



XIII. A dissertation on painting in oil in a manner similar to that practised in the ancient Venetian School

Mr. Timothy Sheldrake

To cite this article: Mr. Timothy Sheldrake (1798) XIII. A dissertation on painting in oil in a manner similar to that practised in the ancient Venetian School , Philosophical Magazine Series 1, 2:7, 302-312, DOI: [10.1080/14786449808676923](https://doi.org/10.1080/14786449808676923)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14786449808676923>



Published online: 18 May 2009.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View related articles [↗](#)

XIII. *A Dissertation on Painting in Oil in a Manner similar to that practised in the Ancient Venetian School. By Mr. TIMOTHY SHELDRAKE*. From Transactions of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Vol. XVI. 1798.*

THE method of painting practised in the Venetian School, I conceive to have been as follows :

The cloth was primed with colours in distemper, of a brownish hue, such as would properly enter into the darkest parts of the picture. The most transparent colours are the properest. I believe umber was most generally used, broken with red, yellow, or blue, according to the tint intended to be produced, and diluted with chalk or whiting to the proper degree of strength. Upon the ground so prepared the subject was correctly drawn with umber, pure, or mixed with lake, blue, or black; and, with the same colours, those shadows that were darker than the ground were then painted in.

The artist then painted the lights with *pure white*, in a solid body, where the light was brightest, or where the full effect of colour was to be produced; and, where the demi-tints were afterwards to be, scumbling it thinner by degrees, till it united with the shadows.

In this manner the *chiaro-oscuro* was finished as much as possible, and the local colour of every object in the picture glazed over it. All the colours used in this part of the work were ground in oil, which was absorbed into the ground, the picture remaining flat, something like a picture in water colours or crayons; it was then varnished, till saturated with varnish, and the full of every colour brought out: the picture was then complete.

* The Great Silver Pallet was voted to Mr. Sheldrake for this ingenious performance.

Upon

Upon the most superficial view of this process, it will be evident that a picture painted by it is, as to all visible properties, a varnish picture; for the small quantity of oil that had been used, sunk into the ground, and never could rise again to be hurtful; while the varnish, being laid on after the colours, gave them all the brilliancy and durability they could derive from that vehicle, without being liable to the objections that are made to painting in varnish, supposing it to be used in the same manner as oil is in painting with oil. It is true that this mode of painting is itself liable to some objections: these I have endeavoured to obviate, and shall therefore mention hereafter. Here it may be observed that, as any varnish may be used, it is to this circumstance we must attribute the different degrees of durability in pictures of the Venetian School. I have seen some that would resist the most powerful solvents, while others were destroyed by the weakest; though all possessed the apparent properties that distinguish the Venetian pictures from all others.

As I do not pretend to degrade painting to the rank of a mechanical art, that may be infallibly practised by a receipt, I shall be permitted to observe, that this was the general system of the Venetian School, which I have seen variously modified in the works of different artists of that, as well as of the Flemish, which is derived from it. It is susceptible of an almost infinite number of modifications, in proportion to the talents, the judgment of, and the objects to be painted by, the artists who may adopt it. This being the case, if it is proved by experiment that effects similar to those of the Venetian pictures may be produced by this method, and that the system has a strong tendency to produce that brilliancy, and harmony of colouring that is so much admired, with more certainty and facility than those qualities can be obtained by any other mode of painting, I hope my case will be proved to the satisfaction of the Society.

I once asked Sir Joshua Reynolds, by what circumstances in the management of a picture he thought the harmony of colouring

colouring was to be produced ? He replied, An unity of light and an unity of shadow should pervade the whole. He explained to me the difficulty of reducing the various colours of all the objects that may be included in a picture, and the various modifications of those colours to the simple, harmonious state he described, and illustrated what he had said by this simile. " A picture, to possess harmony of colouring, should look as if it was painted with one colour (suppose umber and white), and, when the chiaro-oscuro was complete, the colour of each object should be glazed over it."

This observation, from such authority, was impressed with peculiar force on my mind ; and if I can retrace its operations on a subject which has so long engaged my attention, I should say Sir Joshua's observation was the clue that guided me through all my experiments, and, I hope, will enable me to prove, that the beautiful and simple practice which he suggested as a simile, was literally the practice of that school upon whose works his ideas of colouring were founded. At the same time I may observe, that the fact seems to have eluded his observation, or he would not have used it as a comparison to simplify his description of a practice which he thought both difficult and complex.

