WELTKULTUREN
MUSEUM

GREEN SKY, BLUE GRASS

Colour Coding Worlds

Edited by
Matthias Claudius Hofmann

KERBER CULTURE

CONTENT

THE COLOUR PRAXIS OF THE ABELAM AS PART OF A CULTURE-SPECIFIC AESTHETICS

An Example from Papua New Guinea

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin

Introduction

In 1912 the ethnologist Richard Thurnwald was the first European to cross the region between the Sepik River and the north coast in the north east of the island of New Guinea (at the time the German protectorate of Kaiser-Wilhelmsland). On his journey he encountered the Abelam, an ethnic group that had settled in the southern foothills of the Prince Alexander Mountains and who lived from the cultivation of tubers (above all yams). The ceremonial houses of the Abelam – he called them "festival halls" – left a deep impression on him (1914: 82). He described them as "heaven storming" as they were built to a height of almost 30 meters and their magnificent gable fronts were almost completely painted. 50 years later Gerd Koch visited the Abelam region (also known as the Maprik region), establishing a large ethnographic collection for the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin. Writing about the sculptures and paintings, he stated: "The intensive colouration (above all the yellow, rare in other parts, and the bold red) lends [...] these works, together with the clear arrangement of lines and surfaces with their strict stylization, a very special agency, which is intensified in the extreme, thus making the Maprik art something highly special in the wider oceanic region" (1968: 28–29).[1]

