Eugène Delacroix and Color: Practice, Theory, and Legend

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Eugène Delacroix, the foremost master of French Romantic painting, earned a reputation as the great colorist of the mid-nineteenth century. In the history of Western art there have been different styles of coloring in different times and geographical locations. Among these styles Delacroix's color marks an historical watershed. He began as the heir to Rubens and Géricault and ended as the progenitor of Van Gogh and Signac. As a colorist Delacroix is most often linked with the artists of the two generations following him, famous as the great master who exploited the science of color in the art of painting.

This acclaim is puzzling. Knowledge of the science of color and of late nineteenth-century painting styles would lead one to expect in Delacroix's painting a prodigious use of spectral hues and frequent pairings of complementary colors. However, these elements of style are not outstanding in Delacroix's color, especially not in his early and well-known Salon works. Even in his last significant easel painting, *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains* (Figure 1 and cover) he used a palette of close, subtle harmonies among modified earth tones. Unfortunately, Delacroix's fame as a "scientific" colorist diverts attention from fundamental elements of his coloring—his transformation of *chiaroscuro* painting and his technical procedure. Interestingly enough, the seeds of this critical appraisal were planted in Delacroix's own lifetime.

A misleading critical evaluation of Delacroix's color began in the 1860s and gained momentum in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Art critics of mid-century such as Charles Blanc and Théophile Silvestre believed that an artist's coloring could be controlled successfully if he or she understood the physical and optical properties of color. These properties had recently been defined according to findings from the scientific community. Both critics, seeking to link science and art, wrote that Delacroix had calculated his coloring according to principles which paralleled laws formulated by the French chemist Michel Chevreul and published in his book of 1839, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs.*[1]

Chevreul had discovered and empirically verified many predictable optical modifications that occurred when colors were viewed simultaneously. The principles which he formulated could serve as practical aids to the artist in painting and in analyzing color effects seen in nature. With regard to art theory, Chevreul's discoveries were relevant to the concept of harmony through color contrast. Chevreul defined maximum hue contrast as the contrast of complementary colors. Based on his experiments with the optical effects of complementarity, Chevreul confirmed the theory that strong contrasts of such colors as well as close similarity of broken, or mixed, colors produced pleasing harmony.[2] The concept of harmony through contrast superseded the prevalent eighteenth-century view that color harmony was born exclusively through arrangements of similar, analogous colors. In that century complementary colors were considered antipathetic and were avoided in the interest of a harmonious ensemble of tones.[3]

Notwithstanding their great practical worth and theoretical import the laws of color interaction and color harmony had a limited range of application in the practice of painting in mid-nineteenth century France where color itself played a relatively minor role. At the time, though, the very existence of "laws of color" was greeted with great enthusiasm. For over a century the French academy had maintained that, even though there was a firm curriculum for drawing, rules governing color were impossible to objectify and to teach.[4] It is not surprising that Charles Blanc, a former Minister of Fine Arts, affirmed the greatness of Delacroix's coloring by contending that the "laws of color" (which, he said, Delacroix had grasped intuitively) were effectively at work in the paintings. In a very influential essay of 1864 Blanc exaggerated the degree to which the exploitation of spectral hues and complementary pairings of color figured in Delacroix's coloring.[5] Blanc implied that the systemization of color he thought he saw in Delacroix's paintings signified a fundamental object of the artist's interest and study. Although this was an interest of Delacroix's, it did not deserve the emphasis Blanc gave it.

Blanc was one of the first of many writers to have overstated the case for Delacroix as a scientific colorist.[6] In Delacroix's writings there are notations which parallel observations made by Chevreul and Goethe, but Delacroix's interest in the science of color is intermittent rather than central.[7] His journal, which was published in 1893-1895 and therefore unavailable to Blanc and Silvestre, reveals a sustained interest in artistic issues concerning color, mostly focused on the problem of how to increase the role and vigor of color in the medium of oil. Preliminary to concerning himself with a scientific system of color Delacroix altered the practical norms of *chiaroscuro* painting to make color an essential element in the structure of a painting.

