

Disegno e colore: Art Historical Reflections on the Structuring of Space

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Before getting down to the subject of the paper, I would like to make a couple of remarks as regards my approach. First I feel obliged to temper the strictly art historical viewpoint advanced in the title with an aesthetical overtone of a more general nature. As a matter of fact, my adherence to the problem of *disegno e colore* has come from two sources, both outside the realm of art. On the one hand, it has resulted from an interest in the visual tradition of ancient rhetoric, which in the long run, as we know, had proven extremely relevant to art history as well. In broad terms, it's a question of how verbal expression relates to pictorial expression, and vice versa. On the other hand, a certain overall affection for the spatial conceptions in antique and modern philosophy has been conducive to my focus on the problem. In this connection, art history serves as an exemplum of concomitant theoretical thought and world view. My second remark derives from the feeling that it's a sketch of a problem rather than the results of a study that I'm going to propose to you next.

It is beyond dispute that art theory was born in the period of the Renaissance. And as appropriate to every genuine and self-respecting theoretical outlook, it developed in dialogue between two cities, the inland Florence and the coastal and more modern Venice. However, in the context of the Renaissance, the role of Venice must be described as somehow ministerial to the standard-bearer Florence. The Renaissance is characterised, after all, by its wish to resuscitate the ancient Latin and Greek cultures, and from this point of view Florence, being closely affiliated with Rome, was granted a primary role. The ground-breaking work in the history of Florentine and Renaissance art theory as a whole is usually considered to be Leon Battista Alberti's tract *De Pictura* (1435). This book bears definite witness to the peculiar way the germinating Renaissance art theory came to rely on the tenets of ancient rhetoric. I will not go into that well-known historical matter (see, e.g., Spencer 1957); suffice it to say that the penchant of

ancient rhetorical treatments for visual metaphors lent itself well to the use of the Renaissance art theorist. An attendant phenomenon of such substitution of the language of the picture for the pictorial language of rhetoric was that a certain narrative superstructure came to be placed on the visual arts. This is evident in Alberti's comparison of the composition of painting with *historia*, that is, with a plot or *mythos* drawn from ancient or Christian texts, as well as in his intimation that bodies in the picture equal words, syllables equal members and letters equal contours (Alberti 1991: 68, 89). The remarkable consequence of this process was the eminent position attached by Florentine art theory to relief or outline, which also became one of the most heavily charged issues in the debates between Florentines and Venetians.

A historical fact that surely can not be avoided in dealing with Renaissance art is the famous conflict over the relative values of sculpture and painting known as *paragone*. Not only were a number of fundamental concepts elaborated in the controversy, but also a foundation was laid for the important distinction between 'plastic' and 'painterly', unfolding its potential only in the later discussions on Romanticism and Modernism. Although Alberti is lavish in his praise of painting (Alberti 1991: 60–64) and truly the most lustrous Renaissance eulogy on painting was delivered by Leonardo (Leonardo da Vinci 1989: 20–46), who can be considered at least partly a representative of the Florentine school as well, the fascination of Florentines with relief accounts for the sculpturesque undertone of their approach. The Italian concept of *disegno*, which became very closely associated with Florentine art theory and can be translated as drawing, draft or outline, originated partly in the workshop of sculptors and had direct reference to the plastic quality of a work. Giorgio Vasari, the foremost art critic of the Renaissance, gave the concept its universal form by lumping together all the visual arts as *arti del disegno* (Vasari 1996: 22) and by initiating the foundation of the Academy of Design (*Accademia del Disegno*) in Florence in 1562. In Vasari's usage *disegno* points to the regular form or idea of things in artist's mind, that is, *disegno* is understood primarily as the right proportion of the whole to its parts and of the parts to one another. A certain Platonic flavour can't be missed in Vasari's approach to the subject, especially if we consider the proven connection between Vasari's exemplary artist, Michelangelo, and the celebrated Florentine Platonism. At the same time, and it has been pointed out by Erwin Panofsky, Vasari's claim that *disegno* or the idea of things is reached by experience and through the

actual observation of nature stands in sharp contrast to the Platonic approach to the matter (Panofsky 1968: 62). The fusion of mental and textual reality, with the stress on close inspection of nature, is one of the eminent qualities of the many-sided Renaissance (e.g., Lee 1967: 9–10).