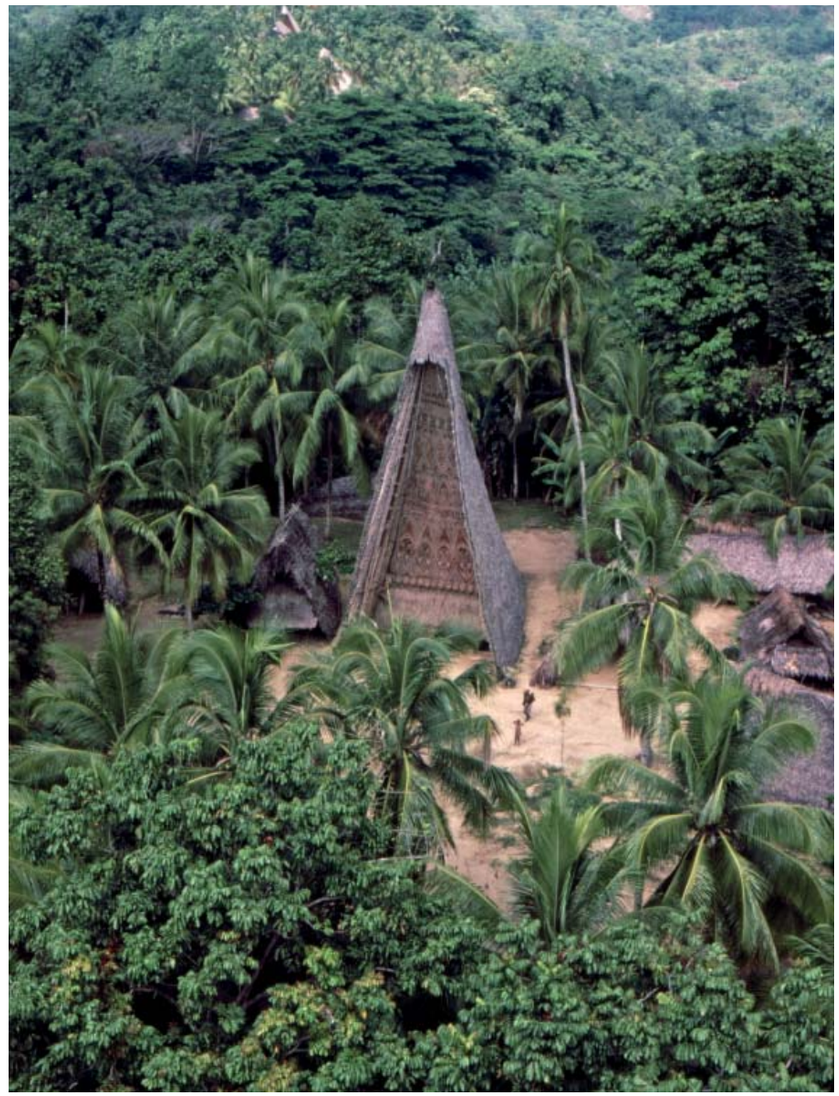

Fig. 1 Ceremonial house in the hamlet of Yambusaki, Kalabu village, with towering gable and painted façade. In the background the gable peaks of other ceremonial houses can be seen. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, 1980.

Alfred Bühler, who also travelled the Abelam region and collected for the Museum für Völkerkunde Basel, spoke of the "lavish painting" of the sculptures and described the paintings as "monumental forms" of façade decoration (1960). The most impressive of all are the triangular, richly painted gable fronts of the imposing ceremonial houses, which were generally built at the highest point of the settlement (fig. 1, cf. plate 44) (Hauser-Schäublin 2016).[2]

In terms of form and execution, the anthropomorphic sculptures, generally conceived as symmetrical frontal views, appear clumsy compared to the often extremely filigree carvings of their southern neighbours. The strong impression which the figures nevertheless leave on the observer is due to their intense painting. The Abelam refer to an unpainted sculpture as 'just a piece of wood' if they want to emphasize the significance of the colour. It is only when it is painted black, white, red and yellow that the 'wood' becomes animated. That is why all the sculptures are completely repainted before they are displayed in a ritual held in the ceremonial house. They thus become living beings from the beyond (ancestors and spirits), or rather their temporary seats. In the past, when initiation rites were performed in the ceremonial house sculptures, paintings, shell rings and stones, as well as flowers, were combined to create an entire ensemble. This resulted in veritable visual orgies of colour, which, in the dim light of torches, drew the novices under their spell.

For the Abelam, as mentioned, the primary colours consist of black, white, red and yellow. They have their own theory of colour, although it is formulated neither orally nor in written form. Instead it is a *colour praxis,* which consists in the selection of colours and their material characteristics, as well as the combination of individual colours and their arrangement to form motifs and patterns. Artists pass on their knowledge and skills to talented young men through learning by doing, not theoretical lessons. The use of colour is regimented and not everyone is (or more correctly, was) free to paint and use motifs or change them at will, although master painters always enjoyed a certain scope of action. Painting – what we would generally refer to as 'art' – was framed by basic cultural parameters.[3] As the anthropologist Anthony Forge concluded, who studied the art of the Abelam in the mid-20th century, and who also compiled a large collection for the Museum für Völkerkunde Basel, the visual art of this ethnic group is of a "ritual character" and forms a central component of rituals (2017a [1962]). The paintings directly affect the observer in a fashion that cannot be expressed in words as the images are connected to a world of experience beyond the everyday.

Theories of colour: From Goethe to the Abelam

Theories of colour are not universal. The emotions and sensations associated with colours are also learned and depend on cultural evaluations and meanings. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe identified the fundamental principle of human colour perception and its corresponding evaluation in the polar opposite of light ("Licht") and dark ("Finsternis") (1810). He termed yellow, blue and red as the pure colours (primary colours), to which the human eye formed the complementary colours. He organised these colours within a colour circle. He marked it with a plus sign on the one side and a minus on the other and associated them with corresponding effects on our sensations ("warm", "cold"). Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), like Johannes Itten (1888–1967) and Paul Klee (1879–1940), was a teacher at the Bauhaus. They all made an intensive study of colours and forms, however each in their own way. The basic forms of Bauhaus teaching were the yellow triangle, the blue circle and the red square. The psychological dimension – sensations that are associated with colours and forms – played an important role for all these artists. Kandinsky, for example, spoke of an "inner sound" that colours are able to evoke, that is, associations with things and appearances (1911). This effect is intensified when they are embodied in certain forms. Colours thus had an outside – the colour itself – and an inside, which appeals to sensations and meanings (associations). Itten also proceeded from three primary colours and spoke of "secondary" and "tertiary" colours (twelve in total) generated by the mixing or superposition of the primary colours. He used this to develop a system of seven colour contrasts, i.e. different forms of the juxtaposition or combination of different colours, which he also illustrated using a colour circle.