In the Newtonian doctrine of light and colours, it is believed that all colours are inherent in light, and are rendered visible by the action of various bodies, which reflect particular rays, and absorb the rest. Without disputing the truth of this doctrine, it is to be observed, that a painter must consider the objects he represents as being analogous to the materials he uses to represent them ; and, in this view of the subject, colour is to be considered as a property inherent in bodies, which is rendered visible by the contact of light, a colourless, or at least a mono-coloured substance, and shadow the mere privation of light.

A picture may represent either a group of figures, or other objects, in a room, or any objects in the open air : whatever the situation may be, it represents certain objects in a given space,

space, possessing individually their peculiar colours, and generally exposed to the operations of light. The quantity of light each can receive must depend upon its form, and its position respecting that part whence the light comes ; for, in proportion as other parts recede from the light, the shadow becomes visible : but shadow is nothing but privation of light, and privation of colour, in proportion as the light is diminished. Some attention to these circumstances will, perhaps, enable us to demonstrate the truth of Sir Joshua's position.

If a globe of one colour be exposed in a painter's room, properly darkened, that part which is nearest the light will partake of its colour; the next part will show the true colour of the object ; that which first recedes from the light will be a little obscured, the next a little more, and so on progressively, till that part which is furthest from the light will lose its colour, and appear equally dark with the shadiest part of the room. Now we know this globe is of one uniform colour ; the variations we see in different parts of it are only deceptions, occasioned by the accession of light in some parts, and the privation of it in others.

What is true of this one object and its parts, would be equally true of any number of objects, whatever their colours or relative situations might be : if they were placed together in the same room, each would possess its own individual colour, each would partake of the general light, in proportion to its situation, and of the general darkness in proportion as it recedes from the light. All this may be easily conceived ; but the difficulty, and in the ordinary modes of painting a serious one it is, is to represent such objects with the appearance of truth, and preserve the harmony necessary to constitute a whole. The Venetian painters however, by whatever means they obtained their knowledge, discovered a method so simple, that perhaps no other can produce such brilliant effects, and undoubtedly not with facility and certainty at all comparable with theirs.

The artist will remark that, in describing the whole of the Venetian method of painting, I have said nothing of the manner of producing those demi-tints which conduce so much to the brilliancy of a picture, which are so difficult to execute, and in which he most frequently fails. Those tints are, in the ordinary modes of painting, produced by the mixture of black, gray, blue, or brown (according to the judgment of the artist), with the local colours of the objects. It is these tints which, from their being made with such colours, it is difficult to get clear, and which never are so clear in any other as in the Venetian, and in some of the Flemish pictures, which are painted upon analogous principles. The fact is, that those painters produced all such tints without the admixture of any colour to represent them, and by a method so like that by which they are produced in nature, that this circumstance alone ensures a degree of brightness to their colours, and of harmony to their shadows, that it is perhaps impossible to produce, in an equal degree, by any other mode of painting.

It is a singular fact, which I have not skill in physics to be able to account for, though by numerous experiments I have ascertained beyond contradiction, that if upon any degree of brown, between the deepest and the lightest brown yellow, we paint pure white, in gradations, from the solid body to the lightest tint that can be laid on, *all the tints between the solid white and the ground will appear to be GRAY*, intense in proportion to the depth of the ground, and the thinness of the white laid upon it. But in every case all the tints laid upon one ground will harmonize with each other, and form one connected chain (if I may use the expression), which will perfectly unite the highest light with the darkest shade.

If then we examine the component substances of a Venetian picture, we shall find the lighter parts consist only of white, to represent the light; and of the local colours of the objects it represents, the demi-tints are imitated by an *appearance*

pearance almost as deceptive as the similar appearances in nature : but in every other method of painting, these demitints are produced by mixing some dusky colour with the local colours and the light. The comparison of these methods will afford a demonstrative reason why the Venetian must be brighter than any other mode of painting.

Having shown, as near to a demonstration as the nature of the subject will perhaps admit, why those parts of a Venetian picture that are connected with light and colours are brighter than the corresponding parts of any other pictures, it remains to explain the cause of similar superiority in the darker parts of the same pictures.

