

TURNER'S THEORY OF COLOURING

BY C. J. HOLMES



So little that is of much practical service to artists has been written upon the science of colouring, that there is some excuse for the appearance of even disjointed and tentative notes upon the subject. Though art is now studied more scientifically in some ways than at any other period of the world's history, and we have undoubtedly learned much as to the craft of representing things in paint, we at the same time seem to have more difficulty in getting fine colour than many ages which were far less well equipped. The colour of the Italian quattrocentists, of the Japanese colour printers of the eighteenth century, and of the makers of oriental porcelain, is almost uniformly splendid, whereas in civilized Europe for the last three centuries the great colourist has been an isolated being, occurring, perhaps, not more than half a dozen times in a hundred years.

The attempt to discover some common principle, or principles, in the work of all good colourists in different mediums does not lead to many positive results. On two or three points, however, there appears to be something like unanimity.

I. Fine colour is accompanied by the deliberate repetition of certain selected tints, making a connected scheme. In primitive art this may often be brought about by actual poverty of materials which ties the artist down to a small number of pigments.

II. Fine colour is almost always translucent, but neither perfectly transparent nor perfectly opaque.

III. Fine colour is very seldom found in company with strong relief.

On the first two points we need not dwell here, but the third is of some importance in an age of realistic painting such as that in which we live, and deserves more

attention than has hitherto been accorded to it. The point may, perhaps, be made more clear by the help of a simple illustration.

Let us imagine a wall-paper, the design of which is made up of green leaves and pink flowers on a white ground. The effect of such a wall-paper is bound to be more or less harmonious, however sharp and fresh the individual colours may be, so long as the green and pink are printed as mere flat tints in the manner of a Japanese colour-print, without any suggestion of modelling or shadow.

Then let us imagine solidity and relief to be suggested by the addition of a third printing in brown, such as is frequently used in common wall-papers. The harmony which previously existed is at once damaged, if not ruined, however carefully we mix and alter the tint of brown. Further experiment will prove that the fault does not lie with the added colour, for if the same amount of brown be added to the design in flat masses (to suggest twigs and branches for example), the result still remains harmonious.

We are thus driven to the conclusion that the disturbing element in the scheme is not the colour brown in itself, but the fact that it stands for shade, and adds an idea of solidity and substance to what was before a flat pattern. The fact appears to be that, when solidity and substance are thus suggested, the eye begins instinctively to look upon the leaves and flower as real things, and not as mere symbols. Then it recognizes that the existence of the same brown shadow on pink flower and green leaf is untrue to nature. In the case of the flower brown is almost an impossible shadow-colour under any condition of lighting. We must account for it by assuming it to be dirt or decay. The leaf suffers in the same way. Its shadow could look brown only if the light were unpleasantly, if not



ST. DENIS (Rivers of France). By J. M. W. TURNER.

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impossibly, cold. The loss of freshness in the flower, and the instinctive feeling of a coldness suggested by the warm shadow of the leaf, entirely efface any possible pleasure we might otherwise have derived from colours which in themselves are not inharmonious. In fact, by the additions of modelling we have led the eye to expect truth, and have given it falsehood.

The more fully we consider the matter the more fully are we compelled to recognize that designs modelled so completely as to suggest solidity, if they are to be coloured at all, must be coloured truthfully—however elaborate a business that may be—or the effect will be unpleasing.

We may now perhaps recognize one reason why the colour of fine Chinese porcelain, Japanese prints, stained glass windows, and Italian tempera painting naturally tends to be harmonious. In all these forms of art the representation is symbolic, as in the wall-paper printed in flat tints. Nay, more, if we examine the work of nature-colourists like Titian and Rubens, it is interesting to note how they tend towards this same flatness, modelling always in very low relief, reducing their shadows by skilful contrast with masses of black used as a local colour, and lighting their subjects from the front, or nearly from the front, to get the greatest possible breadth of illumination.

Both Rubens and Titian, however, were not always free to play with colours as they pleased. They had to paint portraits as well as fancy subjects, and portraiture involved often a high degree of realism in modelling, and therefore for a great colourist a high degree of natural truth. We have no record of the principles on which Titian produced his masterly portraits, but a precept ascribed on good evidence to Rubens indicates how that master solved the difficulty.