As in a number of other colour theories, for Itten colours were "colourful", and he considered black and white to be "non-colours" (Itten [1961] 2009: 17).[4] Paul Klee wrote the following on the meaning of colours and motifs: "Art does not reproduce the visible, instead art makes visible" (1920: 28). As we will see, this also applies to the Abelam. What their paintings show are not reproductions; instead, in the first instance, they make relationships between meanings visible.

But now let us move on to the principles of the Abelam paintings. I will discuss a number of the aspects of European-Western colour theories sketched above from the perspective of the Abelam: the concept of the non-colours, the idea of the primary colours and their equivalence, the mixed colours (secondary and tertiary colours), the combination of colours with one another and the relationship between colour and form. A further, especially important point, refers to the relationship between the outer and the inner dimension of the colours, as Kandinsky called it, in other words, questions of associations, sensations and meanings.

Fig. 2 Painting the façade of a ceremonial house. The master painter explains to an assistant where and how he is to apply yellow paint. In the foreground: An additional helper fills in white triangles, while his colleague applies wood resin to the black rings of the concentrically arranged eyes. Kalabu village. Photo: Jörg Hauser, 1980.

The assumptions which European colour theories operate with are especially apparent in the case of the 'non-colour' white. It is well known that canvas and paper are white (or whitish) – and these are the most important bases which European artists have painted on. These base materials appear to have been implicitly understood as a neutral background. Thus the aforementioned colour theories present the colour circles they have developed against a white background. Amongst the Abelam white never serves as a background, instead it is the most important paint colour. The naturally given background colour amongst the Abelam is brown. All picture carriers – smoothed palm leaf stalks, wood, skin (for body painting) and yams (especially large cultivated examples) are brown or brownish. Brown does not exist as a paint colour. As already mentioned, the primary colours used in painting are black *(wuinkipma),* white *(sabyo),* red *(waimba)* and yellow *(paalkipma);* here the names are those of the corresponding pigment. These colours do not fit into the schema of European colour theories; above all the colour blue is missing, which, from an optical-physical perspective, is also one of the primary colours. This may be due to the fact that no blue colour pigments, i.e. earth pigments, are to be found on New Guinea. Of course the colour blue – as well as green – occurs in nature. However, abstract terms for these colours appear to be missing, as it is the composition or materiality – bird feathers, butterfly wings, flowers and leaves – that is in the foreground. Even the – ephemeral – cult images made from flowers and leaves consist exclusively of the aforementioned colours, although theoretically different coloured materials are available. Furthermore, the Abelam never mix their primary colours, therefore they have not manufactured any 'secondary' or 'tertiary' colours.

The materiality and spirituality of the colours

When imported oil paints became available in the middle of the 20th century the Abelam also began to experiment with blue and green. Sometimes they employed blue for those parts which they had previously painted black. They used the same name for blue and black; the same applied for green, which was sometimes used to replace yellow. In the 1970s the Abelam returned to the traditional colours. Whether this was on the advice of the many European collectors who, as far as possible, wanted to buy 'authentic' painted artefacts, or on the initiative of the Abelam themselves, as colours are not just colours, is not completely clear.

Many painted gables, which now adorn the fronts of churches, schools and community centres – the majority of the Abelam are now Christians of various denominations, which is why hardly any ceremonial houses are built or initiations conducted – still display the traditional patterns and colours.[5] Coupaye (2007) reported that since the end of the 1980s only industrially produced colours were used. However, in terms of hue – in contrast to the first wave of modernisation – they largely correspond to the traditional colours.

