

## CHAPTER SIX

# PRETTY IN PINK

### Why are red foxhunting coats called 'pinks'?

This has nothing to do with confusing red with pink, or with red fading to pink: horsey mythology has it that there was once a remarkable tailor called Mr Pink, who was exceedingly nifty in making those red hunting coats and, over time, the name stuck to refer to all of these types of coats.

Pink is a new colour – relatively speaking. There is no natural pink paint pigment and through most of history the range of shades we now call pink didn't have a name of their own – they were simply lighter reds, just like lighter blues are shades of blue. In English, the word pink originally meant a version of yellow – unless you were into foxhunting in which case it would suggest a deep red ('donning your pinks'). It was also a term used to describe a frilled edge, which is why scissors that cut zigzags are called 'pinking shears' – and it was through this path that today's pink emerged. The pale red dianthus flowers were known as 'pinks' because of notches in their petals looked like they'd been trimmed with pinking shears, and so, in the seventeenth century, pink became associated with pale red and became its own colour.

At around the same time, the popularity of pink in painting, ceramics and clothing was growing, particularly in France where it was called *rose* or *roze* or *rose Pompadour* (because it was adored by the king's mistress). Incidentally, in most other European languages our pink is their rose (*rosa* in Spanish, German, Italian, Norwegian and Swedish, *roze* in Dutch, *roz* in Romanian, *cor-de-rosa* in Portuguese, *rozowy* in Polish, *ruzovy* in Czech and *ruzicast* in Croatian). The use of rose or pink has a far older vintage



in several other parts of the world – in ceramics in China and Japan and in fabrics in India. But its current cultural connotations took a while to arrive.

Today, pink is slanted in a feminine direction – for little girls' toys, fairy dresses and shoes and women's cars, sex toys and phones; as the ribbon colour of the breast cancer campaign; as the colour of downward-facing triangles used by the Nazis to brand homosexuals (which is why it has since been reclaimed to become one of the symbols of gay pride). Meanwhile, in Japan, 'pink films' were those featuring 'soft-core' porn. Sometimes the meaning of pink depends on its context: bright pink and black together has raunchier connotations than pale pink with white spots. But none of this is any way innate to the colour. Perhaps more than with any other colour, the meanings of pink have changed over a short period of time.



# PINK IS FOR BOYS

A team of evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientists from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne embarked on a rather odd project in 2007. They started with the notion that women had evolved through natural selection to prefer pink and men, blue. They tested this by flashing up pairs of colours to 208 British students with a subgroup of thirty-seven Chinese students, asking these volunteers to select the colour they liked best by clicking a computer mouse. Perhaps a bit to their surprise, the most favoured colour for the women as well as the men was blue, confirming the consistent results of previous studies in other parts of the world, which show that blue is by a long way the favourite colour of both sexes. However, much to their relief, the women liked pink a bit more than the men



Because of the researchers' belief that this pink-and-blue preference evolved biologically, the team devised retrospective solutions. On the origins of blue-preference, team leader Dr Anya Hurlbert said, 'Going back to our savannah days we would have a natural preference for a blue sky because it signalled good weather. Clear blue also signals a good water source.' But it was her Just-So Stories explanation for female pink preference that drew the headlines. 'The explanation might date back to humans' hunter-gatherer days, when women were the primary gatherers and would have benefited from an ability to home in on ripe, red fruits,' she said. She did not explain how it was that liking ripe red fruit prompted a preference for pink (and it's hard to think of any pink-skinned food in the

African savannah – flamingos perhaps?), nor how this preference might have given those with the right genes any kind of selective advance, let alone whether random genetic mutations for red-preference traits was even a theoretical possibility.

Despite these caveats, their conclusions were energetically embraced by numerous media outlets all over the world. *The Times* headed theirs with, 'At last, science discovers why blue is for boys but girls really do prefer pink' and their intro left no doubt: 'Now it emerges that parents who dress their boys in blue and girls in pink may not just be following tradition but some deep-seated evolutionary instinct'. *Time* magazine suggested that 'women may be biologically programmed to prefer the colour pink'.

This idea was beginning to settle into conventional wisdom when Dr Ben Goldacre got hold of it in his 'Bad Science' column in the *Guardian*. He noted that the test was devised to measure preference rather than ability to discern shades of red (which might have conferred a berry-picking edge). But the more decisive verdict came from publication archives, which he and other sceptics dug up. These showed that the pink-for-girls thing was of very recent vintage. For example, the *British Ladies' Home Journal* noted in 1918: 'The generally accepted rule is pink for the boy and blue for the girl. The reason is that pink being a more decided and stronger colour is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.' *The American Sunday Sentinel* advised its readers in 1914 to 'use pink for a boy and blue for a girl, if you are a follower of convention.'

One reason pink was seen as masculine at this time was because it was derived from passionate blood red – a bright and light, little boys' version of this manly colour. In other

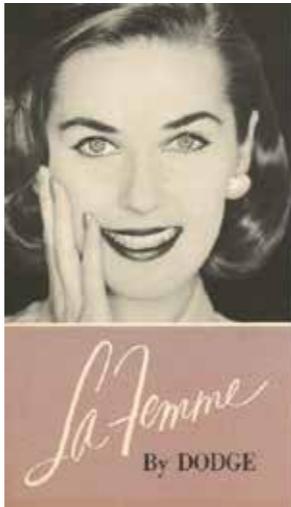


**Why are flamingos pink?**  
It was once thought that they evolved this way because pink gave them some selective advantage. In fact, it has everything to do with their diet. They eat shrimp and insect larvae, which are rich in carotenoid.





settled into public consciousness, aided by popular 1950s songs like ‘Think Pink!’ (from the Audrey Hepburn musical, *Funny Face*), ‘Pink Champagne’, ‘Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White’, ‘Pink Cadillac’, ‘Pink Chiffon’, ‘A Touch of Pink’ and many more. But the change happened more gradually in some other countries – blue and pink were still being used for both girls and boys, sometimes together in pink-and-blue garments, as late as the 1980s in Belgium and Switzerland.