It has been said, with much confidence, that as white represents light, so black is the representative of darkness. But though this may be true in physics, it certainly is not so in painting: for the painter's art is to represent objects as they *appear*, in point of colour, to be, not as they really are. Thus, if I know an object is perfectly black, and am to represent it as it appears to be at the distance of fifty feet, black from the pallet will not produce a good imitation of it, because the interposition of fifty feet of the atmosphere will cause it to appear of a colour different from what it really is; and *vice versa* if we go into a cavern, a cellar, or a room, so darkened that the colour of no object can be distinctly seen, and if we there hold any solid black substance near to the eye, the difference will be visible at once; the black object will be immediately distinguished, by its solidity and colour, from the surrounding space, and such remote objects as may be obscurely visible through it. These objects actually possess their individual colours, and only appear indistinctly from the absence of light. The black object may appear solid, and of that colour, from its proximity to the eye; but the circumjacent ones will appear of a colour perfectly distinct from it, more or less transparent, in proportion to their distance from the eye, and showing a portion of their individual colours, according to

the quantity of ill defined light that may be admitted. Thus we see (if I may venture to mention so notorious a truism), that shadows are nothing real; they only seem to exist in the absence of light, and give to objects an ill-defined appearance, distinct from, though in some instances mixed with, light and colours in different degrees: but as the painter must represent this *appearance* by something *real*, he chooses the colours most analogous, viz. browns, and the most transparent of their class, to represent this transparent, but imperfectly defined appearance in nature.

It has been supposed that the Venetian painters had some peculiarly rich and transparent brown colour, which is seen to pervade all the works of that school; the effect of which no modern artist has been able to imitate, and which therefore is supposed to have been lost. It is not very probable that a colour so common, as to pervade the works of the worst as well as of the best artists of that school, should be so unaccountably lost; and, as the effect attributed to it may be easily produced by the mode of painting I have described, it is not unreasonable to conclude that this much-lamented colour has never existed.

It is well known that chalk, and other earths of the same kind, lose, when wetted, much of their whiteness, and become semi-transparent: it is equally certain, that if umber or other earths are mixed with chalk, and saturated with varnish after they are laid in the cloth, they in like manner become diaphanous, and are infinitely more brilliant than the same colours can be when mixed with white lead and oil. This seems, on good grounds, to have been the basis of the Venetian method of painting, and all its peculiar effects; at least if I may draw any conclusion from the numerous experiments I have made. But if artists, whose talents will enable them to repeat those experiments to the best advantage, should be induced to do so, the fact will be determined in the most satisfactory manner.

I may

I may now be permitted to say, it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive a theory more simple, more beautiful, or more true, than that of Sir Joshua Reynolds. It is certainly impossible to form a practice more simple, or more conformable to that theory, than the one I have described, as will be evident on recapitulating the particulars.

The artist, having determined what hue should pervade his picture, formed his ground with that colour prepared in distemper: upon this the subject was drawn, and the darker shades painted in with transparent colours, which sunk into the ground: with pure white he then painted in all the lights and demi-tints, and, lastly, glazed in the colours, each in its place. Upon applying the varnish, the darker shades were, as to body, incorporated with the ground; and thus, though different in colour, appeared thinner and more transparent than any colours could be when laid upon any ground: the full effect of every colour was brought out, and the picture was complete.

Whoever has been accustomed to paint, or to mark the progress of painting in the common way, and will reflect on the practice of the method I have described, by artists who had been brought up to it, must see that such artists would paint with a degree of facility, expedition, and certainty, as to effect, that could never be equalled in the ordinary way of painting in oil: besides, it will be evident that an artist would not only paint a picture himself with more facility, but, if he had occasion, could employ a number of subordinate artists upon large works, and put those works out of hand with more uniformity, as to merit and effect, than if he were to employ such assistants in similar works if they were to be painted in the common way.

