

Reflections on the Method of Studying Color by Comparing Objects with Each Other

Jean-Baptiste Oudry



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Gentlemen,

I believe you know me well enough to see that my attempt to explain a few principles here is not intended as an attack against colleagues who might have a different opinion on the subject. I don't have the slightest intention of lecturing these colleagues. You know that I have always respected our teachers' brilliance and talent. I might also add, quite frankly, that when I decided to set these reflections down on paper I never planned on presenting them to you. Writing them out was merely to arrange them in my mind for my son's education.ⁱ However, since we all have an obligation, each according to his own talent, to contribute to the education of our young students—the reason why you gather them here in our assemblies—I thought I should apply myself completely to this endeavor.

I'd like to point out to you that what I have to say is intended just for them. Should you judge after reading this lecture that they might possibly derive some benefit from it, then that would fulfill all of my expectations. I would not presume on my part to have any other expectation. Since I am not used to writing, I just wrote down my thoughts all at once as they came to me. I didn't have an expertly thought-out plan; I simply did the best I could. With respect to the language used, I spent very little time laboring over it. I think you'll notice that right away. Gentlemen, the same good faith that leads me to point out the faults you may find in this lecture also compels me to tell you of the worthwhile things you may find in it—fundamental principles and everything related to them. If I may speak freely, I think these things are worth your taking a look at. The principles I'm going to share with you are not mine. I actually learned them from my dear teacherⁱⁱ whose memory I will cherish until my last breath. Gentlemen, you know who this is. You're also familiar with the admirable maxims he created regarding the wonderful effects and magic of our art. He would always communicate them to me with a genuine, paternal love. I assure you that it is with great pleasure, as an honest man who loves his art or as youth hoping to succeed in painting, that I, in turn, share them with you today.

Mr. de Largillière used to tell me time and time again that he was particularly indebted to



the Flemish school where he had once been a student. He had learned their beautiful maxims and applied them effectively in his work. He said these maxims would greatly benefit our work here and would often reveal his disappointment to me when he saw just how little we used them.

It's possible that he was a little too biased in favor of that nurturing source. He never once refrained from showing his affection for that school. He firmly believed they had many advantages that we lacked. He would go as far as to say that even in drawing, their weakness, the Flemish school used principles that were superior to our own. Here is his reasoning:

“What is drawing?” he asked. It's the exact imitation of the object you want to represent. How do you achieve this exact representation? Through the important practice of rendering the line as you see it. If the natural setting or the model is not perfect though, should you imitate all of its flaws? This is where the problems arise. The Flemish school says yes. Our school says no. The French school says you should use taste to supplement the drawing and correct the original's flaws and insipidness. The Flemish school says young artists should accustom themselves to rendering the original exactly as it is. This practice should be followed so exactly that in each academy there, you should be able to recognize the individual model that each drawing is based on. Once they have achieved this, young artists should then use that same exactitude in their study of the antique. This will be much more beneficial than drawing based on their teacher's observations of nature or the antique. Mr. de Largillière was quick to agree with this last point. I would even venture to say that he completely proved the point in his art.

He heaped abundant praise on the good Flemish painters of his time for their diligence in choosing different models. This would ensure, based on the studies, a variety of figures for their paintings. They would select a more delicate model, for example, to make the figure of Apollo, a sturdier and more squared off model for Hercules, and so on and so forth. “How perfect our art would become” he said, “if we were to take these same precautions. Surely they would be very easy to put into practice in a city like Paris.” He thought it a shame that in our school we seek these different qualities all in the same model. We're satisfied with teaching students here that



for the figure of Apollo, all you have to do is make the contours more delicate. The same goes for Hercules. Just make the contours bolder. He believed that you could only achieve this just and true variety, a quality we find so pleasurable in nature, through this kind of approach. This man, who did everything so brilliantly would only use his imagination for forms he had learned long ago, things like draperies and hands. If, however, he had to create a history painting he would be sure to follow the Flemish masters' techniques.

On occasion I would express to him my astonishment that, overall, these gentlemen were very mediocre in their drawing despite this exactitude and their precautions. In response Mr. de Largillière would tell me that it was not so much their fault as their country's, because nature is rarely as beautiful there as it is in Italy. Then, to illustrate his point, he would show me nudes from Rubens and Van Dyck, all drawn from well-proportioned models. Each was tastefully executed without losing that quality of realism conveyed by a perfect imitation of nature.