Color was considered to be of minor importance in French academic theory of the early nineteenth century. Students of French art are familiar with the long-lived quarrel between those who favored the effect of drawing and those who favored the effect of color in painting. Within that quarrel there was a less well-known but important conflict between color, that is chroma, and *chiaroscuro (clair-obscur),* that is light and dark, or value. In French terminology color was categorized as a half-tint *(demi-teinte)* because its value was between the extremes of dark and light. The conflict between color and *chiaroscuro* became more defined in art criticism as the nineteenth century wore on.[8]

Chiaroscuro, which is pictorial combinations of light and dark, was a fundamental category of French academic theory. *Chiaroscuro* expressed sculptural relief of forms, and it was a means by which a picture's composition was

organized. Regardless of subject matter or motif, the artifice of the composition in light and dark produced the expressive effect (*éffet*), which captured attention and which activated interest and thought. During the first half of the nineteenth century the *éffet* of color was considered greatly inferior to the *éffet* of the *chiaroscuro* in the ensemble of a painting.[9] An early academic treatise put it thus:

> It is chiefly to combinations of light and dark that the effect owes it energy, sweetness and charm: . . . Colour of course produces an effect of its own but is optically subordinate to those obtained by masses of light and dark, half-lights and half-darks.[10]

An ideal formula for the ensemble of the *chiaroscuro* was codified by the French. According to the formula, the ensemble of a painting was to be unified by presenting no more than one dominant light mass and one dominant dark to which all other values were relatively subordinated.[11] The eighteenth-century diagram in Figure 2 illustrates formulae for *chiaroscuro*, and the existence of such a diagram demonstrates the degree to which light had been rationalized for the purposes of painting.

Delacroix's opinion about color in painting differed from the opinions of most of his academic contemporaries and predecessors. He advocated a kind of painting in which color would not be "optically subordinate" to the value composition of the *chiaroscuro*. Analyzing the constituent effects of a painting, Delacroix equated the *éffet* of color with the *éffet* of *chiaroscuro*. He wrote:

> Painters who are not colorists produce illumination and not painting. All painting worthy of the name . . . must include the idea of color as one of its necessary supports, in the same way that it includes chiaroscuro and proportion and perspective.[12]

Delacroix felt the artifice of *chiaroscuro* was poorly suited to expressing the appearance of color seen in natural daylight which, to his sensibility, was what painting required to give the "appearance of life."[13] As Lee Johnson has observed, the fantastic and sometimes supernatural nature of Delacroix's subjects may prohibit our noticing the naturalism of his color, yet the goal of natural-looking color was a constant preoccupation which guided the development to his mature style.[14] Delacroix analyzed color in nature and used the terminology of painting to record his observations. The following succinctly describes his ideal for painted form: "Speaking radically, there are neither lights nor shades. There is a color mass for each object, having different reflections on all sides."[15] In his later works Delacroix came close to embodying that radical ideal, but in his early Salon paintings one can see that the ideal and the technique to achieve it were still inchoate.

In the *Death of Sardanapalus* of 1827 (Figure 3), for example, Delacroix tried to imitate in oils the bright color effects of pastels, a medium of strong chromatic intensity. The work was inspired by Lord Byron's drama about the King of Ninevah who destroyed his harem, his possessions, and himself rather than submit to his conquerors. Delacroix experimented with a technique which he hoped would allow him to translate the coloristic effects and appearance of pastel, which he had worked out in pastel studies, onto the canvas of a giant Salon painting. Delacroix's idea was to recreate the blond tonality of pastel by laying in the underpainting *(ébauche)* with a substance called distemper.[16] Distemper is a mixture of powdered pigment, water and size which has a bright, mat surface when dry. On top of this distemper underpainting Delacroix applied the cacophony of hot-toned pigments and glazes which supported the painting's theme of cruelty and passion. The technique was largely a failure, however, because in most areas the oils and glazes obscured the brightness and mat surface of the distemper. Only in a few places was the coloristic quality of the pastels sustained in oil.[17] To make matters worse the distemper formula caused an unusually rapid deterioration of the canvas.[18]

A bit later in his career Delacroix discovered a successful way to translate into oils the brightening effects of distemper and similar substances. His technique involved an adaptation of value range and simplification of modeling used in the underpainting in oils. The discovery came through Delacroix's study of the Venetian master, Paul Veronese.

