

H-France Review Vol. 19 (July 2019), No. 141

Laurence Schmidlin, ed., *Enraptured by Color: Printmaking in Late-Nineteenth Century France*. Vevey: Musée Jenisch Vevey; Zürich: Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, 2017. 248 pp. Foreword, color figures, notes, glossary, list of illustrations, and bibliography. \$55.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9783858817983.

Review by Anne Leonard, Clark Art Institute.

Despite their wide appeal, color prints have long been a contested category. The problem dates back to the very beginnings of printmaking in Europe in the early fifteenth century. In those early years, adding color into the black-and-white image was not inherent to the printmaking process but could be accomplished only by hand-coloring of individual impressions after printing.[1] To some, this variable coloration on images produced from a consistent matrix seemed antithetical to prints' supposed status as fungible, replicable objects, just as the presence of an "artist's hand"—usually different from that of the print's designer—laid bare the divided labor of the print, thus muddying authorial intention. Complicating matters further, the incorporation of color often implied an aspiration to imitate works in another medium, most usually painting, resulting in what was seen as an essentially bastard art. Historically, this negative view of color printmaking has gained the most traction whenever the claims for printmaking as an independent art are strongest. There have been moments, however—the late nineteenth century in France was one of them—when printmakers' desire to mark off their art as distinct from others beautifully conjoined with the techniques and possibilities offered by color. At such moments, color became a fundamental rather than supplemental aspect of the print.

Laurence Schmidlin's gorgeous exhibition catalogue contributes to a thriving bibliography on late-nineteenth-century French color printmaking that has recently seen several notable additions. It is beautifully produced, boasting exquisite paper, and the delicacy of the color images deserves highest commendation. Color has in fact been incorporated into the whole design: block texts, running in parallel columns in French and English, are each given a distinctive hue that varies by chapter. Full-color images, generously supplied and stunningly reproduced, occupy more than half of the total page count. To say this is no less than the topic demands would be boorishly closing one's eyes to the major costs that such a publication entails. Meanwhile, the essays are well-balanced, informative, and translated with remarkable smoothness and accuracy. A substantial glossary of printmaking terms accompanies the checklist and bibliography in the back matter. The works in the exhibition came from two main sources: the Musée Jenisch Vevey and an anonymous private collection.

Schmidlin offers the lead essay, a clearly written overview of color in prints from the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries that sets out the main issues for a lay readership. She notes that early woodcuts were “meant to be painted,” usually as a way of conveying information to the viewer, but that little artistic intention can be inferred from a colored print of this period. Renouncing color allowed early modern printmakers not only to retain control over their vision and final product, but also to “establish the specificity of their art” (p. 14). Schmidlin credits Jacob Christoph Le Blon’s three-color process, an invention specific to printmaking itself, as the turning point in this history. Especially with the rise of printmaking as an autonomous art form in the nineteenth century, the stakes changed, to the point that “[a]ny ‘imitation’ of painting through the use of color was decried as a form of usurpation” (p. 21). Quite the reverse, the *peintre-graveurs’* experiments in printed color exerted a noticeable influence on their painting, as can be seen in the cases of Paul Gauguin and Pierre Bonnard. Schmidlin usefully distinguishes between artists working *in* versus *with* color: for those in the latter category, color was a “chosen method of execution” (p. 26, quoting André Mellerio) that opened up new aesthetic possibilities even in other media.

Cyril Lécousse’s essay, “From the Impression to the Science of Color,” evaluates the Divisionist painters’ influence on printed color. Surely, the Divisionists’ experiments in this realm enjoyed a greater scientific prestige than, say, the highly personal “How do you see this tree?” Synthetism of Gauguin and Émile Bernard, yet the latter approach speaks equally to the fin-de-siècle fascination with color theory of all kinds. [2] For that reason, Lécousse might have considered extending his scope to include artists less enamored of Michel Eugène Chevreul. He notes that the perceived rationality of Neoimpressionist color theory offered, in the first place, an antidote to the Impressionists’ subjective approach to color. To printmakers, the decomposition of hue according to scientific principles would have sounded familiar, for it offered productive analogies with Le Blon’s technique (based on Newtonian optics) of recomposing colors from three primary components. (Lécousse reminds us that Charles Blanc’s 1867 popularization of color theory, *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, was indebted to Le Blon as well as Chevreul.) Although some printmakers did rely on optical mixture—notably Paul Signac, Henri-Edmond Cross, Maximilien Luce, and Théo van Rysselberghe—few strictly followed Divisionist technique. The wood engravings undertaken by Camille and Lucien Pissarro are among the scarce examples in this realm, involving an intensely laborious process. Even the color lithographers of the period, who might have attempted Divisionist color procedures with less crushing effort, were more apt to embrace the broad planes of color seen in Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints than the “dots and commas” of their Neoimpressionist peers. All told, it seems that the color experimentalists of the period had asserted their freedom of expression at too much cost to have it reined in by any regime they found too dogmatic.