Venetian art theory originated much later and owed a very great deal to the Florentines. Yet, they enriched the theory with an admixture of modernism. Together with the looser style of the exposition of their ideas, Venetians opposed Florentines by investing colour with honour and dignity. In practice this meant that, instead of starting the composition by making an under-drawing on a canvas, the picture was worked out directly in paint. X-rays have shown that Titian was in the habit of covering his canvases with a mass of colour and that he then proceeded to construct the figures by refining the area and by adding successive layers of pigment (Januszczak 1987: 34). To put it bluntly, whereas one school created the world out of lines, the other did it out of paint. From our point of view, it's important to notice that this change in the attitude to colour was accompanied by a corresponding reduction of the elemental value of line as a constituent of space. The essential difference between the two schools of art lies not in their willingness or unwillingness to accentuate colour as such, but in their divergent assessment of line as a discrete element of the picture. A comparison of the style of Michelangelo to that of the Venetians should illustrate the point. Michelangelo was famous for his emphasised practice of figural contrappostos, manifested first of all in the serpentine poses he was fond of in his statues. The dramatically shaped human body exposing its inner anxiety by the axial disequilibrium of its parts – the weight shifted to one leg causes the tensional counterposition of the innately symmetrical members – was a fundamental characteristic of Michelangelo's *disegno* and a basis for his brave use of line. It is worth noting here that the Renaissance idea of contrapposto was modelled largely on rhetorical antithesis, and as such exemplifies the symbiotic relationship that existed between the two arts (Summers 1981: 76; Braider 1999). Now, Michelangelo was not only bold in his use of line, but he also followed the same principle in his chromatic practice, which, quite interestingly, gave rise to the general assumption that Michelangelo was superb in *disegno*, but rather inconsequential in terms of *colore* (Summers 1987: 212–213). This brings us to the important distinction that illuminates a great deal in regard to the issue in question. Namely, while *disegno* was not denied a right to more or less sharp contrasts, the good use of colour, in

the sense of that of the Venetians, was always associated with a kind of softness and blending of tones that subdues the contrastive quality of line and affords the picture an overall tonal unity. In fact, the Venetians have gone down in history as the first great masters of tonal painting and we can argue that in this type of work the structural role of the border was radically reduced in favour of spatial unity.

Especially relevant for the discussion on *disegno e colore* is Leonardo's position in art history. Although a Florentine, the two technical devices he favoured, *sfumato* and aerial perspective, paved the way for the new colouristic sensation of space. *Sfumato* is a smoky rendition of contours by dint of shading colours gradually into one another, so as to avoid any kind of distinct edges in the objective world of the picture. An aerial perspective, or perspective of colour, is a concept closely related to *sfumato*, as it presumes that the more distant an object is, the more it loses in the distinctness of its hue. It has been argued that by promoting these techniques Leonardo opposed the then flowering idealism of line (Barasch 1985: 157–159). I think that, in a more general way, Leonardo's manner should be viewed as displaying the inner ambiguities of Renaissance thought. As we know, the invention of linear perspective based on geometrical rules was surely the great achievement of Renaissance art theory, which characteristically exposes the mathematical disposition of its mind. The long discussion of perspective in the first chapter of Alberti's treatise is in fact the earliest theoretical disquisition on the technical device that ushered in the great epoch of infinity in the realm of arts. At the same time it should be noted that the extreme expansion of the universe implied by perspective invoked a change of canvas from a tablet to an open window – *finestra aperta* – which logically brought the artist into contact with nature and landscape scenes, that is, with non-ideational reality. As a result, a certain Romantic connotation and plain-air feeling came to be associated with 'mathematical perspective', from the very beginning of its invention. This ambiguity between *ratio* and *natura*, underlying the concept of perspective as well as Renaissance art in general, is well revealed by the famous art historical distinction between the Italian Renaissance and its corresponding developments north of the Alps, in the Low Countries. The mutual impact of these two artistic areas largely prepared the stage for later events in European art history, including the debate over the respective merits of ancient and Gothic art. In this context it is justified to argue that Leonardo's transposition of linear perspective, predicated initially on geometrical grounds, to the impressionistic language of colours was a move highly significant for later art theory and practice.

