

## Elizabeth Helsinger Seminar Notes

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**Session with Elizabeth Helsinger**  
**May 14, 2007**  
**Part I**

We began with a conversation about color and the history of the color wheel. Color wheels are most frequently arranged as circles, but nothing prevents one from using triangles or other geometric forms. There are considerable differences of opinion as to whether there are specific sets of rules for creating color harmonies. It is debated, in fact, if there are set ways in which secondary colors are created from primaries.

In the 1830s there were debates, particularly in England and France, on the utility of educating the laboring poor in the ‘correct notions or laws’ of color harmonies; these laws would be taught through rote learning. The opposing view proposed that workers should be taught color theory in the same way as artists understood it. It was argued that this knowledge would be important for workers engaged in textile manufacturing. The general question was how to educate the eye. A Workingman’s College was founded in London where both Ruskin and Rossetti taught.

We discussed the differences in color phenomena depending on whether color was perceived as projected light or color pigment. The differences between absorbing and reflecting light rays were explained. This topic made for a lively dialogue between the (humanist) artists and the physicists. Then we discussed the general decline in philosophical analysis that the topic of “color” has endured. Color has the reputation of not being “true” because it partakes of illusion. Locke called “color” a secondary, not a primary sensation. And Platonism has a distrust of color perception.

We compared Rossetti’s ‘Venetian pastoral’ sonnet with Giorgione’s painting “La fête pastorale”. The earlier version of the poem used many more color terms; later versions used the words of the poem to record mentally heard or felt sensations. We compared this to Manet’s “Afternoon in the Park.” Manet engages the viewer directly in the way that the principle female figure challenges the viewer. We discussed Michael Fried’s critique of this work and Francis Haskell’s *The Artist and Writer in France*. Ruskin thinks melancholy is in the perceiver, not in the colors or in the artist. We discussed the place of clouds in modern art, especially in Turner’s work.

We then compared the use of color in the paintings of Delacroix and Cezanne. In his *Letters on Cezanne*, Rilke describes how Cezanne’s objects respond to each other (pp.77-78). There is an impossibility of making the dimensions (i.e. the perspective) work the

way it does in Renaissance art. This experience leads the viewer to the notion that what is being seen is paint on canvas. Roger Fry describes how painting makes demands on space in these works. We considered the “warring planes” of orange and green. It is color that seems to hold the objects on the surface. We also compared Cezanne with a Chardin still life

**Session with Elizabeth Helsinger**  
**May 14, 2007**  
**Part II**

**COLOR**

Much of the day was spent exploring color as a secondary feature. Looking back at Plato and Aristotle, we realized that in the ancient philosophical tradition, color was an accident, not a quality. From this comes the term “Chromo-Phobia”—a distrust of color as unreliable especially in the distinction between color and form. As late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, John Locke was describing color as a secondary property. Beth described color as “deceptive, illusory, slippery.” even as “delusive”—as not reliable, as an excess or luxury. She noted an increasing interest in perception and the unreliability of human vision.

Color seems to have become important in the Renaissance as artists moved from egg tempera paints to oils through which it became possible to create new and expensive coloring. From the mid-18<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, we find a renaissance of color, perhaps as resistance to the over-rationalization of the enlightenment. Color became allied with imagination and sensory experience. Out of this came the work of the colorists. Newton’s work on optics, especially on the perception of color through light, and Goethe’s theory of color seemed to initiate a more serious interest in color. In the mid-eighteenth century, Baumgarten founded an aesthetics grounded in perception. This grew into the neuro-physiology of perception and vision, especially as methods of producing paints and dyes changed and industry began to work with chemists to produce reliable colors for materials for clothing, rugs or ceramics.

We looked at slides of Titian, Rosetti and Turner as colorists—the Venetian school influencing the painters of the early industrial revolution, especially in England. We noted Ruskin praising Rosetti’s flesh tones, comparing him favorably with Turner as a colorist.

We spent some time with Albert Gregory’s work on “Leaves”—a color program with which Stuart Patterson worked in detail. This program allows students to understand the effect of colors in relationship to one another. By simply changing the background or the foreground color of a simple shape, the color can appear radically different.

