

Colour harmony, subjective appreciation or ordered construction?

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ABSTRACT

Jacques Fillacier, in his book "Pratique de la couleur", (1) proposed a series of chromatic figures which are all produced by cuts in the three-dimensional colour space as shown in the most common atlases. These colourful units appear as harmonious. Is an evident coherence enough to produce a convincing harmony? It is indeed, insofar as the « *relation between the various parts of a whole thanks to which these very parts work towards the same overall effect* » can be appreciated.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nature, in some of its manifestations, offers colour associations which we spontaneously consider as harmonious: sunsets, rainbows, colour variations of tree leaves as well as the different shades in the petals of some flowers,... These associations present common features: the shade variations occur without pronounced breaks. Is it the reason why we consider these colour architectures as harmonious? Are there natural harmonies which are different from constructed harmonies?

« How lovely! », « These colours, what a harmony! » we have all heard such admiring exclamations from people contemplating paintings by Monet, Matisse, Bonnard or Turner or even Gauguin... These painters are known for their wonderful ability to use colour. The expression « colorist painter » is used to characterize them. Such expression is not used for Picasso not even for his works from the « blue and pink » periods. Yet, Picasso invented unusual colour units but neither the criticism nor the public admits that his paintings are endowed with the same charm as those by Matisse or Bonnard! Is this charm created by specific between associations colours? Does harmony stem from the colours themselves? Can we measure the distribution of the colours which form the harmony? Does a colour unit have to be continuous in order to appear harmonious?

2. METHOD

In the dictionary of The French Language, le Robert, harmony is defined as: « [the] *relation between the various parts of a whole thanks to which these very parts work towards the same overall effect*. (2) The author indicates that the word dates back to the twelfth century and that its initial meaning designated an « association » in music. The term stemming from the musical field is used for « associated sounds ». The issues at stake are: « *chord* », « *consonance* », « *dissonance* », « *euphony* » and « *rhythm* » ... These are the terms which are the most frequently used in debates on a choice of colours.

Let us consider a set of colour samples for themselves, with no functionality, in a neutral context devoid of all symbolic value. A set of ordered colours in a « desaturation triangle », which constitutes the basic system of most of colour atlases meets the criteria defined in the dictionary. In these figures, the colour variations gradually evolve in all directions and the perceptive spaces which separate the samples are equally regular. These units form harmonies which are so obvious that they create stereotypes. (3)

Is the readability of the relations between colours absolutely essential to the constitution of a harmony? Does the organization of samples have to be obvious?

An amateur observing a pictorial work might not see how a colour harmony is built but he will be sensitive to the quality of the association. Thus the impression of harmony is not established thanks to its a priori readability, but this readability, however subtle it might be and even if it is not consciously perceived, is necessary.

According to some, harmony and beauty are synonymous. Still, we can find beauty in colour combinations which do not or not perfectly correspond to the criteria that we have defined.

On several occasions in the eighties and the nineties, we carried out, at l'Ecole Nationale des Arts Décoratifs, experiments on the students' preferential choices in the area of colour combinations. Six groups of approximately twenty students in their second or third year fell in with this experience.

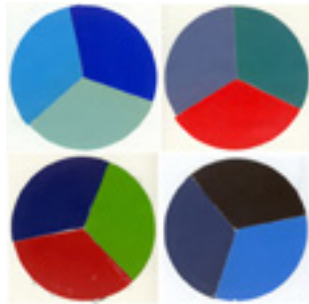


Figure 1



Figure 2

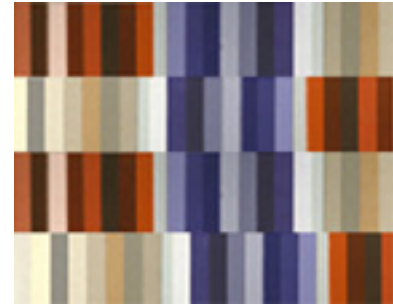


Figure 3

As we can see on the figure 1, the sets under observation were composed of three colours of the same size and shape, laid so as all the samples shared a common border. The students had to divide the colour sets into two groups: the « beautiful ones » and the « ugly ones ». Then the documents were shuffled. Thanks to a vote in which all the students took part by group, we could classify the documents from the most beautiful to the ugliest ones. Of course, some sets thought as « beautiful » by those who had created them were classified as « ugly » by others and conversely.