He praised the masters of that country for not limiting themselves with simply drawing the human figure and leaving the rest. It's true that the human figure should be of primary importance. Yet Mr. de Largillière would suffer at seeing how poorly many of our great masters drew the secondary parts of their compositions. After finishing the figure they would say shamelessly that the rest was undeserving of their talent.

Since in history paintings every visible object in the composition is significant, Mr. de Largillière deemed it necessary that a painter had to know how to draw and paint every object before he could call himself a history painter. "Why not accustom young painters in our schools to draw everything from life as they do in Flanders—landscapes, animals, fruits, and flowers—all of such great variety and beauty? This exercise would give the student a certain facility in everything. It would accustom his eye to the process of imitation and in so doing make it more precise." "If it is true," he added, "that drawing is useful for everything, I would also add that everything is useful for drawing. Since drawing any particular object is difficult, one can only hope to overcome this difficulty and become a skilled artist by drawing everything."

Gentlemen, I'm not going to insist any further on my teacher's thoughts on drawing. I've



brought them to your attention beforehand as a sort of bias. Even seeing them as such I hope that you'll consider them worthy of your attention. Should you find any errors I hope that you'll see them as the errors of a great man.

Yes, he was great, and as you all agree, Gentlemen, he was superior in areas concerning color, chiaroscuroⁱⁱⁱ, execution, and harmony. His ideas on each of these things were so beautiful that they surpass the imagination. They seemed especially clear when he would explain them with such graciousness and kindness. You've never heard anything so exceptionally admirable. I won't refer to him again, unless it's through his ideas. I'll try to remember the best things he said about all these things, but I may not be able to express them as well as he did. In any case I'll attempt it in good faith and as best I can. This is all I can promise. The rest is not up to me. Seeing how hard it is to separate my ideas from his, I'll warn you once more that they are all mixed together. They've been together in my mind for so long, that it's impossible for me to separate them.

Moreover, forty years of assiduous work has given me new knowledge. I'd like to share it with our young people just as I, in turn, have received new knowledge from others. Loving my work as much as I do, I want them to understand these things just as well as I understand them. There is nothing more base in an art such as ours as keeping little secrets from each other and not doing for our successors what our predecessors have done for us.

As I've said before, I'm only speaking about our young students. To remove any doubt, I ask that you find it appropriate for me to address them directly. This is a professor's lecture presented to them in your presence. Feel free, Gentlemen, to do the same with your own lectures. Take note young people of how much there is to gain from listening to me. Listen now. I'm coming to the point.

The use of color is one of the most important aspects of painting. It's the part that characterizes it and sets it apart from sculpture. It gives it its charm and its brilliance. You are advanced enough to know all that. You're also aware that in the use of color two things are important: local color and chiaroscuro. Local color is none other than the color that is naturally



present in each object. Chiaroscuro is the art of distributing the light and dark in such a way as to give the painting its effect. This general understanding of the process, however, is not enough. The main point is to know how to apply the local color correctly and to acquire an understanding of how to give it value with respect to another color. In my estimation this is the greatest part of our art, yet there are far fewer principles to guide it than for any other aspect of painting. By principles I mean only those based on nature because we have plenty of principles based on the works of the old masters. We have plenty of writers who have spoken about this. Is what they say still really reliable? And, if it is reliable, are we doing everything necessary to harvest the fruit that would naturally come out of these valid examples? This is the first problem.

What do you do? Filled as you are with admiration for those we regard as the premiere colorists, you decide to copy them. How do you copy them? Purely, simply and without almost any thought. You put down white where you see white, red where you see red and so on and so forth. You do this in such a way that instead of forming a complete understanding of the master's use of color, you're merely scratching the surface. What would be a better way of going about this? When copying a beautiful painting, you should ask your teacher what the painter's reasons might have been for coloring this or that in such and such a way. This method of active reasoning will help you learn what you've been trying futilely to understand through routine. With each different artist you'll see different reasoning and new principles at work. These will enter your mind and save you from a certain bias in your painting that can last a lifetime. This bias occurs when one decides to follow the example of a single painter and exclude all others. It will invariably lead to the ruination of a young man who might otherwise have succeeded.

In proceeding in the way I describe, something else will occur. When you copy a Titian, for example, you'll be enchanted with its beautiful tones and the beautiful interplay of the tones with respect to the overall effect. However, your teacher will say "Be careful! Don't assume that these tones will have the same value if placed elsewhere. They belong to this composition for specific reasons. Herein lies the painter's great talent. The slightest displacement of this color



would render it false and offensive.” The truth of this reasoning should be readily apparent to you. Painting would be such a narrow, confined art if all it took were an assortment of colors like Titian’s to paint as well as he did.