We spent the remainder of the afternoon on Turner, beginning with Ruskin's acclamation of his work. Ruskin works with the notion of seeing as a process—a temporal component of visual experience, a metaphor or simile which sets up associations. With Turner, color becomes the representative of light. We looked at a series of Turner sketches, then at what he called “color beginnings”—bands of color which indicated horizontal color lines. He would do these sketches and color beginnings at the site of the painting quickly and then returned to the studio to work on the paintings, adding figures last. He did his final touches at the galleries in which the pictures were hung after he saw the relationship of his paintings to others being displayed, thus drawing the viewers' eyes to his work.

We spent a considerable amount of time examining slides of Turner's “Slave Ship” and Ruskin's remarks upon that painting. Ruskin makes a complex narrative out of Turner's painting, validating it as both an action and a landscape. The political impact of the painting plainly reveals Turner's opposition to slavery, and plainly celebrates Britain as the nation which has already outlawed this particular barbarity.

**Session with Elizabeth Helsinger**  
**May 15, 2007**  
**Color**

Elizabeth Helsinger began the session by directing us to a study of Delacroix's *Algerian Women* (Mel Wells), acrylic on paper. At the same time the group was directed to review the sections of the Baudelaire reading where he contrasted draftsmen and colorists: colorists feel their way through a piece, using emotions to intuit a path across the page, focusing on gesture rather than contour, transitioning to a more abstract engagement; the draftsman creates with lines and contours, fashioning the image as a structure. The contrast between the draftsman and colorists can be seen in Turner's beginnings with color: the draftsman creates a perfect outline, contoured, and then fills in with color, whereas the colorist lets the color bleed out of the lines, mixing and clouding—much like Turner. There were incredible tensions between both camps on which needed to be emphasized, the color or the outline. As an argument for the colorist perspective, we were directed to Delacroix's *Lion Hunt* and *Liberty*. Both of these paintings have a wild, emotionally driven feeling—they do not look finished in the draftsman's sense of the word. But that is not what is important in these pieces. They are energetic, dynamic, always in flux; it's hard to distinguish one body from the other as they twist, roll, and spiral into each other.

The question was asked: “Can we unpack the term *Gesture*?” It was answered that Delacroix, for instance, was heavily influenced by literature. Contrasts between English and French literature were noted. For example, Shakespeare was not respected by the French due to his constant use of a high/low dichotomy. English literature, and painting, was known for its naturalness whereas French literature and painting was known for its urbanity and formalism. The gardens of Versailles, for example, were meticulously planned and manicured while a typical English garden was allowed to grow more wildly, naturally. One could attach a political symbolism to this comparison: the engineered French garden represents Continental Monarchy and the complex hierarchy of

Catholicism and the wild English garden represents British liberty from stricter top-down structures.

It was then discussed that *Lion Hunt* was heavily influenced by Romantic writings; Byron's name was mentioned, which dealt with the "other", the exotic, the beast.

We moved back to Baudelaire. Is he at a loss when talking about color? We went to page 54 (from *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, Penguin Classics, 1972) and found that Baudelaire is creating his own landscape, one that is clearly imaginary. He uses, like Ruskin, scientific language; colors are described as shimmering, melting and changing—verbs of progress and motion. His writings focus on the interaction of color. Today, for us to look at a beginning study, a sketch would be like Baudelaire looking at the finished works of someone like Turner, as people back then were used to only seeing painting in a more traditional, polished, final form.

We looked to page 57 and found more precision: Harmony and Melody. Harmony is the base theory of color. Melody is the unity of color. To differentiate between harmony and melody Baudelaire inserts a temporal factor: melody connects notes of color, reaching for a conclusion. There is a need to connect visually the different touches of color in different places; this is where the melody comes in. The question was asked: "Are gesture and melody the same? Is there a continuous beginning, middle and end?" The answer came as a question: "Is there a linearity of color?" It was also said that gesture is the action the artist makes in establishing the image. Energy, in this respect, is key, expressing both a physical inhabitation of both the motion and the subject.