During my research amongst the Abelam, black, white and yellow were exclusively pigments which occurred naturally at certain locations in the area and which were traded regionally as small clumps. These pigments were cleaned of little stones and employed without adding any further ingredients. Another black paint, which is not used for priming but for painting small areas, is still manufactured from soot to this day, which is chewed together with certain leaves. The black juice is then spat out and used. Red was the most complex colour as it was composed of different components, also of a magical nature. The starting material was a type of earth only occurring in one place. This was then finely grated and mixed with the bark of the *ndigu* tree and red flowers. At the time some men stated that the piece of bark must be collected by a menstruating woman in order for the colour to exert its full power (Hauser-Schäublin 2007). The mixture was then burnt and stored in powder form in a small bamboo tube. This red powder displayed slight variations in colour, depending on the manufacturing process. Master painters placed great value on having the 'right' paint powder, and they preferred to go in search of another 'supplier' rather than use one that did not meet their expectations.

The colour red is – or more accurately, was – not just a colour as is the case in Western colour theory, but a special, magical substance which refers to a series of multi-layered meanings, including those from religious contexts. Red is associated with vitality, menstruation and birth. These, at least at first sight, are dangerous areas for men, as they are understood as uncontrollable female powers diametrically opposed to the ritual world controlled by men. Nevertheless, the colour red plays a dominant role in the ritual lives of the men, as it means vitality and ritual heat. The sculptures, predominately painted red, awaken

associations with animated bodies pulsing with blood, with vitality par excellence (cf. plate 43). After uttering a magic formula over it and mixing it with further ingredients, yam farmers gave red paint to their seedlings to make the tubers grow as big and beautiful as possible. It was also administered to novices and sacred images during initiation ceremonies. In these contexts it was no longer a colour for painting but a magic substance *(urakus)* which could be extremely dangerous if it landed in the wrong hands. It transformed the people and objects into powerful, sacred protagonists (which was termed *maira* 'sacred-miraculous').

Depending on the cultural context in which it was used this red substance was given different names. Today, as even the Abelam lead an increasingly globalised lifestyle and use industrial paints, a secularisation process seems to have also taken place with respect to the colours: For many of them red has become a mere colour or material, which is still assigned a certain power, but as a secondary property, so to speak. However, that which previously possessed neither an 'inside' nor an 'outside,' as it was referred to in some colour theories, but instead, all in all, was a potent substance, is now subject to a corresponding division.

None of the other colours display this potent-dangerous substance character like the red earth pigment, whose manufacture and usage included secret knowledge and the observance of many taboos. The example of red shows that this colour cannot be assigned either a plus or a minus sign in order to evaluate the impressions and feelings, as is the case in some colour theories. Red encompasses both: vitality, extreme life force – and deadly danger. However there is another difference to the European colour theories: The Abelam associate some of the colours with sex, i.e. *gender.* Thus red refers to women and womanliness. However, this gender allocation can be transformed through powerful actions, as occurs in the male cult when a magic spell is cast over the colour red and it becomes a magical masculine substance.