Veronese's painting, especially the *Wedding of Cana* in the Louvre, was a model for Delacroix because Veronese's local color was not obscured by strong *chiaroscuro*. Veronese's *chiaroscuro* was attenuated because he used a limited range of values. This was the middle to light segment of the complete scale of values from deepest dark to highest light. In Charles Dempsey's words, "Veronese painted from the light *(chiaro)* range of the tonal scale, avoiding the dark *(scuro)* range."[19] Instead of washed-out highlights and dark, colorless shadows, Veronese's forms had light areas of blond local color and showed local color even in the shadows. Delacroix admired the naturalism of color which resulted from Veronese's use of limited value contrast. He realized that by using limited value contrast of half-tints, he could model forms adequately and approximate natural appearances.[20] He wrote in a letter that because of his principles of tonality, Veronese was "possibly the only painter to have grasped the whole secret of nature."[21]

In mature works Delacroix applied Veronese's principles to his own technique by using half-tints for the underpainting: this was a barely modeled *grisaille* in low value contrast over which the local color was brushed.[22] Preparation in half-tints was a new kind of *ébauche*. In conventional academic practice, the *ébauche* in earth tones served the artist by setting the placement and gradation of values between deepest dark and highest light. There, masses of light and dark would be painted first and then these opposing values were linked by a series of at least six half-tints between each opposition.[23] Implicit in the conventional procedure was the minor importance of color because its effect was mitigated by the value gradations required to bridge a long scale of tones from dark brown or black to white. On the other hand, Delacroix's preparation was broadly modeled, worked only until the form "turned," and served as what he called the "bed" of color.[24] Having color as a preparation assured Delacroix a great deal of freedom to improvise in touch and in color in the next phase of painting.

Establishing the local "color mass" in the preparation, Delacroix would proceed to paint the "reflections on all sides," which harmonized color. According to French academic tradition various colors in an ensemble were harmonized by blending pigments of adjacent local colors. This artifice was supposed to produce an equivalent to the effect of reflected light which causes color exchanges among neighboring objects.[25] In contrast, Delacroix unified the colors in an ensemble by using touches of unblended color. He modified his local colors with these touches, and

thereby gave visible expression to the variety and nuance of color seen in the atmospheric unity of natural daylight.[26]

Delacroix's first attempt to do this on a large scale occurred in 1824.[27] He reworked the color in his Salon piece that season, the *Massacre of Chios* (Figure 4), in response to his learning about the technique of the English landscape painter, John Constable. Constable has used sketchy strokes of unblended color, called *flochetage* by the French, to enliven the greens of his meadows and to render the sparkling effects of sunlight. In the foreground of the *Massacre of Chios*, a painting which commemorated a very dark event in the abortive struggle of the Greeks against the Turks, Delacroix peppered figures and landscape with touches of orange, pink, green, and blue. For example, there are touches of spectral color applied over the smoothly-modeled shadow of the old woman's arm.[28] The color additions were literally superficial because they had been applied on top of a carefully-modeled, finished painting. Later in his career Delacroix was able to exploit successfully the technique by applying his touches of color on top of his simplified underpainting.

Delacroix's *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains* of 1863 exemplifies the two aspects of his mature technique that have been discussed. The coloring of the sandy landscape is an excellent example of the use of unblended color. Its local tone is composed of visibly distinct touches of a gray, two yellow, and three green tones worked on top of a gray underpainting. These multiple tones are used to vary the color across the surface. In some areas it is more green, in others more gray, and so on. The multiple tones harmonize the landscape color with the colors of the figures, the foliage, and the azure sky. For example, the left-hand figure in yellow was massed in using one of the yellows which appears in the landscape, and two of the other yellow tones with which the figure was painted are identical to tones found among the colors of the sand. Similarly, the color of the sky and the color of some of the plants relate closely to the blue-green tone that is woven throughout the landscape turf. Local colors of adjacent figures are likewise harmonized with strokes of color superimposed on a different tone beneath. For example, touches of ochre and vermillion tints were applied on the sienna tones of the horse in order to harmonize that form with the colors around it.

Reduced value contrast is obvious in figures in the background where forms were not developed much past the state of the lay-in. Where there is accentuated value contrast, for example between the lights and shadows of a white form, the darkest colors were clearly applied as accents in a late state of the painting. Reduced value contrast allows the local color to appear in the highlights as well as in the shadows. For instance, the lightest value of the tones that comprise a mustard-colored tunic is painted with an almost pure Naples yellow; the highlight of a red sleeve is a pure vermillion. Shadows of these forms are brown-yellow and brown-red respectively. With the exception of the shadow beneath the falling horse, black appears as a local color and not as the absence of light. Where white is the local color one can see how the ivory-gray half-tone of the lay-in helps stabilize the form as a solid mass because it shows through the myriad blue-grays, rose-grays, purple-grays and ivory tones which bathe the form in reflected light and color.