One more example should illustrate my point. We know Galileo Galilei first of all as a physicist and an astronomer, but he has also bequeathed us writings on art and literature, including a letter to Ludovico Cigoli dated June 26, 1612. In this letter, long considered apocryphal, Galilei raises the art of painting above that of sculpture, arguing that while the painter aims at representing a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional plane, a sculptor, as in the more primitive art, conflict which, in its essence, is fundamental to serious aesthetic pleasure (Galilei 1983: 241). As Erwin Panofsky has demonstrated, Galilei's argument in support of painting was closely coupled with his disapproval of Torquato Tasso and his concomitant praise of the poetry of Ludovico Ariosto (Panofsky 1983: 215–218). Juxtaposing these two Renaissance writers, Galilei says that Ariosto writes like an oil-painter, smoothing down all the sharp contrasts, whereas Tasso's allegorical style resembles intarsia of strange and inharmoniously arranged objects. The controversy regarding Ariosto and Tasso started right after the publication of *Gerusalemme Liberata* in 1581, and it centred, on the discursive level, on Tasso's equal stress on *unità* and *varietà*, as compared to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532), which had arguably tipped the balance in favour of variety and *meraviglie*. On a more contextual level, Tasso's position has been associated with the Mannerist tendencies of his time, which were intellectualist in character and prone to allegoric finery, making it difficult to conceive the 'unity' of a work in a sensuous way, that is, in terms of the chromatic effect of the picture plane. The only painter whom Tasso is known to have admired was Francesco Salviati, a devoted Mannerist disciple of Michelangelo's *contrapposto*, while the definitive edition of *Orlando Furioso* from 1532 was dignified by the portrait of Ariosto by Titian, whose name also appeared among the great masters in canto 33 of the poem (see Shearman 1977: 161; Rosand 2004: 36). Thus we see once more that the painterly quality of art, expressed in the idea of *unione del colorito* and solidified later in the aesthetical concept of the picturesque, was elaborated in close parallel with devaluation of the cognitive import of borderline.

The debate over *disegno e colore* is not confined to the period of the Renaissance. Its most remarkable continuation took place in the clash of the Rubenists and Poussinists in 17th century France, being indirectly part of the famous *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, but in fact the argument has played a constitutive role in the jerky process that can be called the formation of the European modernist discourse. Let us recall, for example, the Classicist obsessions with contour of Jo-

hann Joachim Winckelmann (Barasch 1990: 121; Potts 2000: 171–173), and the respective deprecation of the boundary line in Romantic ideology (Paglia 1990, chiefly ch. 5, 8). Romanticism as a movement built amply on the luminous and visionary perception of landscapes, which deconstructed the distinctively corporeal aspect of the picture, or at least balanced it with the painter's attempt at a unitary effect in the work. These efforts to grasp the essence of painting in terms of colour were articulated explicitly in German Romantic theory, where modern art was equated with *pittoresk* and *Kolorit*, while sculpture was considered ancient and relevant to *Zeichnung* (Schlegel 1989: 301, 322; see also Hegel 1928: 26). It is not our intention here to examine the rich material on the subject, but rather to offer, in the light of these historical developments, some general comments on the problem of *disegno e colore*.

As a matter of fact, the Florentine conception of picture as *historia*, which is founded on drawing and to which colours, being secondary, are added, has a strict parallel in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Comparing tragedy with painting, Aristotle claims that just as plot (*mythos*) is the soul (*psyche*) of tragedy and characters are secondary, an outline in black and white is the most important part of painting, and not the colours (*Poetics*, 1450a38–b3). Quite the same position is implied in Plato's dialogue *Meno*. Asked to define both figure (*schema*) and colour (*chroma*), Socrates says that figure is the boundary or limit of a body, while colour is an effluence from that bodily shape, granting to figure seemingly more value than to colour (*Meno*, 76a–e). Now, the *schema*, such as Latin *figura*, which was adopted by Cicero as an equivalent to the Greek word, really points to a posture or an outside form of something. Figure is, so to speak, 'attached' to body and it conjures up the image of a bodily form. Like a solid that is defined primarily by its geometrical qualities, figure is a numerically explicable and constructible form of things. Thus the apparent domination of drawing over colour, detected possibly in Hellenic metaphysical thought, reveals the characteristically Greek penchant for corporeal existence, evinced further by the high appreciation of limit (*peiras*) as a constituent of the physical world. No wonder then that in ancient rhetoric, which centred around the theory of figures as well, colour failed to form a distinct rhetorical concept, referring in a non-technical way to the emotional input of the speaker rather than to his factual thought (see Quinn 1994: 273–282). There appear to have been some attempts to re-evaluate colour as a term during the controversy over Asianism and Atticism, and surely Cicero paid a certain tribute