Phillip Dennis Cate opens his essay with the piquant observation that in the last decade of the nineteenth century, artistic color printmaking “reached a pinnacle of critical appreciation and deprecation” (p. 80). Given these mixed fortunes, it is no surprise that André Marty’s *Estampe originale* albums, now viewed as summits of technical achievement and artistic originality, were lightning rods for praise and criticism alike. Color prints, despite or more likely because of the commercialism that undermined their status in conservatives’ eyes, offered a promising and viable means for experimental printmakers to earn both money and fame. Cate’s essay opens out from Lécousse’s to consider a wider variety of techniques for printed color, each used to greater or lesser degree in the voluminous production of the 1890s. While acknowledging Jules Chéret’s immense and foundational contribution to the poster as an art form, Cate reserves his fullest

tribute for the much less prolific Toulouse-Lautrec, who, with “only” thirty-three posters to his name, transformed the genre. Even if Chéret introduced decisive pictorial innovations, he did not insert himself into his poster designs. By contrast, Toulouse-Lautrec’s posters are startlingly modern in their self-referentiality—a quality that, far from conflicting with their commercial purpose, if anything enhanced it. Today we understand that in advertising a singer, a dancer, or a particular night spot, Toulouse-Lautrec was ultimately advertising himself: if we remember *them* at all, it is because of him.

It is easy to forget that all of Toulouse-Lautrec’s street success with the lithographic poster was occurring against the background of a prohibition on color prints in the Salon. Only in 1899 did the Société des artistes français lift this ban, with a bracingly laconic concession: “Works [engravings and lithographs] in color will be admitted” (p. 89). Almost immediately afterwards, printmakers and publishers folded up their efforts—as if official blessing, by suddenly recasting the whole enterprise as tame rather than transgressive, had ended the magic.

For any era of printmaking, the chance element of survival grossly skews the histories that get written. Gilles Genty addresses this important question in a somewhat anecdotal essay devoted to the Nabi printmakers. Alongside the albums and single sheets commissioned by noted dealers such as Edmond Sagot, Édouard Kleinmann, Siegfried Bing, and Ambroise Vollard, Genty also acknowledges the vast quantity of printed imagery that appeared in more incidental, ephemeral formats. So much of this output has been lost, overlooked, or excluded from traditional accounts that Genty deems it difficult to form a secure assessment of contemporary reception. He cautions against the claims of out-and-out “poster mania” during the Belle Époque and notes the dismal sales figures for Vollard’s single-artist portfolios, pointing out in both cases that today’s enthusiasm for these works has no doubt clouded our understanding of how they were viewed at the time. What the *Enraptured by Color* publication does allow us to see more clearly, thanks to a wealth of trial proofs from a private collection, is the process by which successive layers of color were superposed to create any given impression. The proof states reproduced here, from Maurice Denis’s *Amour* suite in particular, but also including extraordinary sequences for sheets by Édouard Vuillard, Maximilien Luce, Paul Signac, and Ker-Xavier Roussel, are one of the glories of the catalogue, exposing with uncanny subtlety the stakes of the “marriage” (as Odilon Redon called it, cited p. 130) between artist and printer. To watch the series of color separations accumulate—to see the gradual, circling approach (through trial and error) to a final chromatic equilibrium—is also to witness the emergence of form itself. Starting from nothing, figures, props, and landscapes are conjured into being, perhaps only to slip out again and reappear in a different intensity or hue. In Vuillard’s *La Naissance d’Annette* especially, birth offers a supreme metaphor for an adumbration of form in which line and color are as indivisible as flesh and blood.