It was commented upon that Delacroix was not stylized by uniqueness. But he was instinctual as opposed to calculating. There is an aspect of time here as well, bookending both ends of the images' life. We looked at Delacroix's *Dante*. Here, there are more defined lines. We looked to Baudelaire, page 61: The lines are strong and must have elicited a powerful response from an audience. We then went to Pages 66-67: Here Baudelaire says that nature is a dictionary to be consulted before one paints. The art, however, can come straight from the mind—one should use imagination, not truth. Detail can be sacrificed to the whole, where more important aspects exist such as movement, color and atmosphere. Lines themselves are not separate entities but rather the intimate fusion of two colors.

We discussed Baudelaire's sense of intervening air. We went to pages 56-57 and there learned that the colorist can be paradoxical; a study of nature does not necessarily look like nature; rather, it might approximate nature. The painter is aware of the role air plays between the pigments in that the viewer has to take an active role in creating a harmony of the image. We also discussed the fact that, with Delacroix, one cannot look at the paintings up close because the works weren't designed for such close scrutiny and if one is too close melody disappears. Baudelaire gives a large role to mistiness and a lack of recognition. It stimulates the imagination. We looked at *Invitation to the Voyage*, which takes place in a port city, a hazy, transitory space. In this space the intervention of air triggers the imagination.

We then looked at Delacroix's painting of Jesus Christ. It was mentioned that Delacroix is translating both word and picture. He is capturing the moment, really illustrating. It was then said that this is not necessarily an illustration but a realization; it is not subservient to the text; rather, it encapsulates the story. It was asked if Delacroix's

*Dante* is a dramatization, as it captures gesture, body and figures, inhabits and invents the character.

We discussed how theater pieces can serve as freeze frames and can inspire paintings. We then moved on to Cindy Sherman, a photographer, who stimulates the construction of a narrative around the subject's life. We discussed how artists want to overcome the inherently static nature that traps an image in the moment. Moreover, which moment does an artist choose, that just before the climax of the action in question or that just after? It was suggested that people prefer the moment before the ultimate climax as it leaves space for further narrative.

We then moved on to discuss some passages in "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Lamia" by Keats. It was mentioned that the words "flush" and "blush" are etymologically related: there is the rush of blood, a rising, a throbbing; and the woman blooms, unfolds. This moved to comments on the sexualizing of plants i.e. bloom = sexually mature.

We discussed passages from William Morris's *The Defense of Guinevere*, in which there are vivid depictions of violence. Symbolism doesn't quite describe it. The color vocabulary is similarly drastic; there aren't any shades; instead there are just solid colors and their corresponding names—red, white, etc. We moved on to the poem "The Gilliflower of Gold." We focused on the heraldic sign of the knight, which is a battle cry and also a means of identification. Figuratively, this also works as a focus for flashback. He is writing home. There is an association with the Gilliflower stained with blood and the blood spattering the knight's helmet, but there are no direct (Modernist) narrative connections. It is all implied, for instance, in a recollection of blood dripping on a bed of Gilliflowers. There is a juxtaposition of memories shifting between sexuality and violence. Momentary violence, contrast, is also used to shift from real to remembered to imagined. Color is being used as an indicator of psychological activity. Actions such as these are not directly revealed; rather, they are presented in the structure of the poem. Keats does and does not want to discuss, for instance, sexuality and violence—so he uses the image of the blood spattered helmet. In this decorative poem, the speaker is dazed while also remembering something that he can't quite articulate. Then there is the Gilliflower as a chivalric crest that refers to an entire back story, a family history, which, in a way, fashions the narrative as an epic in the process of becoming. There was also discussion of the joining, through marriage, of two lineages. The crest (a shield), would be redesigned to incorporate the crests of both families. The shields would be quartered and then read as a series of planes. There was an order to reading these images, in temporal slices, creating juxtaposition without explanation.

