

THE ART OF THE USE OF COLOR IN IMITATION IN PAINTING : NO. V

WILLIAM PAGE¹

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I have heard it regretted by a painter, whose acknowledged abilities should have taught him better, that he had not the pigments wherewith fully to represent nature, forgetting that if his wish for infinite means were granted, he with his limited capacities could do no more wield them, than an infant the club of Hercules²; indeed, until we have outstripped all that has gone before us in Art, we have no right to call for more, when even now, we *waste* so large a proportion of what we have. It seems to have been the opinion of Titian³, who was well qualified to judge in the matter, from a saying recorded in his life, that his countrymen, “the Venetian painters, would have colored much better if yellow (pigment) had been as plenty as common earth, and white as scarce and dear as gold,”⁴ that even in that school of painting most skilled in the use of

¹ William Page (1811-1885) was a 19th century American artist, best known for his portraits. Well-studied in the Venetian school, he was an expert on Titian, and after ten years studying the Old Masters in Italy, he would eventually become the president of the National Academy of Art from 1871-1873 (“William Page”).

²After defeating the Nemean lion with nothing but a club and his bare hands in the first of twelve labors, the mythical Greek hero Hercules is often depicted with a lion skin and olive-wood club (Lemprière).

³ Considered one of the “Old Masters,” Titian was an Italian painter active during the High Renaissance of the 16th century. A contemporary of Michelangelo and Raphael, he was known for his versatility and use of color, especially the subtlety and muted colors of his later works. Unlike Michelangelo and Raphael, Titian was a proponent of imitation as the sole purpose of art (Gould).

⁴ The Venetian school of painters, led by Titian, believed that the imitation of nature was the purpose of art, and thus emphasized realistic paintings over imaginative sketchings. The Florentine school of Michelangelo and Raphael held contrary beliefs, that the artist’s expression and idealism was integral to the art form (Pace). The specific quotation which Page attributes to Titian is difficult to verify, but Titian has been similarly quoted as saying that “a good painter needs only three colours: black, white and red” and that “the painter must always seek the essence of things, always represent the essential characteristics and emotions of the person he is painting” (Genn).

colors, and famous therefor throughout the world, even more limitation of means, rather than increase, would have been attended with advantage. If in his time and country this was true, how much truer must it be now, when we have some colors of such intensity that artists by common consent throw them aside, from their very brightness, as useless, and yet complain of their limited means. Let any painter have learned so to use what he has, that in a landscape of his painting there shall breathe an atmosphere of morning, noon, or evening, such as Claude's⁵ never lack, the waters limpid, clear and glittering as a mirror, the leaves of his trees reflecting on their glossy surfaces the light of the sky as well as the rich deep colors of the earth, and suffering the sky-light to shine through them, as in nature—their branches spreading wide, with atmosphere of light seen to float between the nearer and farther parts, so that a bird might not there seem to spread its wings in vain, in that not quite *empty* space, and we shall hear no more calling out for aid—we shall then have true art, such as has ever won the eyes to fill them with tears of delight. But before this can be done, we must ask well the why, and how—we must peer into things, not skim the mere surface—we need to see through the subject; if we would paint a flower, we must well consider how its rosy hue differs in its qualities from all other colors called rosy; if it seem to have moisture in it, or is dry to the vision; and when we have learned to see wherein on substance differs from another in either its local or accidental color, or absorbing, or throwing off of light, from its surface; it will go hard, but we shall find a means to represent it that no eye can mistake it for what it is not intended to be. For the different applications of pigments can be made to imitate equally well all qualities that the eye discerns in things, as these opposite, *wet and dry, hard and soft, transparent and opaque, rough and smooth, &c., &c.*, as well as the different modifications and combinations of these in different degrees and relations: for instance, the look of wetness on silks or satins, of whatever color; and dryness and absorbency, in woollen cloths; the dry look of sky or atmosphere, and the wet look of its reflection in water. This wetness may always be produced by glazing with transparent color⁶, and dryness by its opposite, by what is called scumbling⁷, that is, passing an opaque color thinly over another.