Rubens is said to have held that colours should always be arranged in a definite

sequence as they recede from the point of highest light; namely, pure white at the focus of illumination, next yellow, then red, then blue, and then presumably the warm translucent shadow he employed so brilliantly. This apparently arbitrary rule is, I think, explained by a remark of Reynolds, who recommends that all the lights of a picture should be slightly tinged with yellow, as if illuminated by the setting sun. Natural light is often cold, and coldness, however truthfully rendered, is seldom pleasant. It was then to escape this difficulty, which has ruined the colour of the majority of our modern painters, that Rubens adopted a regular system by which all his sitters would appear as if they were seen by the warm and pleasant light of evening.

Yet there is one great if unequal colourist whose practice seems so consistently opposed to that of Rubens and Titian, not to mention the tempera painters or the orientals, that he must be discussed before going any further. Rembrandt would appear to be a very apostle of relief and realism, who lights his pictures more often from the side than from the front, and fills them everywhere with strong shadows.

It should be remembered, however, that Rembrandt's works as a rule contain so little positive colour, that he is not infrequently said to be a chiaroscuroist only, and not a colourist. The saying is thus far true that his pictures are conceived as masses of light and shade, and not as masses of colour, but the atmosphere which envelops them is always coloured, and passages of positive colour are used here and there for purposes of emphasis with astonishing vigour and decision. Rembrandt, in short, is a great colourist, because he is a master of emphatic colour, as opposed to the harmonious and decorative colour of Veronese. Now it is with colour in its immediate and decorative aspect that we are at present concerned, and therefore the use of colour

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as a means of emphasis does not concern us, though it is not the least noble and important secret of the art of painting.

From what has already been said the difficulties of the modern landscape painter who aims at being a colourist may be recognized. The moment he attempts representing objects with the relief that they possess in nature, he is placed in a dilemma. The relief he has given to the objects in his picture makes them suggest reality, and therewith leads the spectator to expect truth of effect. If the painter attempts to alter and arrange nature's colouring, the effect produced will cease to be truthful, and therefore is apt to strike the spectator's eye as false or forced. Some of Cotman's drawings owe their unpleasantness of effect to this cause, since unnaturally bright blues and yellows, not perhaps in themselves inharmonious, are introduced into drawings otherwise precise and realistic.

On the other hand, if the painter accepts (as most modern landscape painters have done) nature's colour exactly as it is, he gives up his freedom to select and arrange, and therewith any claim to be a great colourist. As Whistler pointed out more than twenty years ago in his well-known lecture:—

'Nature contains the elements in colour and form of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science these elements, that the result may be beautiful—as the musician gathers his notes and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony. To say to the painter that nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player that he may sit on the piano. That nature is always right is an assertion artistically as untrue as it is one whose truth is universally taken for granted. Nature is very rarely right, to such an extent even that it might almost be said that nature is usually wrong; that is to say, the condition of things that can bring about the perfection of harmony worthy of a picture is rare and not common at all.'

Turner, however, affords an excellent example of the manner in which a great landscape painter who was also a remarkable colourist grappled with this difficulty

of combining natural effect and decorative beauty, and a number of his drawings have been reproduced by modern process with an accuracy which, if not perfect, is at least quite sufficient to enable them to be used as illustrations without any risk of misapprehension.

Turner started by working in emulation of his predecessors the Dutch marine painters, Poussin, Salvator, and Claude, with a technique similar to that employed by Reynolds in portraiture. This of itself involved a general lowness of tone, and the tendency to darkness was strengthened by Turner's wish to surpass his forerunners both in completeness of modelling and in force of effect. In his youthful pictures he thus obtains the greatest possible relief and vigour of contrast by foiling bright lights with black shadows. His early works such as the noble sombre *Calais Pier* in the National Gallery are thus magnificent designs in black and white rather than works in colour so far as general effect is concerned, for the colour is held in reserve as with Rembrandt.

It is easiest to follow the subsequent development of Turner's art in a series of drawings such as the 'Rivers of England' or the 'Ports of England.' Both are fairly well represented in the National Gallery, and should be compared with the oil paintings which belong to the same period of transition. A selection of these drawings together with some from the 'Rivers of France' series has recently been reproduced—wonderfully well, considering the moderate price—by Messrs. Cassell,¹ by whose courteous permission the illustrations to this article are reproduced.

In these drawings we see Turner attempting to combine the forcible contrasts and strong chiaroscuro of his early work with brightness and fullness of colour. The ex-

¹ 'The Water Colour Drawings of J. M. W. Turner in the National Gallery. With text by T. A. Cook.' London and New York, 1904. £3 3s. net.