to it, but Quintilian, the great systematiser of Latin rhetoric, definitely rejects 'colour', as an error in speech (*The Orator's Education*, 9.1.18).

However, to assume that colour was a generally defamed element in Greek culture would be a very uncritical restatement of a historically disproved position. From the Renaissance up to the middle of the 19th century, the view that Greek sculpture and architecture had been in principle white, i.e. colourless, held sway (Gage 1995: 11). This opinion peaked in Neo-Classical thought, which pinned down the linear sentiment of Renaissance-born Classical idealism. After new discoveries had revealed, in the first half of the 19th century, that quite the opposite was true, the so-called principle of polychromy became established step by step in classical studies. This development of scientific thought illuminates indirectly the specifically Greek chasm between the verbal and manual arts. Although Greek literary sources contain enthusiastic notes on painting and sculpture, these arts seem to have had a much lower position in ancient society than poetry or rhetoric: the high esteem accorded verbal expression went hand-in-hand with a depreciation of handicraft, even if its products were admired (Kristeller 1990: 169–170). Accordingly, remarks on visual arts served in literary texts less to characterise these arts than to give metaphorical evidence of the visionary powers of the poets, coinciding well with the corresponding lack of systematic treatises on visual arts in antiquity. That is why ancient metaphysical theories and literary testimonies are not considered the best guides in elucidating the artistic meaning of colour in contemporary societies. On the other hand, the natural paucity of factual evidence as regards ancient painting and colour practices explains the considerable tenacity of the 'white marble' hypothesis in the past.

From our point of view it suffices to say that, on a theoretical level, the ancients considered colour most traditionally as a mixture of light and darkness linked to a certain clearly identifiable geometrical structure (e.g., Gage 1995: 11–16; Lossev 1963: 286); the 'figurative' undertone of their approach to colour was coupled with placing verbal arts and rhetoric at the top of the artistic ladder. In the light of these historical facts, the Florentines can claim to have been rather dutiful followers of ancient thought. The paramount difference, however, is that they reversed the ancient order by applying the theory of verbal art to visual arts, and secondly and more importantly, they did it in an historical situation where confidence in the superiority of the bodily border began to be refuted. As already stated, Plato's and Aristotle's insistence on outline is surely not an accidental part

of their argument, but instead reflects the main drift of ancient physics. Leaving aside atomists, whose philosophy was often considered to be an underground trend, the ancients in general looked at the world as a finite body. Accordingly, the world was supposed to have an uppermost border which accounts well for the importance they ascribed to limit as a primary quality of being. No less relevant is the disgust the ancients displayed toward physical emptiness, as well as their missing the concept of absolute space. As a result, they were practically powerless to conceive of place as something incorporeal and distinctive from the bodily substance. Aristotle's well-known definition of physical *topos* – place (*topos*) is the adjacent boundary of the containing body (*Physics*, 212a20–22) – strikes a familiar chord. With regard to Greek art, Erwin Panofsky has expressed the same rule in his apophthegmatical statement: 'The art of classical antiquity was a purely corporeal art; it recognized as artistic reality only what was tangible as well as visible. Its objects were material and three-dimensional, with clearly defined functions and proportions, and thus were always to a certain extent anthropomorphized.' (Panofsky 1997: 41.) Reviving the antique ideals, the Renaissance surely inherited, to a degree, the ancient concept of space. At the same time it is noteworthy that, already at the very dawn of the Renaissance, an outlook of an entirely opposite nature was propounded. Although the motives of Nicholas of Cusa for implying the existence of an infinite universe differed greatly from those that spurred on Giordano Bruno, there is no doubt that the denial of a limited universe is the specific and 'modern' strand of the Renaissance mind, which necessarily involved it in dialogue with the ancients. This kind of cognitive ambiguity, already hinted at from other points of view and clearly contained in the notion of perspective as a combination of the finite and infinite, prompted, most obviously, the process of mutual reactions between two divergent substances, the bodily and luminary. In other words, I claim that the controversy regarding *disegno e colore* resulted from a coming together of the finite world and the infinite universe and, while the graphic line suited the former to express its contoured ideas, the infinite expanse asked for a sensitive use of colour.