Something of wetness is also produced by using even opaque colors considerably thinned with oil, so that when used they somewhat melt, as it were, together. This is a very common mode with our painters, whether the substance to be imitated be clouds, metals, or even a dry and dusty road—where its application is about as efficient as that of the old lady's broom, who wanted “to sweep the cob-webs from the sky:”⁸ indeed, if we were gravely told that she did so, and were also told that these painters do well, the one and the other would be equally credible. It would not be very astonishing if some of these *artists* were discovered to be the actual descendants of this identical old lady, and who have inherited an ambition as laudable as her own, which will not suffer them to pause or rest until they have brushed

⁵ Claude Lorrain was a 17th century painter known for his “ideal landscapes,” which presented pastoral scenes in a highly idealized, grand, and idyllic manner, and thus did not specifically value realism. His landscapes are especially praised for their use of light and color (Kitson).

⁶ Glazing is a technique typically achieved by combining pigments with substances of similar refractive indexes and then applying a thin layer of the new mixture over an existing layer of paint to create an effect of increased contrast between shadows and highlights. Oil is typically the mixing agent (Dunkerton).

⁷ Scumbling is the technique of applying a thin layer of opaque pigment over an existing layer of paint in order to lessen the under-layer's vibrancy of color (Featherstone).

⁸ This nursery rhyme about a woman attempting to clean the sky with a broom is at least as old as 1819 per a search of the American Periodical Database (“Sweep”).

away, not only the “cobwebs” but nature’s entire self from their canvass, if not from the face of the earth. “Nature puts them out,” and if in their turn, they put out nature, why not? She never did them any good.

There is nothing mean or trivial in nature, where all things know and keep their proper places, where all things are grand or beautiful. It is when the misnamed artist tears it from its proper relation and throws it into a chaos of his own creation, or holds it up mutilated, and shorn of *all* its beams, before us, that any true quality becomes disgusting. He who has a true sense of art, will take wide views in his imitations of nature, not forgetting that this *relation* of one quality to another, is the very essence of what he can learn from a study of nature; he will not allow one quality to usurp the place of another, but keep all within the limits wherein alone they can be beautiful. He will not, as the French painters do, sacrifice *harmony* to relief—which is the product of contrast, or like them degrade an expression of enthusiasm, by painting in the face of one engaged in manufacturing a “leetle boot,” but give to an eagle the wings of an eagle, and to a lobster his claws. If therefore, we would paint gold, it should look solid—if flesh, it should not be glass, or rose-leaves, but seem to possess all we know of flesh—not forgetting the very down spread every where on its surface. Let no painter flatter himself that he can dispense with any of these, that men’s eyes will be so grossly deceived as to accept less than all: if they do so deceive themselves, the painter will be the greater sufferer. This has been the rock on which modern Art has split—that it was to be attained by some other means than imitation. The English by making pleasing combinations of colors, and light and dark, without reference to the imitation of natural objects.⁹ The French by clothing heroes and clowns in the cast-off forms of the antique.¹⁰ The Germans, by imitating the puerile attempts of the Italians, previous to the time of Leonardo da Vinci¹¹.—And we, in a medley of all these. All would storm Art—and all choose the side away from Nature, not knowing that the same gate through which those who have ever reached the citadel of Art, stands now wide open to all who seek it in that path which lies right through the very heart of Nature. If any doubt this, let them look back to those early works of Italy to which I have referred, and see how simply those men begun. If they would paint the early history of Moses¹²—what did they do? why they designed their pictures in every thing directly from the people about them, to their very *clothes*. The fall of Ninevah they painted from their own cities, and in this child-like way that Art begun to be developed, which afterwards found such noble advancement by the genius of Raffaele¹³, equally indebted to nature for his “Divine.” The Venetian, the Dutch, the Spanish-Murillo’s

⁹ The primary art movement in England in the early 19th century was based on watercolour paintings, which were inherently more wistful and less realistic than traditional oil paintings (Brown).

¹⁰ The primary art movement in France in the 19th century was French Historical Romanticism. In a move away from the old emphasis on imitation of nature, romantic paintings were distinctly more imaginative and fanciful. Romantic history paintings presented historical scenes in an exaggerated, grandiose manner (Vaughan).

¹¹ Likely a reference to the German Nazarene School. Similar to those of the later Pre-Raphaelite movement, the Nazarene painters called for a return to the style of religious history painting of the early Renaissance, prior to the influence of the Old Masters (Vaughan).

¹² Examples could include Raphael’s *Moses Saved from the Water* (1518) and Giorgione’s *The Test of Fire of Moses* (1501).

¹³ Atypical spelling of Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio). The Renaissance artist and contemporary of Titian was a pioneer of the Florentine school, which emphasized expression over realism (Penny).