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periment was by no means invariably successful; indeed considering Turner's genius and the astonishing elaboration which he lavished upon the 'Ports' and 'Rivers,' the result as a whole is a failure. The drawings are wonderful pieces of workmanship, and are composed with Turner's full power, as the mezzotints executed from them prove, but as colour they are frequently unpleasant. The desire of getting strong contrast has led the artist to attempt the impossible. Nature's light was far lighter than his white paper, her black was darker than his darkest paint. In order to keep his lights bright Turner was compelled to omit all colour from them but yellow, as being the colour nearest in tone to positive white, while to get his shadows correspondingly strong and cool he had to make them dark blue. This convention, so like that of Rubens, was unsatisfactory in a picture where the modelling and relief were carried to a high degree of completeness. Everything in these drawings is represented perfectly so far as form is concerned, that we expect a similar exactness of colour, and no convention however brilliant will serve instead. The few drawings which are quite successful in colour are just those where the handling is so free that reality and solidity are no more than suggested, or where there is no pronounced roundness because the sun is full in front of the spectator or nearly behind him. The *Okehampton*, the *Scarborough* and the *River Medway* might be instanced, as well as the splendid *Arundel Castle*, reproduced.²

Turner at last seems to have discovered why these drawings were more successful than their fellows. At any rate in the 'Rivers of France' series he produces splendid colour time after time without difficulty and without any serious lapse.

Now if we consider the drawings as a whole, we shall be struck by one or two characteristics common to them all.

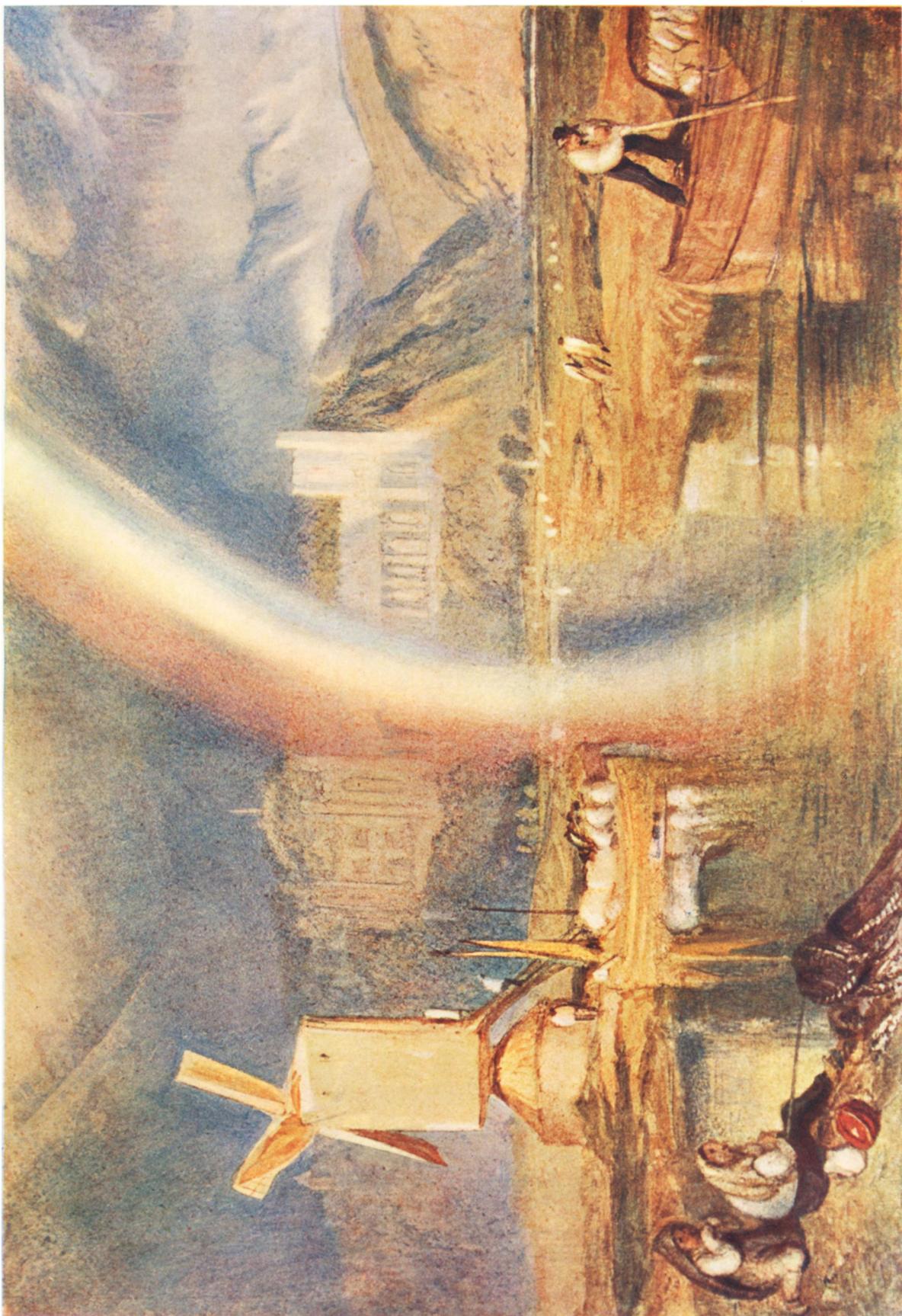
In the first place we shall notice an increased freedom of handling, a want of what is popularly known as 'finish.' By this apparent carelessness of touch, Turner obtains suggestiveness instead of fact, variety of surface instead of monotony, and ensures purity of colour, for a stroke thus swiftly laid is not sullied by subsequent efforts to get detail.