Valérie Sueur-Hermel’s concluding essay on Japonisme and color prints brings the reader back in time to the heyday of Japonisme in the 1870s and 1880s. This essay—with its focus on color etching and woodcuts—seems to belong at the beginning of the history, before the “rise and fall” of color lithography documented by Cate and Genty. As Sueur-Hermel states, color was what most fascinated Western artists about Japanese prints, while “[p]rintmaking, more than any other medium, was the heart of Japonisme” both as “mode of expression and agent of transmission” (p. 207). Broadly speaking, two generations of late-nineteenth-century print revivalists looked to Japan: first the original etchers such as Édouard Manet, Félix Bracquemond, James McNeill Whistler, Edgar Degas, and Mary Cassatt; then the Nabi color lithographers and the woodblock printmakers (most notably Henri Rivière). Yet color woodblock printmaking

remained a recalcitrant medium for European artists. Even those who sought to master the technique, like the valiant Rivière, in the end channeled their efforts toward lithography, lured by its greater ease of production and distribution. That choice, however, necessarily separated the labor of the designer and the printer—in lithography, those could never be the same person—which meant abandoning the singular authorship touted by the early promoters of the “original print.” According to their gospel, this also jeopardized artistic integrity.

More can always be said about the scope of expertise required to make and market such complex prints. Understandably, the tendency has been (even since the days of Roger Marx) to focus on the marquee names of artist-designers, even though the posters, playbill covers, single-sheet prints, and portfolios that flooded fin-de-siècle Paris vitally depended on the specialized technical knowhow of printers and the commercial backing of publishers and dealers. Genty’s mention of the major figures in these realms is welcome, though current practice is still to leave them uncredited in the captions to individual works.[3] Over the past several years, even as we remain indebted to previous contributions from a generation ago, newer scholars in museums and the academy have put forth admirable research that is helping to integrate the histories of technology, art, and design within a broader cultural context.[4] Alongside this salutary trend, one must acknowledge the constant improvement in the color reproduction of images, which makes the latest wave of publications especially delightful not just to read but to look at. Taken together, these developments mean that scholarly publishing in the field of color printmaking now demonstrates a vibrancy equaling that of the prints themselves.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Laurence Schmidlin, “The Color of Prints: A Different Look at Printmaking from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Century”

Cyril Lécosse, “From the Impression to the Science of Color”

Phillip Dennis Cate, “The Victory of Color in Artistic Printmaking: 1890-1900”

Gilles Genty, “The Nabis and the Art of Color Printmaking”

Valérie Sueur-Hermel, “Impressions and Influences: Japonisme and Color Prints in Late Nineteenth Century”

NOTES

[1] *Printing Colour 1400-1700*, an admirable edited collection that documents a much wider use of printed color than is generally acknowledged in the first three centuries of European printmaking, contains nevertheless the following verdict in its preface: “The first three centuries of printing in colour were largely experimental and redundant, with few instances that can be claimed retrospectively as important technical, aesthetic, and commercial successes.” Peter Parshall, “Preface: The Problem of Printing in Colour,” in *Printing Colour 1400-1700: History, Techniques, Functions and Receptions*, ed. Ad Stijnman and Elizabeth Savage (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. xiii.

[2] This point is made in the recent exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, *Sérusier's "The Talisman": A Prophecy of Colour* (January 29-June 2, 2019), which includes color wheels developed by Paul Sérusier.

[3] *Toulouse-Lautrec Illustrates the Belle Epoque* (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2016), the catalogue of an exhibition curated by Genty, is a notable and welcome exception: despite a similar investment in full-page, full-color image galleries and exquisite production values, it scrupulously notes the origins of each lithograph as well as the multiple hands involved.

[4] Indispensable, now-classic older references include Phillip Dennis Cate and Sinclair Hamilton Hitchings, *The Color Revolution: Color Lithography in France, 1890-1900* (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1978); and Pat Gilmour, "Cher Monsieur Clot...Auguste Clot and His Role as a Colour Lithographer," in *Lasting Impressions: Lithography as Art*, ed. Pat Gilmour (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp. 129-182. Among newer references, note Laura Anne Kalba's work on chromolithographic print techniques in chapter five of her *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Commerce, Technology, and Art* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017); and Fleur Rosa Roos de Carvalho, *Prints in Paris 1900: From the Elite to the Street* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds; Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2017).

Anne Leonard
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
aleonard@clarkart.edu

Copyright © 2019 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172