

# The Story of Green



Before chemical pigments, artists used natural green pigments in their work.  
PHOTO: Paul Blenkhorn/Unsplash

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I love staring at a forest from afar, allowing my eyes to sink into the lush tapestry of greens that never fail to pull me in. Plein air paintings created by artists have a way of reminding me of that feeling, but nothing is quite the same.

If an artist hopes to capture any scene of nature, they probably need a good few shades of green in their arsenal.

Before chemical pigments, this was quite an endeavor. To the right is a brief overview of the history of natural green pigments.

Throughout the centuries humans have spent trying to recreate green, photosynthetic organisms produce it as simply as breathing. So next time you go outside, let yourself get pulled into nature and appreciate the effortless artwork. These ecosystems, much like paintings, are a testament to the delicate balance of nature. In appreciating their beauty, pledge to protect and preserve it.

1300s  
1400s  
1500s  
1600s  
1700s  
1800s  
1900s  
2000s

**1300–1600:** Ground into powder, the mineral malachite may be the oldest known green pigment. It was found in Egyptian tombs and was common in European paintings mainly throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. The brilliant shade known as "malachite green" is used today as the marking ink for plastic surgeons, though it no longer contains the mineral itself.

**1300–1900:** Green earth is a common mineral pigment usually made from celadonite or glauconite. In Canada, it was used by Northwest Coast First Nations. Tlingit, Haida, Kwakwaka'wakw and Tsimshian artists used the green pigment on items like wolf masks, headdresses and rattles. In Europe, green earth was used by medieval Italian painters for underpainting flesh tones.

**1400–1800:** Verdigris and copper resinates were pigments used by Italian masters, often laid over each other to produce a more intense hue than green earth. These pigments were famously used in Herman van der Mijl's Garden Flowers (1715).

**1750–1850:** Wabanaki encompasses five principal nations: the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot and Abenaki. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, their basket makers used natural dyes made from tree bark and roots to produce shades of green in their basket weaving. Basket makers later combined Prussian blue and chromium yellow to make green.

**1775–1960:** Bolstered by some new colors, the French Impressionists vividly depicted lush green landscapes. These new bright green hues came at a price: Scheele's Green and Paris Green were derived from arsenic and were as toxic as they were popular.

**1817:** Chlorophyll, the pigment which lends plants its green, was first classified in 1817. Chlorophyll plays a major role in photosynthesis, the biological mechanism that transforms light from the sun and converts it into energy.

**1838–Today:** Viridian emerged from hydrated chromium oxide in the first half of the 19th century, along with many other synthetic pigments. It became a popular choice for the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. The examination of viridian now serves to authenticate artwork, even some of Van Gogh's!

**Gabrielle** (she/her) is a recent psychology graduate who is beginning to harbour some regrets for not having studied environmental science. Lately, she's been trying to improve her sourdough bread, oil painting and knitting.