We looked at Morris's the poem "The Wind." The sound of the wind intrudes into the poem and brings the protagonist back into the present. Once again, we have action (violence) represented by the interaction of colors: Oranges against greens: "Something will scream." The protagonist doesn't move because he doesn't want violence to break out. The woman in the poem was dead, and the blood was there all along. There is an ambiguity in their embrace—sex taking place whilst violence lurks everywhere. The protagonist is afraid that violence will enter into things, and, even though he tries to contain it, the violence occurs anyway. The narrative is buried in the relationships of colors. He doesn't want the narrative to bubble to the surface by avoiding the shocks of narrative interlocking. He wants the blindness and impartiality of the wind. There are also

interesting color relationships. Orange and green in particular have a deeply disturbing relationship. The orange threatens to break down into its primaries when innocence, represented by the color yellow, disappears, and he's left with only blood. This shows the way the mind works: it moves against the will with one memory leading to another. The underlying connection between one memory and the next is the violent murder and is also connected to love and sex.

**Session with Elizabeth Helsinger**  
**June 5, 2007**  
**Part I**

We began by talking about landscape as a Western phenomenon. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries landscape became a point of interest, but it was mostly the area of art historians. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Dutch and Italian painters turned to landscapes and brought greater interest to the genre. Landscape was the first genre for which the British developed a school, its apex being Constable and Turner. Landscape was the dominant genre in the West from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The aesthetics of landscape paintings serves a social and political function. It was asked: "What's going on in these paintings?" Landscape paintings were popular with those who had money to travel and would commission the paintings (or, perhaps, paint themselves) to capture the sights they saw on their travels. These pictures were also commissioned by wealthy aristocrats who wanted pictures painted of their estates to show their power, as land ownership meant power. In this sense, there are social, political and economic motivations for the creation of these paintings, thus combining wealth and power with beauty.

There was also a dark side of the landscape. Those who captured the landscape also worked the landscape, doing everything to make it look better, razing unsightly villages, for instance, if the powerful commissioner of the work did not want to depict poverty. The peasants were not usually depicted realistically; if they were in the painting, they were usually depicted as being jolly and happy, not down-trodden and work-weary.

Landscapes were also used for nationalistic purposes beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the end of the French Revolution. Britain, of course, was an opponent of the French Revolution, and also the emerging European power. Britain inherits the European tradition, Western culture.

We also looked more closely at traditional figures, and also at the school in the 1960s known as "Land Art." We then looked at Cosgrove's introduction to the second edition of *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*; he writes about the viewer and the viewed being a certain distance away from each other and thus being two distinctly separate things.

We looked at Ann Whiston Spirn's essay "'One with Nature': Landscape, Language, Empathy, and Imagination", where she claims that landscapes are multi-sensory: we see them and imagine being in them. This is much like the themes of the poets.

We discussed how landscape is an uncertain art. It cannot predict the effects of time, natural forces or new materials. The poets make it clear that landscape is a human way of organizing the land.

We looked at Claude Lorraine's painting *Landscape with Dancing Figures*. This is an example of scenes being framed as complete by using dark borders, which, as in this case, were often trees. This strategy keeps the eye on the dancing figures (biblical pictures in this case). It makes viewers think of life in the countryside. It was asked if *Dancing Figures* was an example of a naturalistic landscape or an idealized landscape. It was asked if there was such a thing as a non-idealized landscape painting. It was answered that there were things that were simply produced. The initial innovation is adopted by other painters and thus becomes part of a stylization. We see in categories, and, because of that, a purely naturalistic rendering is impossible. This would be something akin to the "Child's eye" in Ruskin or the "Convalescent" in Baudelaire.

There was also discussion of the extent to which these landscapes depict something of a "golden age" with the peasants being not only happy and dancing, but there are also anachronistic images of ruins and castles.

We looked next at Claude Lorraine's *Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*. For Turner, this painting was important because it is a port city. It is a classical port in late afternoon. We paid particular attention to the time of day in the painting. It was mentioned that this painting could possibly be a more naturalistic landscape as it is a historical painting that does not feature gods and other such mythical figures.