In contrast to red white has a male connotation. White refers to bones, the skeleton. As an inner structure it lends the body its form, that which is enduring in a human being. In accordance with the Abelam's ideas on reproduction, the male contribution to procreation is responsible for the formation of the bones, the female for flesh and blood. Both of them, blood and bones, are the seat of 'souls,' of which the human individual possesses three different ones. When a person dies the 'soul' associated with blood functions as a frontier crosser, moving between the here and now and the beyond, until the funeral rituals are completed and the 'blood soul' remains in the hereafter. The bones are the seat of a 'soul' which continues to exist after the funeral rituals. The 'bone soul' is associated with stars and shooting stars. Accordingly, the 'bone soul' has an almost eternal character. Large, smoothly polished shell rings (gouged from the giant clam *Tridacna gigax)* are considered valuables. They are also used to decorate the lower section of the front of a ceremonial house on the occasion of its inauguration, and are also considered to be an aspect (or a manifestation) of stars, which decorate the everlasting firmament – the cosmos. Thus white is also a colour that connects different materials with one another. Red and white do not have a single, clearly defined meaning. Instead they point to a whole series of phenomena associated with one another, or more precisely, to relationships between them (cf. Forge 2017b [1970] and Losche 1995). Put simply, red is associated with fertility, earthliness and transiency, white with light/sun, the ethereal, as symbolized by white feathers, and immortality. However, for the Abelam, these boldest of colour contrasts are not opposites but complementarities and form an indivisible whole.

Combinations of colours and forms in the painting

This complementary relationship is also apparent in the painting process, which is traditionally a sacred activity carried out shielded from everyday life. There are regional and local differences regarding the painting process, the motifs and patterns, and even the 'signatures' of the master artists differ from one another. In 1980 I was able to follow the painting process in detail – the painting of a gable façade – in the village of Kalabu. The following remarks are based on this (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 2016).

The gable front of a ceremonial house is tailor made, its size is determined by the building's dimensions. It is constructed from the lower sections of Sago palm sheaths, which are sewn together. These palm sheaths, pressed flat to produce an extremely smooth surface, are first primed with a dark grey or black earth pigment, piece by piece, and from top to bottom. This produces a surface onto which the earth pigments can adhere. At the same time the priming is understood as the first step in the transformation of the natural substrate into a sacred image. The main artist – as the leader of a whole team of painters – traces the first line with a bird feather dipped in white paint, beginning at the tip of the gable triangle laid out on the ground. The white paint is the form-giving colour; it has precedence over all other colours and is therefore reserved for the master artist. He does not partition the gable front into different sections for the respective horizontal pattern bands. He successively paints the outlines of the motifs from the tip of the façade such as swirls, vegetable and animal elements, figures with bent arms and legs, bodies, faces with flat triangular headdresses and white feather bands as well as net bags as attributes of the figures.

The pattern bands are generally arranged symmetrically and are composed of characteristic motifs. The main artist continues from the point where he has previously completed a pattern band. Horizontal lines are rare, and the vertical connecting lines do not play a dominant role in the overall composition. The majority of lines are curved. A number of the motifs are composed from several closely aligned lines drawn in parallel. Sometimes they form hatching

or
zig-zag lines. Spiral forms are composed from white lines, on whose outer edges feather-like triangles in white are often placed. Occasionally, white bands of triangles are positioned on the circumference of circles, as can be seen at hip height on some anthropomorphic sculptures. White lines also determine the size of the figures' eyes composed of concentric circles, for example on the bottom row of faces on a gable façade. Sometimes two artists work simultaneously on the same motif, one on the right hand side, one on the left.

Fig. 3 left Young women adorned with shell ornaments and face painting; they accompany their brothers during a ritual dance. Lonem village. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, 1980.

Fig. 4 right Ritual dancer emerging after an initiation: His entire body is first painted black and then decorated with ornaments made from a wide variety of materials. The eye area is completely covered with paint; he is not allowed to open his eyes. Between his teeth he holds a boar tusk ornament as a symbol of prowess. Lonem village. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, 1980.

In a second step stripes of red paint – generally applied with a brush-like instrument – are painted by the main artist's assistants. Red nestles seamlessly against the white lines, subordinating itself to them. In contrast to the white lines the red stripes are often wider, more extensive. Red and white are the most important, high-contrast colour combinations in a painting. They result in what can be described as white lines in a sea of red (Hauser-Schäublin 2007).