Your work will become easier if you combine studies from nature with your other work. As soon as a young man begins to paint, provided he has a good foundation in drawing and knows the principles of color reasonably well, he should do the following. After he completes his Titian copy, he should paint from nature and try to make a painting with the same intentions as Titian’s. This will force him to look for the same principles in nature that the great painter followed and depicted so masterfully. Would you not agree that anyone capable of comprehending this connection is on the right path? When I say Titian, I include also a Paolo Veronese, a Giorgione, a Rubens, a Rembrandt, a Van Dyck. In short, these masters are all esteemed for their color.

You wouldn’t believe the progress you’d make by taking this path. You would gain so many advantages over other painters of similar ability just by painting everything from nature in this spirit—that is, with respect to your use of color. Try it as an experiment and I’m sure you’ll thank me for the advice. Here is another piece of advice.

The first thing you should focus on when using the model this way is to determine the correct value that it should have against your painting’s background. This is of primary importance and I’ll try to show you why.

Every object always derives its mass from the background that it’s placed on. When you paint the object on a background lacking in light, meaning a dark-colored one, the form should be kept light. If the background is light, then the object should be darkly colored, or even brown. When your object appears against a dark background, but you give it a light background in your painting, inevitably what happens is that the background shows through in many spots. This also happens when your model is set in reality against a light background, but you paint it over a dark background in your work. Nothing else ruins a painting more than this.

I’d also like to point out that this is not the only time when colors show through. In fact whenever the background colors have the same tone as your object, they’ll do this. The reason



why I'm warning you about this is so that you'll be on your guard and not fall victim to either mistake.

Avoiding these problems, however, is so simple that it's actually quite surprising the mistakes happen at all. The solution lies in choosing an appropriate background against which to study the objects of your painting. If you don't know how to do this, all you need to do is place a canvas that has the same tone as your painting's background behind the objects. For even more precision, match the color of the canvas with the color of your painting's background. Consequently, if I set a figure against a light blue background, my canvas should have that same color as its background. For architecture that is dappled with light, the canvas should have the color of stone; for landscapes, paneled walls, or something heavier, the canvas should be painted with that approximate color. You should also make sure your canvas is turned toward daylight when you're working on a background that is dappled with light. For dark backgrounds, you should do the opposite. Those worthy Flemish masters never failed to take these precautions. In doing this they had the advantage of seeing correctly how the colors worked when placed against each other. They were able to find the correct color value, something that can only be accomplished through comparison study, to the extent that there is no rule or formula that will indicate what the given color should be. Nature alone is the only thing that will lead us from one to the next through comparison and comparison alone.

To better teach you these principles, I'll use an example. Suppose you want to paint a solitary silver vase on your canvas. The general understanding of the color silver is that it is white. To render this metal realistically however, you have to find the exact white and its specific qualities. How do you do this? Here's how. You need to put several kinds of white objects next to your vase – things like linens, paper, satin, or porcelain. These different whites will help you determine the precise tone of white that you need for your silver vase. Through this comparison, you'll know that one object's white will never be another object's white. This will prevent you from using the wrong color and from overusing certain colors. The Flemish painters were the most successful in demonstrating this understanding. We admire and derive such



pleasure from the correctness of tone in their works.

I would not spend so much time on this principle of contrasts if I didn't think you needed it. I see you working every day at the academy. Those among you who possess a certain facility and finish working on your figure earlier than others—either because you've only half done it or you've done it from memory. You use the rest of your time to make the background. How do you go about this? Through a careful examination of the background behind the model? Not at all, but through a capricious arrangement of light and dark. The contrasts created in this random way are almost always incorrect. The contrasts destroy the figure's correct tone and cause the background to show through it in twenty different spots. If you follow the path indicated by the backdrop behind the model, your painting will be reasonable and progress naturally. You'll be able to include as many objects as you want without spoiling the effect of the main object: your figure. On the contrary, these objects will complement your figure in a pleasant and fitting manner. You'll learn how to compose through sound principles that are based on truth and on proven, well-understood natural effects. Any work not based on these principles is flawed and false.

I am fully aware that everything I've told you about contrasts here is applicable only to single objects. Yet, as is the case with almost every painting, there are many—sometimes a great number—of objects. In these situations you might feel that my proposed method isn't feasible. It's true that often I see people working this way, but I ask whether this way is the right way. You paint your object on a background that has yet to be determined because you haven't yet figured out the details of the contrasts. The outcome is clear to anyone with eyes. If you had decided on the background color, you would have definitely painted the object differently. What should one do in such a case? Group as many of the objects together as possible. If you can bring them all together then the effect would be admirable and the comparison of colors would become so sensitive, that once you lay down the first color, the others will effortlessly follow suit.