No strict rule emerged, yet a common feature characterized the choices: nearly all the sets considered as beautiful showed, to various degrees, a coherence which the ones considered as ugly lacked. The latter ones seemed more heterogeneous. The sets considered as being too monotonous were also generally rejected.

We also noted that the difference of brightness between the samples in the beautiful sets was often low.

We must be cautious with these results as the pleasure given by the sight of a colour in the colours of the triads also motivated choices...

Most of the time, to harmonise a chaotic set of colour samples, one just has to adjust the set of colours to one of the following parameters: hue, brightness or saturation. However colours without any links between them, but set in a regular geometrical space, benefit from this order. Figure 2. If the vividness of the rhythm is powerful enough, the colours seem to harmonise. A symmetrical construction confirms this phenomenon. Figure 3.

And even more surprising, any group of hues reproduced repetitively, stops being an accident and establishes itself as a voluntary construction and why not as a harmony?

The role played by the complementarity of colours in the construction of a harmony is not obvious. Maybe, because the phenomenon is not easy to define correctly. The complementarity changes indeed according to the device chosen: material mixing of pigmentary colours, mixing of lights, revolving discs, optical fusion of frames ... (4)

The complementarity creates a relation of symmetry between two colours, a union in a relation of opposition, a sort of positive /negative relationship.

3. CONCLUSION

Bonnard, as well as Matisse or Delaunay, belongs to this category of painters known as “colorists”. His painting charms a great number of amateurs. But where does this appeal come from? Does it come from the colours themselves (preferential choices) from their disposition (order and disorder) or from their distribution on the space of the canvas (geometry, rhythm and symmetry)? Certainly from all these elements. (5)

Needless to say, the theme plays a central role in the appreciation of a painted work. A garden in bloom, or a landscape at sunset, or a view of the Mediterranean Sea, inspires more ideas of harmony than a weeping woman by Picasso or a still life by Soutine. Still, the theme and the symbolical elements attached to it are not enough to create harmony. When we carry out cuts (virtual) in the painting, we bring into the open some of the basic associations on which the colour relations of the work hinge. The vertical and horizontal cuts emphasize the rhythms drawn by the brushstrokes. Figure 4.

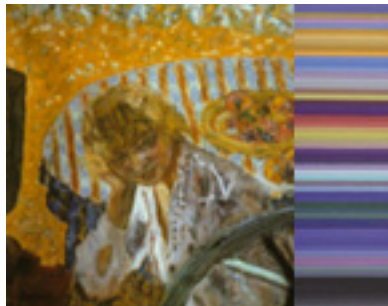


Figure 4 a



Figure 4b



Figure 5

The « fractionism » of the brushstroke rhythms the surface divided into clear and dark zones. The colours are organized around some dominant hues, in which colours, in small doses, in opposition of tonality become embedded. Although the colours are not excessively saturated, an impression of chromatic richness ... and harmony emanates from it.

Interrogation

A regular series of variation of brightness, composed of samples of achromatic colours, calculated according to a logarithmical progression of the blending from white to black forms a particularly harmonious gradation. The better the progression is, the higher the feeling of harmony is. Does it mean that the ideal harmony is a stereotyped suite and besides an achromatic one?

William Blake (6) noticed that the paradise, the place of the perfect harmony as it is characterized in « Paradise lost » by Milton, (7) seemed rather dull. Do we have to conclude that seeking beauty in an achieved harmony would be a miscalculation?

A man, Alphonse Allais, revealed the existence of a work whose harmony seems perfect. Can't we consider this spotless white painting (8) as the expression of the ideal harmony ? Figure 5

References

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