Red stripes often border larger black core areas (i.e. the painted substrate). However, the clashing of red and black is offset or moderated through rows of white dots. These circular spots are dabbed onto the edge between red and black and form, as Kandinsky had already determined, both a border and a bridge between different coloured and form-giving elements (1969 [1926]: 21). These points follow an imaginary line, however they nevertheless form a type of staccato – each point an element in itself – in relation to the curved white lines and their red frames. At the same time, these points frequently convey the almost perspectival impression of an edge which borders a dark chasm. In fact black is sometimes used for intermediary or (imagined) cavities. It is frequently also used for hairy body parts: Facial hair, but above all male and female genitalia, which are depicted in the form of a black pubic triangle surrounded by a red line dotted with white points. This form-giving combination generates a dynamic tension between the elements of point, line and area, surface, edge and depth.

It is rare that red and black are immediately juxtaposed. This occurs in the case of parallel lines, not areas of colour, as can be occasionally seen in head silhouettes or concentric circles.

At many points in a painting the red border of black core areas is only an intermediary step, as many of the black intermediary spaces are ultimately filled with yellow paint. Above all this is done with faces or parts of faces, where yellow is used to mark areas of skin (cf. Mc Guigan 1992: 244) that do not display any bodypainting. In these paintings yellow plays a mediating, appeasing, two-dimensional role. The combination of yellow and red is harmonious. Sometimes the two colours almost seem to merge, when they are not separated from each other by a white line. In a final step in the painting process, those areas which are left black are painted over with a white tree resin. This dries crystal clear and lends the black a light gloss. The sheen, the brilliance of colours and colour combinations, is a quality that the Abelam value highly.

Conclusion

The combination of colours and forms sketched here – the repertoire of forms must be systematically discussed in a further analysis[6] – also appear in the decoration of male and female dancers, yam tubers, which are displayed during a festival, as well as on carvings and plaited masks (fig. 5). The idea of white lines as the primary colour and structuring element is central. However, beyond the white painting colour, they are also realized using other materials, for example the sun-bleached string from which women produce patterned net bags, or the light-coloured plaiting material for male basket masks or rear headdresses. Despite the variety of materials, similar or identical combinations of colours and forms are always employed, and thus refer to interrelated meanings.

The colours and colour combinations form a system. The colour praxis of the Abelam, as I have attempted to show, possesses a culturally immanent logic and system of meaning which cannot be explained using European colour theories, let alone understood. The colour praxis, and the basic rules of their combination and form-giving, are central parts of the Abelam's aesthetic and are embedded in comprehensive relationships of meaning.

Fig. 5 The magnificent specimens of long yams, bound to bamboo poles and decorated with masks and plaited rear headdresses, are carried to the competition at the ceremonial ground. Lonem village. Photo: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, 1980.

1 The Abelam collection of the Museum der Weltkulturen was established by Meinhard Schuster and Eike Haberland on the occasion of the Frobenius New Guinea Expedition of 1961.

2 The author of this essay undertook research in the Abelam village of Kalabu between 1978 and 1985, together with her husband Jörg Hauser. She visited the village again in 2015 (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 2017).

3 Today much has changed, not least as a result of the Abelam's conversion to Christianity. Consequently, painting is no longer embedded in ritual and subject to the corresponding taboos. Nevertheless, I employ the present tense in order to convey a livelier picture than would be possible with the past tense.

4 The painter and art theorist Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810), a contemporary of Goethe, already described black and white as a "different class, opposed to the chromatic colours" (quoted according to Keller Tschirren 2011: 55).

5 In 2012 an exhibition was held in the Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, which also invited Abelam artists to paint an on-site gable façade (using plywood panels and modern acrylic paints) and build the front side of an Abelam ceremonial house. Here too the artists restricted themselves to the traditional colours white, red, yellow and black, cf. the illuminating report on this successful project from McDougall (2015).

6 For the repertoire of forms cf. Hauser-Schäublin 1989.

References:

— **Bühler, Alfred. 1960:** *Kunststile am Sepik.* Basel: Museum für Völkerkunde.