The conspicuous corollary of these developments, from an artistic point of view, was the gradual emancipation of space from its solid ingredients, attested to in the independent and elaborated spatial dimension of the works. This process culminated in Romanticism, where empty space is endowed with imaginative value and infinity becomes a highly charged concept. Moshe Barasch has shown

that one difference between the Florentine and Venetian schools was that, while Florentines treated light and colour separately, Venetians tended to conceive of them as interrelated elements (Barasch 1978: 101). The intuition of Venetian artists was provided its scientific foundation in Newton's "Opticks" which made a strong impact on modern culture in general and was regarded, as has been pointed out, "long before the Romantic period ... as essential reading for landscape artists" (Gage 2001: 134). That Newton was also the first man to make the idea of infinite void space a strict concept of modern science may be viewed simply as another testimony to his genius, but, in fact, the internal link between light and space, witnessed in the history of philosophy, prompts one to see the two inventions, the analysis of white light into the spectre of colours along with the new conception of space, as somehow related aspects of modern thought.

In recent studies the ancient and Renaissance predilection for line has sometimes been brought into connection with the homoerotic ambience of the respective societies (Paglia 1990: 168). Being not ready to comment on it, I would like to refer to the tradition that seems to confirm the feminine flavour of *colore* in contrast to the masculine *disegno*. Since the Renaissance, the excellent use of colour on the part of a painter was usually associated with his skill in representing human flesh. In fact the argument of the delicate depiction of areas of flesh as a criterion for excellent painting was strongly deployed by Venetian theorists to contravene the Michelangesque stress on bone structure and muscles (Dolce 1968: 143, 155). Giorgione's famous *Sleeping Venus* (c. 1510), a picture combining the deeply felt charm of the naked female body with suggestive landscape scenery, is usually considered the initiator of a new tradition in Renaissance painting. Thus the beautiful metaphor Ernst Gombrich offers to describe the achievement of the foremost Baroque colourist, Peter Paul Rubens, '[he transmuted] the Classical idiom into living flesh' (Gombrich 1987: 131), loses its overtly figurative sense when seen in a strict art historical context. In the 18th century, when a modern concept of fine arts started to form on the basis of Pre-Romantic considerations, including the ideology of the picturesque and the high status of painting, Denis Diderot claimed that colour was the soul and life of all beings, which puts to the test the painter's feeling for flesh (*le sentiment de la chair*) (Diderot 1955: 43, 46). Remarkably, Diderot is also the author of *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (*Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*, 1771), a bold and caustic dialogue on the sexual prejudices of the civilised world, and his compassionate attitude toward

women bears the mark of the pre-revolutionary emancipation movement. The regular harking back to 'flesh', in an effort to substantiate the concept of colour, proves to have a very characteristic parallel in the history of the word 'colour' itself. This is especially illuminating if we consider that the Romantic tendency we have tried to relate historically with the promotion of colour fed partly on the primitivistic 'return to nature'. That is, colour is traditionally associated not only with painting (cf. Fr. *peinture*, Ger. *Malerei*, Fin. *maalaustaide*), but it derives etymologically from the root that refers, quite generally in Indo-European languages, to the skin, or to the outward aspect of things. In Greek, this line of development is shown by the relationship of *chroma* to *chros* ('surface of body, skin, flesh, body'); for the English *hue* similar evidence is provided by the more archaic Swedish *hy* ('skin, complexion'). In Russian цвет ('colour') bears reference to цветок ('flower'). The Estonian language has retained this kind of meaning in the old word for colour, *karv* ('hair'). Thus the almost idiomatic distinction between the intellectual sculptor dealing with the invariable forms of being and the sensual painter addicted to mere appearances has its justification in the history of 'colour' as well. This, in turn, entitles us to say that the debate over *disegno e colore* was in a sense also a dispute over the relative values of feminine and masculine perceptions of space.

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