Please don't think that these principles and painting methods, which have worked so well



in Flemish painting, are not suitable for our French tastes and especially for our historical paintings. Every “taste” should have its source in nature. Understand that the most perfect historical painter is one who consults nature and represents all of its aspects as best he can. The use of correct color can only be learned by painting everything from life. Painters who don’t want to take the trouble to do this are often led astray because realistic and striking effects do not come from the imagination. You have to actually see them with a well-trained eye to render them as they really are. It is only by this faithful imitation of each object that the painter will achieve that rare and seductive quality of truth in his paintings. Accustom yourselves as soon as possible, then, to working from life. It will support your work and provide you with an understanding that you won’t find anywhere else.

I am not limiting this practice to the single human figure. You should apply it to everything. Without this how will you ever be able to make those precise comparisons and choose one color over another? This is the only way you’ll ever become what is considered “a good painter”. Would you become a good painter by using a completely biased practice, one that forces you to look at nature through other people’s eyes? You already know doing this would quickly stop you halfway down the path to achieving that goal. It would be a total waste of your talent. These principles are designed to bring you face to face with nature and to enable you to see it expertly. It is only through seeing nature correctly and studying it completely that you’ll achieve that singular brilliance that distinguishes the superior man from the common man. I say “seeing nature correctly” because unless you continuously examine it through comparison, as I’ve asked you to do, you’ll get nowhere. You know that if you don’t do this you won’t see the object the way it should be seen. You’ll merely subject it to a particular taste by rendering it in a color that would hide its true nature. Consequently, anything you do in this way will seem practiced and artificial. No, every object in your painting, whether it’s the primary or secondary object, must be studied in such a way as to give it the correct color that it alone should have. The tone of this color should be determined by the objects surrounding it. If you don’t follow this technique, you can be sure that you’ll never achieve paintings valued for their color. It would be even worse if you had



others complete the secondary objects in your paintings for you. This kind of assistance is infinitely dangerous. It distances you from this study of comparisons—something you can never get enough of. It also introduces a false element into your work that will not fail to strike the viewer as false, regardless of whether the person chosen to do the filling-in is competent or not. No matter how competent, he will not see nature the same way you do and will not see it as he should see it—by comparing the objects to each other. He sees that your object is already complete and what he sets next to it becomes simply a matter of routine practice. He does his best, but it's not as good as if he had seen the two objects together. This method lacks a certain core understanding of a process which must necessarily originate from the same point. Should the painter you choose be less skilled than you in applying these principles, just imagine what you'd be exposing yourself to, and how many errors he would introduce which disrupt your painting. You've got to start early on and, as my teacher Mr. de Largillière said, do a little bit of everything to avoid this problem. Do it, though, under the watchful eyes of your own teacher, so that your work will be principled. If you proceed in this manner, every single object, no matter how small, will be of infinite benefit to you.

I remember something about this that happened to me when I was with that charming man [de Largillière], that shining example of a teacher, as well as a decent human being. I don't think you'll mind me sharing the experience with you.

He told me one morning that I should occasionally paint flowers. So I immediately went out to find some. I thought I had done a great job of bringing back an assortment of different colored flowers. When he saw them, he said, "I proposed this idea as part of your training in the use of color. Do you think your choice of flowers is suited to the purpose of this exercise?" "Go on," he said "find a bunch of flowers that are all white." I immediately obeyed. When I put them in front of me, he came over to my spot and placed them in front of a light background. He began showing me how on the shadow side against the backdrop, they were very brown. On the light side, they stood out from it in half-tones that for the most part were fairly light. Next he brought the white of from my palette up to the light area of the flowers, which was very white. He showed me that



the white from my palette though was even whiter. He also showed me that in the bunch of white flowers there were far fewer light areas requiring a touch of pure white than areas needing halftones. There were, in fact, very few of these pure white areas. Through him I understood that this was what formed the bouquet's roundness. It was through this principle that all other objects acquire a sense of relief. Thus this roundness effect is produced through broad halftones and not through pristine lights. After this he showed me the strong brown touches in the center of the shadow and the areas where the browns are without reflections. "So few of our painters," he said, "dare to render the effect you see here even though nature is always displaying it to them. Remember that this is one of the main keys to the magic of chiaroscuro. You should also remember to take full advantage of the shadows so that you won't be forced to drown your work in light colors or dilute or overload the shadows with color to make your objects shine. Lastly, as a general rule, never attempt this artifice with thick, impasted color because when this is done on a flat surface, it will only harm the overall effect. There are certain cases when it will not, but these are exceptionally rare."

