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Laura Anne Kalba, *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Commerce, Technology, and Art*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017, xvii + 266 pp. List of illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$84.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-271-07700-0.

Review by Jeanne Morgan Zarucchi, University of Missouri–St. Louis.

Impressionism is undoubtedly the most well-known of all movements in Western art, and it enjoys enduring popularity among many people who otherwise have little interest in the so-called fine arts. Art museums may struggle to attract visitors to shows on works by contemporary artists, but an exhibition on Monet or Renoir will almost inevitably be a blockbuster. The populist appeal of Impressionist art can lead to its dismissal by some critics, who assume that because it seems easy to understand, it lacks intellectual depth. Artists went outside, painted quickly, and captured a moment; they used bright colors because they worked in bright sunlight. End of story.

Even those critics who admire Impressionism have often taken a reductionist view, attributing artists' use of strong, undiluted colors to the invention of the paint tube. This enabled artists to carry their working materials far away from the studio, working *en plein air*, and presumably encouraged them to experiment with the bright colors of paint squeezed straight out of the tube. These interpretations, however, fail to explain why Impressionist art was not just a passing fad, but succeeded in capturing the attention of the viewing public, influencing generations of artists, and opening the door to a conceptual, abstract way of looking at the world around us.

Art historian Laura Anne Kalba addresses these challenging questions in an innovative, meticulously researched, and beautifully written book, *Color in the Age of Impressionism*. Instead of focusing narrowly on an artistic genre, she takes on the broader perspective of French society in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In so doing, she makes a remarkable connection: that French industry was making advances in the mass-production of synthetic dyes, and that the world depicted in Impressionist art was in fact a response to, and a commentary upon, the way in which bright and even gaudy colors were permeating everyday life. Bright color from expensive dyes had historically been restricted to the domestic interiors of the wealthy, but suddenly there were colors everywhere, from the textiles used for clothing to the artificial flowers used on hats, and from the paint used on buildings to the printed advertising posters plastered on those buildings.

As Kalba describes this phenomenon in her introduction, the ubiquity of bright colors in the

public sphere brought about a change in modern visual culture: “the development of a consumer culture based on the sensual appeal of color fundamentally transformed collective categories of visual perception and understanding” (p. 2). Color was changing the way in which ordinary people experienced and understood their world, and Impressionism was one of the ways in which artists sought to explore the meanings and boundaries of that interaction.

In order to understand how industrial developments in color technology brought about this profound change in French social history, Kalba begins with the color theory articulated by the chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul in his book *De la Loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* [*On the Law of Simultaneous Contrast of Colors*], published in 1839. Far from being an esoteric treatise known only to scholars, this work was very influential for manufacturers of household goods. As Kalba points out, these manufacturers and designers did not always agree with Chevreul’s ideas, but they nevertheless took very seriously the idea that color has important meaning. Many designers believed that specific colors could express ideas, emotions, and even aspects of the consumer’s individual personality.

The second chapter explores how the demand for color variety and novelty was manifested in the nineteenth-century flower industry. This included not only horticulture, the growing and selling of real plants, but also the creation of artificial flowers, which were a vital component of feminine fashion. Kalba analyzes the flower industry as evidence that people were conscious of, and took pleasure in, the interplay between the real and the imaginary. This offers a thought-provoking rationale for the significance of flowers as a subject for Impressionist artists.

In the third chapter, Kalba takes on the ways in which Impressionist art depicted the colors of everyday life, using a selection of works by Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. In many of these paintings, depicting contemporary fashion, both naturally- and synthetically-produced paint colors were used in an intentionally artificial way. The artists were aware that synthetic dyes used for clothing tended to fade quickly, and Kalb argues that their choice to capture the dazzling brilliance of red or green striped gowns may be understood as a commentary on the transience of that brilliance. In other paintings, the artists emphasized color over line, testing the limits of what could be perceived as reality.

The fourth chapter takes the subject, and the reader, in an unexpected direction: fireworks and the pyrotechnic industry. Kalba points out that Étienne Lacroix, the owner of a fireworks plant in Toulouse, was a gifted amateur horticulturalist, as was also the earlier color theorist Michel-Eugène Chevreul. Lacroix was an award-winning cultivator of chrysanthemums, and Kalba asserts that “the color and fantasy of the floral bouquet dovetailed with the pyrotechnical bouquet—the usual term for designating the grandiose finale of fireworks shows” (p. 121). Although fireworks had been known in Europe since the late fourteenth century, she observes that technological innovations in the 1830s allowed the production of safe, affordable fireworks that could be seen by people of all classes. Kalba has made excellent use of sources such as newspaper illustrations, which documented the importance of color in eliciting viewers’ admiration; in a drawing from 1863, a bourgeois couple exclaims “look, there’s a red one, ah, there’s another blue one, oh how beautiful!” (p. 126, my translation). The chapter concludes with a remarkable poster created by Jules Chéret for the Paris Universal Exposition of 1889, for which the Eiffel Tower was built. The poster shows a scantily clad female fairy flying high above a fireworks explosion.

That artwork provides the transition to Kalba's fifth chapter, in which she undertakes the analysis of chromolithography, a technique first used for mass-produced color reproductions of paintings, and later responsible for the proliferation of posters, labels, and trade cards. The genre of the advertising poster was particularly significant; according to Kalba, "posters were powerful testimonies to the modern experience of color" (p. 149). Unlike other forms of commercial ephemera, they were often acknowledged by critics as having artistic merit and became desirable to collectors. The work of artist Jules Chéret is seen as being pivotal in establishing the poster as a genre of great artistic freedom, inseparably linked with an idealization of Parisian charm. Kalba provides key citations of numerous contemporary critics, who interpreted Chéret's work using language that refers explicitly to his use of color: "attractive visions of colors combined together with a prodigious cleverness, brilliant like poppies;" "a luminous symphony of yellow and blue" (p. 164).

The book's final section is presented as an "epilogue," which examines the impact of the introduction of color photography and the reinterpretation of color by Neo-Impressionist artists such as Georges Seurat. Kalba sees these developments as a continuation of the debate about the role of color in the emergence of modern visual culture. This debate continues into the present day, with color still being a point of contention in definitions of high art versus popular culture.

The book includes a thorough and helpful scholarly apparatus. There is an extensive bibliography separating entries for archival collections consulted, primary sources, and secondary sources. There is also a detailed index that is useful to scholars in a variety of disciplines; art historians, for example, can locate specific works by title as well as grouped under the name of the artist. Endnotes are grouped by chapter, and often include additional relevant information as well as full citations of source material. The Pennsylvania State University Press should also be commended for the excellent production quality of this volume. The book includes 117 figures, of which 106 are in full color, providing visual documentation that complements and reinforces the author's verbal commentary. The book is also well-designed, with a dual-column text and discreet running footers. Readers will appreciate the heavy, low-gloss paper and the elegant, easy-to-read typeface.

Overall, this book is an admirable work of scholarship that makes a very significant, original contribution to our understanding of how color has influenced the way in which people experience the world around them, as well as the ways in which artists have represented that world. It should be required reading not only for specialists in art history and visual culture, but also for any scholar of nineteenth-century French history.

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