I am sensible how little attention will, and perhaps ought to be paid to observations on painting, if made by those who are not professionally artists: for practical men acquire a kind of knowledge that can never be obtained in any other way; but at the same time they contract prejudices that

often prevent them from fully investigating any novelty in practice that may be offered to their notice. The speculative man, on the contrary, who investigates the properties of matter, unshackled by practical prejudices, and with ideas purely chemical or philosophical, will be more likely to ascertain all the facts relative to any theory that may become the object of inquiry. In this way I hope I have proceeded in this investigation. I have endeavoured to consider pictures as masses of matter, possessing the properties, but differing from each other in degree of brilliancy, transparency, and duration. I have endeavoured to ascertain the causes of this difference, with what success the Society will determine, and with what utility must be hereafter ascertained by the practice of those for whose use the investigation was intended.

I ought, perhaps, here to take leave of the subject; but as I have been induced to submit to the Society's notice an attempt at painting, it may be expected that I should give an account of the manner in which the pictures I have sent were painted.

I have already mentioned, that there are some difficulties in the method of painting I have described, as being that of the old artists, and which would form objections of considerable force to the practice of it by artists who are well acquainted with the usual modes of painting: these difficulties are, first, the ground absorbs the oil from the colours so fast, that they are not so manageable as in oil-painting; secondly, the effect of the picture is not seen till the finishing varnish is laid on; and thirdly, as the effect is not seen till the picture is finished, it will sometimes disappoint the artist, and in that case it will be difficult, if at all practicable, to alter it.

As I believe the process I have described in the beginning of this paper is similar to that of Miss Provis, the artists who are acquainted with her recipe can ascertain whether my conjectures on this subject are right or not. I am certain

at

at least that these difficulties occurred in my attempts to paint, and to obviate them I adopted the following process.

I prepared the ground in distemper, and painted the dark parts in the way I have described; I then varnished the ground with the copal oil-varnish, till it was fully saturated, and by this means the full effect of that part of the picture was seen: upon this I painted the lighter parts with white, using much of the vehicle where the colour was thin, and little in the solid parts, leaving the white in them dead: by this means I understood the effect of my *chiaro-oscuro*, as I saw the effect of the demi-tints nearly as well as when the picture was finished.

Upon this I glazed the colours in the way I have described in the beginning of this paper, and finished the picture. I often found (probably from want of practice) that the effect was different from what I intended, as the effect of the colours, added to that of the *chiaro-oscuro*, produced an essential alteration in the whole: as I took care in general that the defect did not arise from too much white, I added more where it was deficient, and glazed fresh colours over it, which united perfectly with what had been done before, and did not give the appearance of a mended picture. If the defect was from too much white, I glazed on it a colour similar to that of the ground, painted with fresh white upon that, and glazed the proper colours over it. In this way I found I could alter the picture, but not so well as in the former case.

I found I could, when necessary, increase the effect of the picture, by painting on the principal mass or masses of light with the local colours, only mixed with white; as this practice brought those parts more forward, by making them appear solid, and thus contrasting them with the transparency of the rest of the picture. In this way I found I could use the colours tempered with copal varnish without difficulty; and I believe, that if I had been accustomed to paint large

pictures, I could have painted one as large as life, as easily as either of those I have submitted to the Society's inspection.

XIV. *Some Account of the Travels of the two French Naturalists BRUGUIERE and OLIVIER. From La Decade Philosophique, No. VII. 1798.*

IN the year 1793, during the ministry of Roland, Citizens Bruguiere and Olivier, the first known by a work upon shells and researches respecting microscopic animals, and the second by a history of insects, were sent at the expense of government to the eastern parts of Asia. They were to traverse the Archipelago, Greece, Turkey, Persia, &c. for the purpose of making discoveries in natural history, and of collecting facts and observations respecting that science. Their mission extended to the arts and the sciences in general; and they were instructed to procure every information they could in regard to the agriculture and political economy of the countries through which they might travel. Soon after their departure, however, by the unsettled state of the French government, they were left destitute of its assistance; but their love for natural history supported them under this misfortune. They continued their journey, made valuable collections while traversing deserts and mountains, studied the manners of the people, and endeavoured as far as lay in their power to gratify the wishes of naturalists, and of those fond of the arts and sciences. After five years labour they were at length on their return home, and had happily arrived at Ancona, when C. Bruguiere was snatched by death from his friends and the rewards which awaited him in France. This loss is announced by C. Olivier to C. Thouin, professor at the museum of natural history, in the following letter, which contains also some details respecting the success of a tour which must be interesting to the public.

Genoa,