Having thus instructed me on everything I needed to do, he had me put two or three other white objects on the table to serve as reference points for the correct color and then left. I must admit to you the effect all this had on me: I was beside myself. I immediately set to work, applying the instruction that filled my head to the best of my ability. After finishing my painting, I was quite surprised to see the effect created by these principles. All of my flowers appeared very white, even though pure white was used in very few places. For the most part the flowers were rendered in full, broad halftones. My bouquet in all of its fullness, with its colored (not to say, brown) mass set against its background. The vigorous strokes I used in the shadows gave it striking vividness. Through this example you can see the truth of what I'm saying. Every object in nature, regardless of its size, will give you great insight when you study it carefully through the correct principles. I'm sure that you will not fail to admire the beautiful and magnificent lesson that I received then. What was it about? A simple bouquet of flowers. Your own teachers will provide the same resources. All you have to do is look for them. Demonstrate a desire to learn



and a willingness to do well. If you do this, you will win their hearts and the richness of their knowledge. This goodwill, when we find it in you, fills us with joy and makes up for all the pain that you cause us. It's sad that we should encounter it so rarely!

I've spoken to you about principles of contrast and comparison applicable to a small number of objects grouped together in nature on the same plane. In addition to these principles, we still need to examine the rules concerning objects on different planes that are in opposition to each other and compare them through color and other details. My teacher thought that there were some bad practices concerning this as well.

The first one which he considered flawed was the practice by several masters of his time of finishing their composition without going through the trouble of determining with specific details the distribution of light. This made their process of working out the contrasts somewhat tentative, meaning they would place objects on the canvas, one at a time, against a background that they still hadn't determined. What's more, they would have already decided on the general shapes, but would have held off choosing a background to work on the specific contrasts—a large brown mass in the foreground to serve as a *repoussoir*,^{iv} a light mass in the mid-ground, and a grayish backdrop in the background would finish the affair. Once again, the rest is worked out at the end.

He said, "Even though the light doesn't take effect until after the line or the drawing is formed, you cannot compose properly without first anticipating the effect that it will have on each figure or object. You need to fully consider these objects in your mind and observe them in nature to know which ones should receive light and which should not. When we become accustomed to observing nature carefully in this frame of mind, our imagination will become filled with thousands upon thousands of effects that we otherwise might never have imagined. These will be of use to us when the need arises and we'll apply them as we compose our work. Of course, we'll need to refine them afterwards through a more precise study done before nature. Those who are content with following the flawed routine I just mentioned will err with each step they take. If they do not err, then it's only by pure chance that this blindly-followed routine does



not stray from the true principles.”

“For example, there is nothing more false,” he continued, “than that black form with which painter after painter fills his foreground. Nothing is more contrary to nature. In nature you’ll never see anything that is completely black, even with forms that have no light, or forms that are indented and completely devoid of reflection. Thus, once painters choose to use repoussoir to create this black form to give value to the rest of their works, they begin working against the natural truth. They make this form the same color throughout—chairs, draped cloth, terraces—in short, anything there in the foreground. Next, they paint their mid-ground figures with normal lighting so that, next to the foreground figures, they look like a group of Europeans alongside a group of Moors or Indians. Both sets of figures can only be in shadow if there are solid bodies standing between them and daylight. This lack of light, just as we see daily in nature, never causes the figures to lose their own color. On the sides where there are no reflections, that’s where the colors blend, and you can bring the browns forward as much as you want or as is necessary for the overall effect of the system.”

What pained Mr. de Largillière even more was seeing that well-established painters used these repoussoirs for large compositions of scenes set in the middle of the countryside. In these locations the large shadowy masses could only be caused by clouds. Every day we see this effect in nature, especially in spring or in autumn. Who among us does not recall how different these shadows are from those excessive and evenly toned blacks? Indeed, in those areas of shadow we see nuances and varieties of local color. We see how the masses are separated from areas lit by daylight. There is nothing in them that would force us to smear and darken them as the artists who use the repoussoir have done.

This is not to say that you cannot occasionally do this when it is specifically called for—when the background is like this in nature—just as it is with other effects. In using it, however, you need to study it with exactitude. This practice will teach a painter who had previously only used this effect with the same uniform black, that wherever there are browns, there are lights as well, and the rest adjusts gradually through varied masses of colors. This observer only has



to see how the good Flemish painters use their repoussoirs. He'll see that by following the technique I'm indicating here, he'll achieve a truth and variety that we really haven't paid enough attention to.