Whereas his Salon painting of the 1820s allowed Delacroix to experiment in techniques, the nature of his commissions from 1833 to 1861 necessitated a reliable and efficient procedure. Throughout these decades he decorated the walls and ceilings of many public interiors with mythological, allegorical, and religious murals.[29] For these projects labor was divided between Delacroix and his assistants, the latter laying in the painting using set palettes mixed according to the master's recipes.

The use of a set palette *per se* is certainly not unusual. However, Delacroix's palettes were extraordinary for the number of tones found there. Delacroix's palette for the ceiling of the Gallery of Apollo at the Louvre, for example, was composed of twenty-eight pure and twenty-six blended colors for a remarkable total of fifty-four tones which he orchestrated to achieve the complex nuances of his color.[30]

According to his assistants Delacroix spent weeks composing his palettes. He would hang strips of painted canvas on the wall of his studio to consider the ensemble of tones.[31] In his journal he included page after page of color lists which read like ritual incantation.[32] These set palettes are called Delacroix's synthetic palettes because they were more or less dreamed up rather than composed to match natural appearances.

The composition of Delacroix's synthetic palettes is the most artificial aspect of his coloring. Unlike Impressionist palettes which aimed to match tonal relations in nature, Delacroix's palettes were composed according to the artist's sensibility and according to the requirements of a method carefully calculated to render into oil painting color effects analogous to natural color effects. It was the invention and application of his personal method and not simply the application of the science of chromatic color that made Delacroix the great colorist that he was.

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1 C. Blanc, "Eugène Delacroix," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1ère sér., 1864, 106-110; T. Silvestre, *Eugène Delacroix, Documents nouveaux*, Paris, 1864, 16-17.

2 M. Chevreul, *The Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Color* (1st ed. 1839), 3rd. ed., trans. Charles Martel, London, 1883, 62ff.

3 De Piles, 337; F.M. Marsy, *Dictionnaire abrégé de peinture et d'architecture*, 2 vols., 1:301; Diderot, 47. Mérimée summarized these ideas, J.F.L. Mérimée, *The Art of Painting in Oil and Fresco* (1st ed. 1830), trans. W.B.S. Taylor, London, 1839, 259.

4 De Piles, 341; Diderot, 44 and 47. Blanc revealed the opposite attitude when he wrote, "Not only can color, which is under fixed laws, be taught like music, but it is easier to learn than drawing, whose absolute principles cannot be taught." C. Blanc, *The Grammar of Painting and Engraving* (1st ed. 1867), trans. K. N. Doggett, New York, 1874, 146.

5 Blanc (as in n. 1), 108-113. See also Johnson, 69. Van Gogh read Blanc's essay, and was so impressed with it that he copied portions of it, and continued to quote from it for the rest of his life. V. Van Gogh, *The Complete Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, 3 vols., Greenwich, Conn., 1953, letters 370, 401, 430.

6 Outstanding at the turn of the century was P. Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au Néo-impressionnisme,* Paris, 1899. Connections between Delacroix's "science" and symbolism were suggested in E. Bernard, "Les palettes d'Eugène Delacroix et sa recherche de l'absolu de coloris," *Mercure de France,* Feb. 1, 1910.

7 For a summary of these parallels see F. Trapp, *The Attainment of Delacroix,* Baltimore, 1971, 329 and 330-334.

8 R. Shiff, "Impressionist Criticism, Impressionist Color, and Cézanne," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1973, 74ff.

9 Boime, 29.

10 P. de Montabert, *Traité complèt de la peinture,* 9 vols., Paris, 1829, 1:153, cited in Boime, 29, note 29.

11 Shiff (as in n. 8), 76-77.

12 Delacroix, 263.

13 *Ibid.,* 263, see also G. Mras, *Eugène Delacroix's Theory of Art,* Princeton, 1966, 121-123.

14 Johnson, 80.

15 Delacroix, 268.

16 Piot, 75-76.

17 For a comparison between the pastels and the painting see Johnson, 37 and pls. 15-16.

18 Piot, 76; L. Johnson, *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix 1816-1831,* 2 vols., Oxford, 1981, 1:121.