Peasants and Beggars¹⁴—undoubtedly his best pictures, and painted before he left Spain—all these and whatever else the world has seen in Art, worthy to be so called, is just that which each could with his powers translate from nature into his pictures; and because your eyes cannot find in Nature what your eyes are taught to see in the works of Raffaele, will you say that it is not there and never was? Can you see the *character* and expression in nature that is found in the works of the wonderful Hogarth?¹⁵ Yes? well this will only prove that you are nearer to Hogarth than to Raffaele, and no more. But you must be indeed blind if you cannot see in Nature as great beauty as any that Raffaele has given us, if not the same. It is the littleness of the man, that makes any *truth* a trifle,—to the Great all truth is Grand, and the love of Nature and its true worship must go before all who would travel far or profitably. Who has painted the best portraits of individuals? The greatest painters, Raffaele and Titian—and why? if not because they could best imitate what was set before them. Did they leave any thing out? Yes, and why? Because they *could not* paint it *all*, and therefore chose that which to them seemed the truest characteristics of their sitters—and imitated them—and yet take away the *color* from the portraits of the one, and the *expression* from the other, and will much be left? The best History painters must always paint the best portraits, for it is through the one that they attain the other—and it is by no means a matter of wonder that Benjamin West’s¹⁶ *Great Pictures* are so meagre if what Hazlitt¹⁷ says of them be true, “that there is not in all his works, *one truly fine head*,”—and so far as my observation of his works goes it is undeniable.



¹⁴ Bartolome Esteban Murillo was a 17th century Spanish Painter, best known for his honest depictions of street children and his use of muted colors (Marqués). It is unclear what Page is referring to specifically, as there is no apparent evidence that Murillo ever did leave Spain.

¹⁵ An 18th century painter and engraver, Hogarth is best known for the often unconventional expressiveness of his portraits, as well as his serialized satirical paintings of English society (O’Connell).

¹⁶ Benjamin West (1738-1820) is often considered the first American painter to gain international acclaim. A pioneer of the neoclassicist movement and history painting, he was known for the accuracy of details he included in his works (“LIFE”).

¹⁷ William Hazlitt was an English essayist and art and literature critic. He valued honesty and vitality in art, and found West’s depiction of human faces wooden and lifeless (Smart).

EDITOR'S NOTE

In “The Art of the Use of Color in Imitation in Painting,” William Page calls for a new sort of realism in art, a return to the honest imitation of nature, with color as the primary means of achieving that imitation. While the article appears on the surface to be mainly concerned with the specific use—and often abuse—of color in painting, Page’s argument actually hearkens back to a much older theoretical question: whether realistic imitation or the artist’s expressive idealism should be the driving force of art. The discussion, sometimes referred to as *Disegno e Colore*, originated during the High Renaissance, when the “Old Masters” held differing beliefs on the matter. Titian, on whom Page was an expert, firmly believed in imitation as the purpose of all art, and this was the foundation upon which the Venetian School was built. His contemporaries Michelangelo and Raphael, however, tended to value the expression of the artist’s own original thought over realism; this was the foundation upon which the Florentine School was built.

That divide in thinking regarding realism and expression continued throughout art history, and would have been particularly relevant in Page’s time with the rise of the Romantic Movement in art and literature. In keeping with more Florentine ideals, the Romantics began to experiment with “fancy” and “the sublime” in their works, and were more concerned with the expression of emotion. But as often happens when new ideas enter a culture, opposing ideas inherently spring from the new ones, and the Realist Movement of the mid-nineteenth century was imminent on the horizon at the time of publication of Page’s piece.

What perhaps is most striking about the piece, however, is that while Page derides art that does not attempt to imitate nature, he does not necessarily claim that there is no room for personal expression in the imitation of nature. In fact, two of the Old Masters he uses as paragons of good art are pioneers of the two opposing schools, Titian and Michelangelo. Likewise, he references Claude Lorrain, who, though praised for his accurate portrayal of light, was considered more of an “idealist” than a “realist” painter. Taken together, these examples create a more complex picture of what Page considers the imitation of nature—not necessarily a matter of capturing every specific detail as it can be seen, but more a matter of capturing some innate *truth*, whether physical or emotional. For Page, this can only be done by knowing one’s subject as thoroughly as a good portraitist knows his sitter, and the careful use of color is the best method of conveying that truth.

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