Those who routinely use the solid black repoussoir in the foreground will probably be surprised that I suggest using brown for the darkest colors and placing them in the middleground. If they made it a habit to observe nature, they would continually see this effect. This technique would be of infinite use to them in bringing objects closer or distancing them in their paintings. How would this work? Through the effects of light which would give the planes a much wider gradation than if they were merely stacked on top of each other. In situations where the planes are stacked, the painter wouldn't know where to place the figures making up his composition. With a wider gradation of planes the painter would have ample space for them.

I've seen many times how a brown mass in the middle-ground creates a great effect. I recall, along with other examples, a large building that was set against a forest of trees. Since everything was lit from behind, the form of the forest was very brown and the building, which was also deprived of light, stood out from the background in reflection. There was nothing in the foreground linked to that brown mass. The groups of objects that were positioned to receive light were of admirable brilliance.

There is an important principle at work in this example. When a strong brown is used in the mid-ground everything in the foreground is bright and vague. Even when the objects established in the foreground are supposed to be dark, they shouldn't have any connection to the strong mid-ground dark. Lacking in light as they are, they should all be of subordinate tone and form a mass over it through reflection. This should not preclude the use of certain vigorous strokes. Since they don't create shapes, these strokes will never compete with the background. This principle of masses is written throughout nature. Follow these examples attentively. Nature will constantly lay out example after example for you. You'll derive great pleasure and many benefits from studying the world this way.

Yes, when you're working on a painting that is set in the countryside, I want you to go



there with two or three friends who share the same passion for the work. Once you've found a proper subject, start working on a few good studies, basing them as much on form and light as on color. After establishing your planes, position some figures out there where you plan to put them in your painting to see the effect they will have with respect to color and size. Two people from your group or people who are already in that location could serve this purpose. Whether it is twenty figures or one, it's still the same principle at work. I hope that once you've taken these precautions, you'll achieve things that surpass what you normally do. I also hope that this will give you a foundation of principles and an understanding that you would otherwise not gain from simple reasoning. See how easy it is to gain this understanding through the gifts nature offers. She reaches out to you everywhere. These examples will be of just as much use to you for subjects that have an architectural background—for example, in paintings where the main action takes place in a temple, or inside or near a palace. Nature may not show specific examples of these structures, but she will provide you with the easiest ways in the world to create them.

Suppose the scene in your painting is the interior of a temple. Go inside a church, ancient or modern, old or new, depending on the demands of your subject. Carefully examine the appearance of the people you find there. Do they form a colored mass against the architecture, or is there some other effect? How do they appear with respect to the church floor or the paving stones given that they are illuminated by light entering from the transept? Pay very close attention to the glare surrounding these sources of illumination and to the way the light fades in the architecture's shadow as compared to the figures' shadows. Pay attention likewise to the different colors of clothing that stand out against each other. In most cases you'll see all of your colored figures set against architectural masses. They will stand out in brown from the paving stones and will unmistakably seem to be standing up on their plane. Be sure you don't fall into the common trap of making them seem as if they are lying down on account of their light. In nature you will never see well-lit feet appear on dark brown paving stones or terraces. Even when they are set on black cloth, the cloth will form a lightly colored mass with them, and they will only stand out from it on account of their own color. This effect of the light falling on feet also occurs



on the ground around the feet.

This last principle is the downfall of young painters who try to impress us through random and impossible light effects. I believe we should count among this group those who try to bring out a part of the head or try to bring out a certain highlight on the forehead or chin by covering the rest of their painting with a nondescript black. When Rembrandt used this kind of effect, he employed his boundless art to more or less make it work. At the very least he would redeem himself from this abuse by creating objects of great beauty. Those who attempt these effects without a foundation in these principles fall victim to an inexcusable error. The light pulls the figure's head forward and the strong black pushes the shoulders in and pushes the rest of the body back a prodigious distance. If daylight is falling squarely on the head, it's hard to see how the bust can be in shadow. Even if we were to accept this, the shadow would never be such a deep black. There has to be some reflection in it. If not then it should be part of the same light mass as the head, unless the contrast is moderated by the local colors that are used to make it shine. There are only these two ways to bring the head together with the body.

