, The Colours of History (QED Publishing) has just won the Blue Peter Book Award for the Best Book With Facts. Clive shared ten of his favourite facts from the book with us…

Colour fact 1
It took 9,000 sea snails to make just a single gram of Tyrian purple dye. During the times of the Ancient Romans, the dye became three times more expensive than gold.

Colour fact 2
The most popular brown colour used in artists' paints in Europe in the past was made from crushed-up ancient Egyptian mummies.

Colour fact 3
Teenager William Henry Perkin was using his chemistry set to try to make a cure for malaria when he invented the world's first artificial purple dye… by accident.

Colour fact 4
Scheele's green was a dye used to colour curtains and dresses, but it was so poisonous that it was later used by farmers in America to kill crop-eating insects.

Colour fact 5
Margarine was dyed pink by law in many states in the USA to make it appear different from butter.

Colour fact 6
Egyptian blue was a colour lost for 1,600 years, until people uncovered the ruined city of Pompeii and rediscovered the colour there on its walls and bowls.

Colour fact 7
A cheap type of purple dye called orchil was made from lichens mixed with stale human wee and left for 70 days – creating a terrible pong!

Colour fact 8
An entire war was fought in 1374 over a single ship carrying saffron dye, which was stolen by pirates. It took as many as 170,000 crocus flowers to make a kilogram of the golden-orange coloured dye.

Colour fact 9
An orange-coloured powder dropped into the Chicago river every St Patrick's Day is a vegetable dye which magically turns the entire river bright green for the day.

Colour fact 10
The world's oldest paintbox was found in a cave in South Africa and is over 70,000 years old.

And a Bonus Fact…

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Gamboge sap from trees was used to make certain yellow paints but it was a *really* powerful laxative. Workers at a London paint factory had to go to the toilet every hour because they handled gamboge!