— **Coupaye, Ludovic. 2007:** 'Des portraits Abelams'. In: *Arts & Cultures* 7. 258–275.

— **Forge, Anthony. 2017a [1962]:** 'Paint. a Magical Substance'. In: Forge, Anthony: *Style and Meaning. Essays on the Anthropology of Art.* Edited by Alison Clark and Nicholas Thomas. Leiden: Sidestone Press. 43–49.

— **Forge, Anthony. 2017b [1962]:** 'Learning to See in New Guinea'. In: Forge, Anthony: *Style and Meaning. Essays on the Anthropology of Art.* Edited by Alison Clark and Nicholas Thomas. Leiden: Sidestone Press. 123–137.

— **Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. 1810:** *Zur Farbenlehre.* 2 vol. Tübingen: Cotta.

— **Hauser-Schäublin, Brigitta. 1989:** *Leben in Linie, Muster und Farbe. Einführung in die Betrachtung außereuropäischer Kunst am Beispiel der Abelam.* Basel: Birkhäuser Verlag.

— **Hauser-Schäublin, Brigitta. 2007:** 'Weiß in einem Meer von Rot. Die bemalte Giebelwand des Abelam-Kulthauses'. In: Schmid, Anna and Alexander Brust (eds.): *Rot. Wenn Farbe zur Täterin wird.* Museum der Kulturen Basel. Basel: Christoph Merian Verlag. 190–194.

— **Hauser-Schäublin, Brigitta. 2016:** *Ceremonial Houses of the Abelam, Papua New Guinea. Architecture and Ritual – a Passage to the Ancestors.* Goolwa, SA: Crawford House Publishing.

— **Hauser-Schäublin, Brigitta. 2017:** 'Looking back. Abelam Art and some of Forge's Theses from a 2015 Perspective'. In: Forge, Anthony: *Style and Meaning. Essays on the Anthropology of Art.* Edited by Alison Clark und Nicholas Thomas. Leiden: Sidestone Press. 255–267.

— **Itten, Johannes. 2009 [1961]:** *Kunst der Farbe. Subjektives Erleben und objektives Erkennen als Wege zur Kunst.* Freiburg: Christophorus Verlag.

— **Kandinsky, Wassily. 1911:** *Über das Geistige in der Kunst. Insbesondere in der Malerei.* Munich: Piper.

— **Kandinsky, Wassily. 1969 [1926]:** *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche. Beitrag zur Analyse der malerischen Elemente.* Bern-Bümpliz: Benteli.

— **Keller Tschirren, Marianne. 2011:** *Dreieck, Kreis, Kugel. Farbenordnungen im Unterricht von Paul Klee am Bauhaus.* University of Bern: Ph.D. Thesis. https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/2073/1/Keller_Tschirren_Dreieck_Kreis_Kugel_2012.pdf. (1.9.2020)

— **Klee, Paul. 1920:** *Schöpferische Konfession.* Berlin: Reiß.

— **Koch, Gerd. 1968:** *Kultur der Abelam. Die Berliner Maprik-Sammlung.* Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde.

— **Losche, Diane. 1995:** *The Sepik Gaze. Iconographic Interpretation of Abelam Form.* In: *Social Analysis* 38. 47–60.

— **McDougall, Ruth. 2015:** 'Material Matters. Commissioning Contemporary Artworks from Papua New Guinea for the 7th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art'. In: *AICCM Bulletin* 35 (1). 14–21. DOI: 10.1179/bac.2014.35.1.002 (05.08.2020).

— **Mc Guigan, Noel Damascus. 1992:** *The Social Context of Abelam Art. A Comparision of Art, Religion and Leadership in Two Abelam Communities.* University of Ulster, Belfast: Ph. D. Thesis.

— **Thurnwald, Richard. 1914:** 'Vom mittleren Speik zur Nordwestküste von Kaiser-Wilhelmsland.' In: *Mitteilungen aus den Deutschen Schutzgebieten* 27 (1). 81–84.