When I said that you should almost always set the colored mass of your figures against your architectural backgrounds, I based my reasoning on the normal practice. In this practice, as you know, all architecture is painted the color of new stone, regardless of whether it consists of half-degraded materials or ruins. If you want your light figures to appear in contrast against the background, you should go see the old, brown, greenish, and bluish structures. They will guide you to an understanding of how to do this just as new buildings will show you the opposite. The bright parts of your figures, whether it's the skin or the drapery, will stand out on account of their color, and the shadows will stand out on account of their strength. After you've applied a good color tone, a well-balanced one, you can work it as you see fit. Provided you don't work on it in small pieces, your effect is guaranteed.

Thus, as I've been insinuating, these principles are applicable to everything. Should you take the trouble to apply them to your work, you'll get a great deal out of them. If you are studying a countryside scene, do the same thing I told you to do with the architectural setting. Consider



the effect your figures will have when you set them against the trees and distant objects. You'll see colors that you'll be able to render later by memory because the light that gives the overall tone of each plane also sets the tone for every single object.

By making this your regular practice, you'll be able to avoid many problems that less-serious painters often encounter. For example, in many good masters' paintings I've seen objects that were lit against bright sky even though there was nothing there to indicate that these objects were lit by the sun. If these painters had consulted nature, they would have seen that this effect is completely contrary to the effect that occurs in nature. Nature would have shown them that every object, even a white one, forms a colored, if not brown, mass against the sky when it is not lit by the sun. It is only when it is lit by the sun that the illuminated areas appear light against the sky, in a brightness that is always colored. At the same time, the shadows produced by this figure become more vaporous according to the object's height. They become stronger the closer they are to the ground.

With objects that are lit only by natural light, not by direct sunlight, as with a standing figure, for example, the top always has darker shadows than the lower part because the latter is situated to receive reflections from the ground or paving stones. The effect diminishes the farther away from these surfaces the object is, and as the mass rises it becomes more and more brown. Remember this last point because it applies to everything. If you follow this advice your figure will look as if it is really standing. If you ignore the advice, your figure will look like it's falling down backward. This defect is much more common than you'd think and sometimes even goes unnoticed. Study nature often and you'll never make these mistakes.

This precise contemplation of nature will also teach you not to make your figures' shadows the same length, whether they are on the ground or on some other surface. You should also make sure that they don't begin and end in the same brown. You should understand that a shadow's length is based on the source of illumination. If daylight is coming from above, the shadow should be short. If the light is low, the shadow should be lengthened. This is of particular importance in subjects where the scene is outside and where the specific times of day



are indicated. Noon light must be characterized by short shadows whereas morning and evening light should have long shadows. As for the overly even tone of the shadow used by certain painters, you'll see that in nature a shadow is strongest on things that are set against the ground. Immediately after that the darkness degrades as it goes up, continuing imperceptibly up to the top where a glare prevails everywhere there is daylight. This is a principle that applies to all bodies that cast shadows with one distinction. This degradation is much less pronounced with objects that are lit by direct sunlight.

Again, you must observe these things in nature to render them with exact precision, an important quality in good paintings. This cannot be replaced with routine practice no matter how skilled you are; your work will be completely flawed. You'll see this in certain landscapes where you can tell the scenes were painted outside. The figures, however, appear as pastiche because the painter added them later in his studio. Had the artist taken the time to place the figures and examine them when painting his terraces outside, he would have given them the correct tone. His shadows would have had the correct strength and color as they appear in nature. I will say it again. All the work is in vain because memory cannot convey the precise details which perfection demands in our art. You'll only be able to achieve this perfection through a continuous examination of nature. Should you take the care to scrutinize all of its effects, you will create surprisingly lifelike things.

Before I finish I'd like to add a word on another practice that Mr. de Largillière considered very troublesome. He would observe that many painters of his time would place objects together that were supposed to stand out in contrast with each other as they occupied different planes in the painting. For him the problem was that they would place the model at the same distance from them every time, regardless of whether the figures were in the foreground, the mid-ground, or even the background of their painting.