We then looked at Turner's *Sun Rising through Vapor*. Turner makes the comparison that when Claude was painting light he was painting like the sun. Turner, on the other hand, was painting the sun itself. In fact, Turner wanted his work hung next to Claude's to show that Britain had picked up the tradition and indeed improved upon it. Claude's pictures are still compared to Turner's. They are sculptural. In many ways, though, Turner also painted idealized landscapes.

Turner has been criticized for the constant presence of litter (garbage) in his landscapes. Ruskin had a theory that Turner's fascination with litter stemmed from his impoverished childhood. Turner was viewed by many as being "too Cockney." Moreover, regardless the extent of his success, Turner refused to become a gentleman. Turner's landscapes were meant not only as masterworks but also as homage to the past. For instance, Turner's *Hannibal* is painted not only as a homage to the general in the ancient world, but he also painted it at the same time that Napoleon was marching into Italy by way of the same mountain passes. Turner was noted for pushing the bounds of what can be expressed in 2 dimensional painting; the events in the ground are swept up into the air, the sky, thus furthering the illusion that you are caught up as a spectator.

We discussed how Constable was usually compared with the Dutch landscape artists. Constable is also learning from Lorraine along with learning from the Dutch.

There was a brief period, 1810-1815, when Turner made more naturalistic studies that were less grand in construction (Thames River Valley studies). It was mentioned that there was sparse food importation during the blockade (during the wars). There was a new emphasis on British agriculture. The landscape paintings started to depict laborers much more heroically.

We looked at the "ugly realism" of Constable's river bank scenes. He depicts, for instance, rotting pilings. It was mentioned that we ought to look at landscape outside of

the traditional ways. Why then, should we look at Constable's more realistic, renderings? They are not sublime or beautiful. We were directed to Salvator Rosa's work in which "something terrible" is always happening in the landscape if one looks close enough.

**Session with Elizabeth Helsinger**  
**June 5, 2007**  
**Part II**

We looked at a number of paintings by Gainsborough, including that of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews. We noted a number of topics that this painting raises: male/female relations, class, dress, the relationship between the figures and their surroundings, the inclusion of the subjects' crops, which is the source of their power. We discussed conventions versus expectations. Gainsborough's landscapes are versions of Reynolds's "Fancy Pictures." Reynolds painted what were apparently non-posed portraits that imply the next action.

We then moved beyond the 18<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary artists. We discussed Richard Long and also the St. Martin's Art School in England where there was a rebellion against abstract art. They took walks through the landscape itself, marked it, and then photographed it. They then watched how it changed over time. This is similar to Robert Smithson's piece on the Great Salt Lake. In these examples, the artists are marking a place and establishing relationships with that site. There is permanence to these outdoor installations; they cannot be moved like a painting or sculpture. We then discussed walking art and its documentary aesthetic—one can't own the actual experience of the art, which is bound up in the making.

We then moved on to more poetry. We looked at some passages from Wordsworth's prelude. We noted that in Book I some passages communicate strong elements of fear, and that the first memories are auditory. In some passages there is presentation without analysis. There is also an underlying sense of guilt, aloneness—a small boy alone in a large landscape. There is an attempt to capture the fear of a child who doesn't yet have adult tools. In Book XII, we find a scene that is visually reconfigured when the protagonist revisits said scene. It does indeed match up to the previous scene, but the protagonist has different emotions when revisited. The landscape is made more powerful by inserting an element of time. What matters for Wordsworth is the affect, the emotional response; and, a visual configuration is what calls this up as opposed to a narrative delivering the feeling. We also looked at Constable's painting of Hadleigh Castle: Wordsworth wrote about this painting and it becomes the mnemonic for the loss of his brother.

**Session with Elizabeth Helsinger**  
**June 6, 2007**

On June 6<sup>th</sup> we met in Millennium Park in Chicago, at the Cloud Gate sculpture, frequently referred to as "The Bean." We walked around the entire area and the gardens. Conversation related to landscape topics as well as some interesting ideas for math and natural sciences courses (Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry) based on the sculpture

and the Gehry Pavilion. We then went to the Art Institute and looked at a number of related paintings, especially those by Poussin, Lorraine, and Turner.