What all this suggests is that current female preference for pink has nothing to do with genes, and everything to do with culture. And yet, it’s hard to shake off the notion that pink is essentially girly. So how does that happen? The answer may relate to the process we all go through from as early as six months old in developing awareness of ourselves as girls or boys. Right from the start girl babies are smothered in pink and boys in blue. By the time they’re aware of their sex, well before their second birthdays, girls associate their femininity with pink and by the time they grow up, this constantly-reinforced preference feels natural.

Over the last couple of decades feminists in several countries have campaigned against the division of children’s toys into pink and blue categories – dolls, tea sets and fairy skirts for girls; building blocks, dinosaurs and balls for boys. One way around the problem

would be to take on the association of pink with femininity – a tough job, given its cultural ubiquity. Another solution might be to offer pink versions of boy’s toys.

## THE PINK BUS

Socialists have long been called ‘pinkos’ by sneering opponents, the idea being that they are watered-down reds. It goes back to a story in *Time* magazine in 1925, which mentioned ‘parlour pink’ socialists who showed sympathy for the communism of the Soviet Union but did nothing about it.

But this didn’t stop the British Labour Party from choosing a bright pink bus for its 2015 election campaign as part of its drive to win female support for policies on child-care, equal pay and domestic violence. The vehicle, with the slogan ‘Woman to Woman’ on its side, was the baby of deputy leader Harriet Harman, who had to defend the choice of colour as soon as it was rolled out. Criticisms focussed on stereotyping women by ‘pinkifying femininity’, with her opponents deriding it as the ‘ladybus’ designed to be driven by Barbies.

No doubt pink was picked as a branding strategy – precisely because of its feminine associations. But under attack, Harman backtracked, describing the bus’s colour as ‘magenta’, and protesting: ‘It’s not about a colour; it’s about something – it’s about our democracy.’ Her party’s shadow minister for women, Gloria de Piero, was more robust, claiming that the pink controversy drew attention to the issues. ‘Everyone is talking about the issues that happen to women in a political context – how often does that happen?’ she asked, adding that it wasn’t supposed to be wholly feminine



thing because pink had been used often before by her party. She called pink a 'one nation Labour colour'.

But in the end, the 'magenta' bus went the way of the leader and deputy leader – out. They lost the election and chose a new leader who rode a blue bicycle and a red bicycle, but never one painted in pink.

## PRISON PINK



Joe Arpaio relishes his reputation as 'America's toughest sheriff', known for favouring chain gangs for prisoners who sleep in tents (he once happily measured the daytime temperature inside them at 145 F), giving them just two meals a day and making them pay for their food. His shtick involves not giving an inch to inmates, and so, when he discovered that prisoners had been 'stealing' their white prison underwear after serving their sentences, he declared this to be an assault on taxpayers, and devised an underpants solution: 'I had an idea – why not pink?' he said to much fanfare. Arpaio's thinking went along the lines that pink was a feminine colour so the hard male inmates therefore wouldn't like it and wouldn't want to steal their underpants on leaving. A year on he judged the plan a success, and by then had added pink socks and other items to the package, claiming he had saved the county \$70,000. 'They don't like

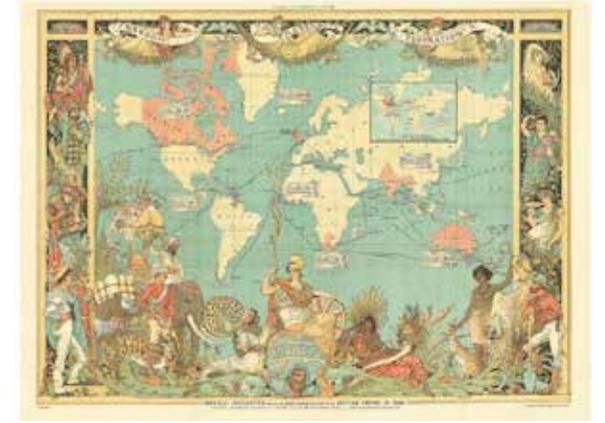
pink,' he gloated. 'They complain sometimes.'

In 2012, however, a court ruled that this pink underwear may have contributed to the death of a paranoid schizophrenic prisoner awaiting trial, who as stripped, held down and dressed in a pink by prison officers. The confused thirty-six-year-old looked at his pink pants, thought he'd been raped and ran away before dying of a heart attack. The appeal court found that forcing awaiting trial inmates to wear pink 'seems without legal justification'.

This, however, was neither the first nor the last use of pink for prisoners. In one US experiment in the 1970s, the cells were painted Baker-Miller pink (a bright, jaunty colour). It was reported that the prisoners were quieter than before the paint job. Another study was conducted in Switzerland in 2013, when some police stations painted their cells pink in a bid to calm people who'd been arrested. The results were 'inconclusive'.

### What are pink-sheet stocks?

A stock that isn't traded on a major stock exchange is said to trade 'over the counter'. These are usually minor, volatile stocks from unlisted companies. They are said to trade on the 'pink sheets' because they were printed on pink paper (until electronic trading arrived).



### Why was the British Empire portrayed in pink on maps?

It relates to the War of the Roses. After defeating Richard III, Henry Tudor reunited the House of York, with its white rose, and the House of Lancaster, with its red rose, creating the new House of Tudor symbolised by a pink rose. Another reason is that a darker background colour, like red, would make it harder to read place names.