The first problem is that they see their models lit with the same tone every time. They will correct this problem, however, through an estimation of the colors based on their own idea of what gradation their painting should have. Actually, I should say "they *think* they'll correct this



problem”, because obviously estimations are not always accurate enough and can lead to miscalculations. When this happens and when the background figure appears too bright with color or too gray, the painter would calmly say, based on his flawed vision, “I’m going to tone it down a little” or “I’m going to liven it up.” Because of the first of these flaws, the figure was seen from too close. The artist then starts to dirty the figure by glazing it with some grayish tints. After doing this he is satisfied, persuaded that he has rendered the figure in its true colors. For those, however, whose eyes are used to comparing objects’ colors based on their distances and used to looking for those colors in nature, the judgment would be completely different. They will not recall ever having seen those grays or violets, the colors used to darken the objects. On the contrary they would remember exceedingly soft, pleasant and fleeting colors of such airy quality. These are colors that can only be learned and conveyed by a study of comparisons. You see how my subject keeps bringing me back this. How then should one go about this study as I have described it in this case? You would place two models at a convenient distance so you can properly evaluate the true colors of each model. Likewise you should accustom yourself to seeing objects in nature with the same mind-set. Here then is the secret to this aerial perspective, which is just as important to the perfection of our art as perspective, a principle that pertains only to the line.

The second problem that arises from viewing the model at the same distance, regardless of where you place the figure, is that it makes the work look too even and too pronounced throughout. Placing the objects farther away erases the small details, an effect which is no-less characteristic of them as the weakening of color. Now, when you imitate nature from very close, it’s almost impossible to convey that vague, unfocused quality caused by the volume of air between it and you, which you see when viewing it from a distance. This is just one more reason why, if you want to see it correctly, you should view it from an appropriate distance.

How many other things could we mention on this subject if we wanted to explore all aspects of it? It’s time for me to stop, however, and I fear I may have already exhausted the patience of my illustrious peers by talking at such great length about things that you know better



than I. However, I count on your good graces for you have already shown me such touching signs that I would appear ungrateful if I were to think otherwise. On account of this, I'm sure you'll openly accept what my love for the advancement of our youth has brought me to say here. You, my illustrious colleagues, love them no less than I do and consider them your most precious hopes and the objects of your most tender care. As do I, you also ask that they show the necessary docility and apply themselves sufficiently to become men of distinguished merit, worthy of the graces that our great benefactor showers on them in such abundance.

For those of you young men who are listening, give us satisfaction. Show your perfect gratitude by becoming successful painters.

Response from Mr. Coypel, Academy Director

Sir, the work you have just presented showed us three admirable yet difficult things to consider together or even individually. We are impressed with the solidity of your principles and can't praise you enough for your generosity in sharing your most profound meditations with us. Likewise you have touched us with this admirable and rare gratitude that has compelled you to give all of the honor to your illustrious teacher. At the very least, you should share this honor with him.

To benefit, as you have done, Sir, from the lessons of this excellent man, it is not enough to demonstrate the docility you showed when learning them. To derive the complete benefit from these lessons, you need a certain "taste" and a vivid and keen intelligence. People are born with these qualities and someday become what you presently are.

I will say it again, Sir, your presentation is both the work of a painter consumed by his art, the work of a zealous academic, and what is even more the case, a gallant man. Not only does it instruct our students on the methods they must use to become worthy of following in our places, but also instructs them on how to show gratitude for the care we take in advancing their learning.

I would find fault with any among them who, while listening to you, didn't feel excited to put into practice what you just explained about our art. I would blame this person if he, having



heard you talk about the celebrated Mr. de Largillière, did not recognize how, through honoring those who have taught us, we also honor ourselves.

We hope, Sir, that you will not stop here and that you'll put together some other thoughts that are in your notebooks. You should not let the fact that you're not used to writing your thoughts down on paper hold you back any longer. You've just shown us that Despréaux^v was completely right when he said in his treatise on the poetic arts:



*What is well conceived, is clearly expressed,
and the words to express it come easily.*



Passage from the Academy Registers.

Today, on June 7, the Academy gathered for conferences that were opened by a lecture from Professor Oudry. His dissertation was on the method of studying color through a comparison of objects with each other.

This work, which presented excellent principles on color and on the understanding of forms was heard by the audience. The audience thanked the author with a discourse addressed to him by Mr. Coypel. This discourse will be recorded in the register following the present deliberation.

ⁱ Oudry's son, Jacques Charles Oudry (b. Paris, 1722/3; d. Lausanne, 1778) was effectively his only pupil.

ⁱⁱ Nicolas de Largillière (b. Paris, 1656; d. Paris, 1746).

ⁱⁱⁱ Oudry's original term is *clair-obscur*, which he later defines as "the art of distributing the light and dark in such a way as to give the painting its effect." The term *chiaroscuro* was used here, since it is more familiar to readers of English.

^{iv} *Repoussoir*: An object, motif or figure in a two-dimensional composition that is positioned in the right or left foreground in order to lead the spectator's eye into the picture.

^v Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (b. 1636; d. 1711), poet and critic, commonly called Boileau.

