



From the Boke: Tinctures

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The SCA recognizes and uses the following tinctures:

Argent = white/silver/grey

Or = yellow/gold

gules = red

vert = green

azure = blue

purpure = purple

sable = black

ermine = black ermine spots on white [1]

counter-ermine = white ermine spots on black

ermineois = black ermine spots on gold

pean = gold ermine spots on black

vair = alternating bells of azure and argent

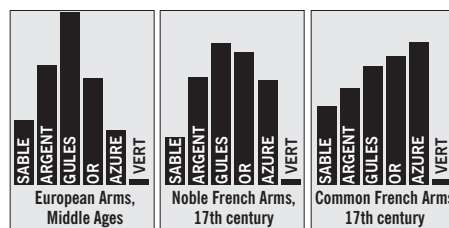
You sometimes hear of a few other tinctures: Tenne (orange), sanguine or murray (purplish/red, blood), and bleu-celeste (sky blue). We don't use these tinctures in the SCA, primarily because in most cases, our only evidence that these came into common use (i.e., beyond more than half a dozen examples in ALL OF EUROPE over ALL OUR PERIOD) comes from after 1600. A heraldry manual published in 1611 says of two of these:

"Tawney (saith Leigh) is a Colour of worship, and of some Heralds it is called Bruske, and is most commonly borne of French Gentlemen, but very few doe beare it in England. In Blazon it is known by the name of Tenne. It is (saith he) the surest colour that is (or so bright a hew being compounded) for it is made of two bright colours, which are Red and Yellow: neither shall you have any Colour so made among all that may be devised; and not to be staind.

"The last of the seven mixed colours, we doe commonly call Murrey, but in Blazon, Sanguine, and is (as most truly saith Leigh) a Princeley Colour, being indeed one of the colors appertaining of ancient time to the Prince of Wales. It is a colour of great estimation, and very stately, and is of use in certaine robes of the Knights of the Bath. Some Heralds of approved judgement doe hardly admit these two last mentioned for Colours of Fields, in regard they are reckoned Staynand Colours. Yet some Coats of Armes there are, and those of reverend antiquitie, whose Fields are of those Colours, for which respect they have beene allowed for

Colours of Fields, as Sir John Ferne in his Glorie of Generositie noteth. This kinde of bearing, Leigh doth instance in two English Gentlemen of ancient Houses, that have of long time borne Tawney in their Armes: the one of them he nameth Hounzaker, and the other Finers." [2]

A few interesting questions can be asked about the use of the tinctures. One is Weere some tinctures more popular than others? The answer to this is "Yes", quite definitely. The following chart is redrawn from an image from Pastoureau, Michel, *Heraldry: An Introduction to a Noble Tradition* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), p. 83:



Three charts are given = "European arms, Middle Ages", "Noble French arms, 17th C", "Common French arms, 17th C". The bars represent the tinctures, and their relative frequencies. Note that vert is extremely rare, comparatively, and purpure and the furs are so rare as to not show up at all. Another related question here is whether some tinctures are more common than others when you consider just the field or just the primary charge. I haven't done any extensive studies on this yet, but I did do a study of around 300 arms from 16th and early 17th C Cornwall. [3] Here is the data that I found:

Distribution of field tinctures

Field tincture	Number	Percent
Argent	110	40.6%
Sable	43	15.9%
Gules	34	12.5%
Or	25	9.2%
Azure	18	6.6%
Divided	18	6.6%
Ermine	14	5.2%
Vair	2	0.7%
Vert	1	0.4%
Erm.[4]	1	0.4%

When you consider the class of divided fields (18 examples), they are divided in the

following numbers:

Division	Number	Percent
Checky	3	16.7%
Per pale [plain]	3	16.7%
Paly of six	2	11.1%
Per chevron	2	11.1%
Per pale [complex]	2	11.1%
Barry lozengy	1	5.6%
Barry wavy	1	5.6%
Bendy of six	1	5.6%
Per fess [plain]	1	5.6%
Per fess [complex]	1	5.6%
Quarterly	1	5.6%

Also of note:

Distribution of number of tinctures used

Tincture No	Number	Percent
Two	144	53.1%
Three	94	34.7%
Four	25	9.2%
Five	4	1.5%
One	1	0.4%

Once the tinctures have been defined, we can move on to a discussion of the rules of contrast as defined in SCA heraldry. The Rule of Contrast (aka the Rule of Tincture aka No Color-on-Color/No Metal-on-Metal) is one of the most well-known and often misapplied rules of SCA heraldry. Below is quoted what the Rules for Submissions actually have to say about armorial contrast:

"VIII.2 Armorial Contrast. - All armory must have sufficient contrast to allow each element of the design to be clearly identifiable at a distance.