19 C. Dempsey, *Annibale Carracci and the Beginnings of the Baroque Style,* Glückstadt, 1977, 22.

20 Delacroix, 170.

21 E. Delacroix, *Eugène Delacroix, Selected Letters 1816-1863,* ed. and trans. J. Stewart, New York, 1971, 354.

22 Delacroix, 268 and 381; L. de Planet, *Souvenirs de travaux de peinture avec M. Eugène Delacroix,* Paris, 1929, 24-25. The same method of preparation is given in a treatise approved by Delacroix, M. Cavé, *Color: The Cavé Method of Drawing for Students, Second Part* (1st ed. 1851), trans. M. Cavé, New York, 1869, 51-53 and 101-102.

23 The full procedure is given in Boime, 36-41.

24 Delacroix, 247; Piot, 87-88.

25 See, for example, de Piles, 354; A.J. Pernety, *Dictionnaire portatif de peinture, sculpture et gravure* (1st ed. 1757), Geneva, 1972, 107; Diderot, 45. The 18th-century theory mentioned above that complementary colors were antipathetic resulted from mixing to harmonize. Complementary colors would not share color when mixed; rather, they would neutralize each other.

26 Delacroix, 558.

27 Johnson (as in n. 18), 89-90.

28 Johnson, 25.

29 M. Sérullaz, *Les peintures murales de Delacroix,* Paris, 1963.

30 Piot, "Galerie d'Apollon."

31 *Ibid.,* 2.

32 For example, see E. Delacroix, *Journal de Eugène Delacroix,* 3 vols., ed. A. Joubin, Paris, 1932, 1:431.

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Piot, R., *Les palettes de Delacroix,* Paris, 1931.

Fig. 1, Delacroix, *Arabs Skirmishing in the Mountains,* National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Fund. (Color reproduction, cover.)

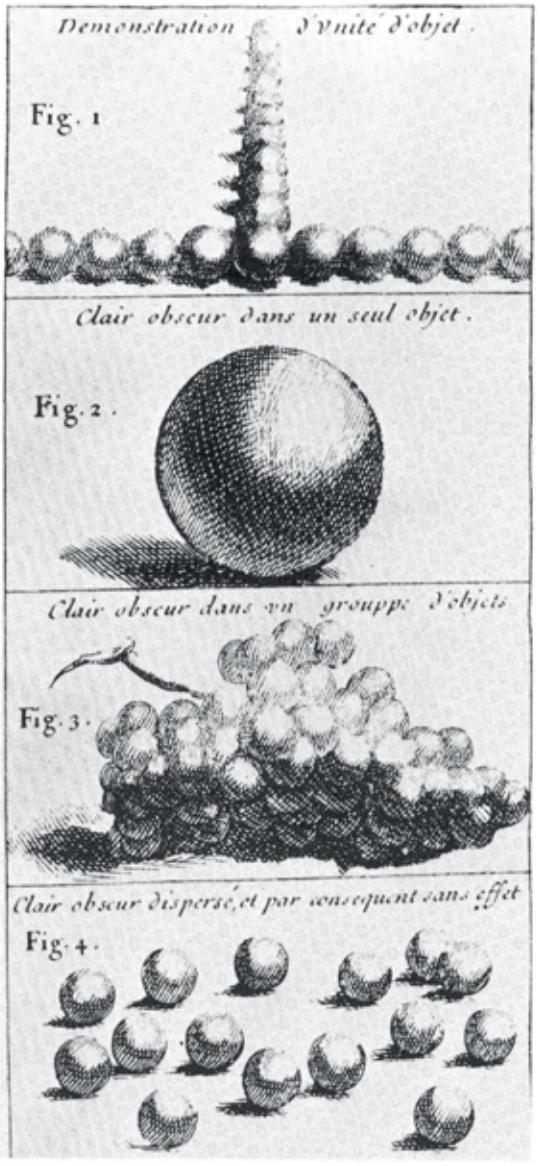

Fig. 2, *Clair-obscur* (from de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes,* 382).

Fig. 3, Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus,* Louvre, Cliché des Musées Nationaux-Paris.

Fig. 4, Delacroix, *Massacre of Chios,* Louvre, Cliché des Musées Nationaux-Paris.