In the next place, the pigment, instead of being transparent colour on a white ground, is opaque or semi-opaque colour upon a grey ground. On this grey ground the colours mixed with white are spread thinly, the grey ground thus tells slightly almost everywhere, and gives these drawings their peculiar evenness of tone.

The actual colours used have also undergone a change. The colour of Turner's former sketches was already arbitrary, as we have seen, for reasons which were defended by Ruskin as naturalistic. In the 'Rivers of France' that defence can no longer be sustained, for brilliant colour is used from sheer pleasure in brilliant colouring. We can often recognize that this or that effect was founded on something actually seen in nature, but the pitch of colour employed is rarely or never like the grey and delicate atmosphere of France. The important thing to notice however is the subordination of modelling to colour. The proportion of subjects lighted from the side is small, and not a drawing of the whole series is unified and made forcible by strong cast shadows. Flatness in fact has become Turner's ideal instead of relief. The great majority of the subjects are viewed either in the Titianesque manner, in which the sun is presumed to be behind or nearly behind the spectator (as in the *Arundel Castle* previously mentioned), or in the manner discovered by Claude and perfected by Turner, when the sun (or the moon as in the *St. Denis*³) is immediately or almost immediately in front.

² Page 413.

³ Frontispiece, page 408.



ARUNDEL CASTLE (Rivers of England). By J. M. W. TURNER.

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In the former view the general effect is one of broad light with perhaps a few sharp passages of shadow to give relief. In the latter view the sky forms one large mass, and the objects silhouetted against it form another, both appearing comparatively flat, because there is no shadow from the side to accentuate their roundness. Where roundness has to be suggested, Turner suggests it as Rubens did and the Italian tempera painters too, by the gentlest possible gradations.

The result of this dispensing with strong relief is at once evident. The very same colours, the blues, the reds, and the yellows, which in the earlier series, such as the 'Ports' and the 'Rivers,' seldom seemed quite right, but usually looked too cold or (more frequently) too hot, because they did not correspond with the realism of the forms to which they were applied, combine in the later drawings into magnificent harmonies, and we are content to accept them as such because there is nothing in the design which entices the eye to expect a scientific imitation of nature.

In the comparatively few instances where the lighting does come from the side and there are cast shadows, these shadows are treated in a peculiar way. They are no longer made as black and forcible as possible to contrast with the lights, but every effort is made to keep them pale and to make

them full of colour, blue in the distance, reddish-brown in the foreground as the shadows in the south are apt to be when full of warm reflected light. The shadows in fact are made to tell as spaces of colour and not as spaces of darkness. In Turner's latest drawings these blue shadows become more and more vaporous, while the warm ones become almost scarlet, and I have attempted to trace the development of these particular characteristics of Turner's colour gradually, in order that we may understand that the occasional extravagance of his later drawings is not mere eccentricity or wilfulness, but the carrying of certain conclusions about colour, based on natural effects, to an extreme pitch.

His numerous imitators and forgers naturally fail to understand the science and knowledge gained by years of experiment that underlie Turner's later work, and consider him a mere virtuoso. Their works in his manner are thus merely fantastic; they are based on no settled and definite principles, and so lack the sense of the scale of natural atmosphere, of tone in fact, which enabled Turner to carry out his most extravagant inventions with an effect of illusion and a suggestion of actual air and space which make our senses feel their actuality even while the colder judgment of our reason forbids us to believe.