"Each tincture used in Society armory may be depicted in a variety of shades. Therefore, contrast is not determined by the lightness or darkness of the tinctures on the submitted emblazon, but by the traditional heraldic categorization of tinctures as colors and metals. The colors are azure, gules, purpure, sable, and vert (blue, red, purple, black, and green). Ermined furs or field treatments on a background of one of these tinctures are treated as colors for contrast in the Society. The metals are argent and Or (white or silver, and yellow or gold). Ermined furs or field treatments on a background of one of those tinctures are treated as metals for contrast in the Society. Furs equally divided of light and dark pieces,

such as vair, are classed with other evenly divided elements, such as paly, per bend, or lozengy.

- a. Contrasting Tinctures - Good contrast exists between:
 - i. A metal and a color;
 - ii. An element equally divided of a color and a metal, and any other element as long as identifiability is maintained;
 - iii. A color and a charge, blazoned as proper, that is predominantly light;
 - iv. A metal and a charge, blazoned as proper, that is predominantly dark.
- b. Contrast Requirements -
 - i. The field must have good contrast with every charge placed directly on it and with charges placed overall. For example, a pale vair between two owls Or might be placed on a field gules, but not a field ermine because the owls would not have good contrast. Similarly, a field vert with a fess Or contrasts with a wolf rampant overall that is argent or ermine, but not a wolf that is gules or sable.
 - ii. A charge must have good contrast with any charge placed wholly on it. For example, a tree placed on a pale azure could be Or, argent, or ermine, but could not be pean or proper.
 - iii. Elements evenly divided into two parts, per saltire, or quarterly may use any two tinctures or furs. For example, a field quarterly could be composed of azure and gules, argent and Or, Or and ermine, or vert and vairy gules and argent.
 - iv. Elements evenly divided into multiple parts of two different tinctures must have good contrast between their parts. For example, checky argent and gules is acceptable, but checky azure and gules is not.
 - v. Elements evenly divided in three tinctures must have good contrast between two of their parts.

So, the first thing to notice is that the rule DOESN'T say that you can't ever have colors touching colors or metals touching metals. This is often how people interpret the rule, but that is far more restrictive than what it really says.

You can think of arms as being composed of layers: There is the field, there are charges that lie directly on the field, and charges that lie wholly on other charges. It is these *layers* that must have good contrast with each other. For example "Gules, on a pale Or, three roundels azure" has:

Layer 1: Field = gules = color
Layer 2: Pale = Or = metal
Layer 3: Roundels = azure = color

So, in this case, each layer has good contrast with the layer that it lies on.

Now, this rule of thumb works when you're considered single tinctured charges and fields. When you start dividing charges and fields into more than one tincture, then you have to consider *internal* contrast. For example, when your first layer is a field divided per pale, you need to a) check that all the charges in the second layer have good contrast with the first layer, AND b) check that the first layer has adequate contrast with itself. Sub-rules iii, iv, and v above are the relevant ones to determine if a divided charge or field has adequate contrast.

Consider for example "Per pale argent and Or, a fess gules".

Layer 1 = field = per pale argent and Or

You've got a divided field, so check and make sure that it has good contrast before you proceed. According to b.iii, "Elements evenly divided into two parts, per saltire, or quarterly may use any two tinctures or furs." Per pale divides the field evenly into two parts, so it can be comprised of any two tinctures. So, this has fine internal contrast. Furthermore, since both tinctures are metals, the entire field counts as a metal

Layer 2 = fess = gules = color

So, yes, the second layer does have good contrast with the first one.

- [1] You can see pictures of period examples of ermine spots in "Ermine Tails in 14th C English and French Sources" <http://www.s-gabriel.org/heraldry/ermine>
- [2] This is from Sect. 1, chp. 3 (http://www.btinternet.com/~paul.j.grant/guillim/s1/gu_s1c3.htm) of John Guillim's Display of Heraldrie.
- [3] Uckelman, Sara L., "Armorial Patterns from 16th and Early 17th C Cornwall" <http://www.ellipsis.cx/~liana/arms/cornwallarms.html>
- [4] While 'erm.' usually abbreviates 'ermine' in this source, in this case, it abbreviates 'ermine's', e.g. 'counterermine', per another source.