

# **GLASGOW COLOUR STUDIES GROUP**

## **Notes following the Twenty-Third Meeting, 30th April 2014**

The twenty-third meeting of the GCSG took place in Room 1, English Language, University of Glasgow. Thanks are due to Carole Biggam who organized the meeting and acted as master of ceremonies, and to Christian Kay and Carole Hough who organized the refreshments.

Our speaker was Prof. Dr Karin Leonhard, Professor of Art History, University of Bonn, Germany.

### **Karin Leonhard spoke on ‘White Earth, or How to Cultivate Colour in the Field of Painting: Still Life Painting and Baroque Colour Theory’**

Her abstract is as follows:

In the history of colour theory, it is impossible to ignore how far the influence of antiquity, especially of Aristotle, reached into early modern times. The Greek text *De Coloribus* was first ascribed to Aristotle and then to Theophrastus and Strato, but was probably created by an anonymous member of the peripatetic school. It was well known during the Middle Ages and studied far into the early modern period. *De Coloribus* starts with an enigmatic passage: “Those colours are simple which belong to the elements, fire, air, water and earth. For air and water are naturally white in themselves, while fire and the sun are golden. The earth is also naturally white, but seems coloured because it is dyed.” How are we to understand this passage? I will take it as a starting point for an investigation into the relationship between physical reality and colour perception – not least because it presents an opportunity for a fresh look at the colouring in paintings, especially in still life and landscape painting of the early modern period. The 16th and 17th centuries saw some epistemological shifts that would fundamentally change the concept of colour. This paper concludes with a discussion of when and why at some point in the historic discourse, colour stopped being an inherent quality of bodies and became the product of surface textures interacting with light.

Commentary (by Carole Biggam; checked by Karin Leonhard)

Prof. Leonhard began with an explanation of the statements on colour contained in the *De Coloribus* (*DC*) (see above). These statements are very odd to modern readers and yet influenced artists and others for centuries, until scientific experimentation (especially microscopy) required a different explanation. The “colours which belong to the elements” include the three white elements: air, water and earth, while fire and the sun are golden. However, the *DC* includes other effects such as lighting and reflectance, and processes of change, such as heating and soaking, in its colour explanations. Heat and light are said to cause colour change, as seen in the ripening of fruit or the greying of a person’s hair, so this colour theory is clearly based on observation. Wood when burning glows red, and this explains the *DC* statement that when black is burnt, it becomes red. Purple is considered to be the most significant colour and to be positioned midway between light and dark (heat and moisture).

Prof. Leonhard has studied how these notions of colour passed into sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painting, especially in Dutch still-lives. The flowers in floral still-lives are very well-

observed and depicted in great detail. They are usually a riot of colour, emerging as a group from a dark background. The flowers in the centre are often painted more brightly than the others, as if reflecting light and drawing the viewer's attention to that area, while the more marginal flowers tend to be in 'cool' colours such as blue or purple. This harmonious but three-dimensional effect with a sense of pictorial depth is known in Dutch art theory as *houding*.

Prof. Leonhard showed the audience several paintings which illustrated these principles. A painting by Gottfried Schalken (1643–1706) clearly showed the centrality of light from fire, standing clear of a dark background. Schalken produced several paintings of people in candlelight. But it is the still-lives which illustrate this use of colour so well. They often contain fruit in addition to flowers, and depictions of grapes, for example, show the colour changes discussed in the *DC*, as they ripen into purple. Moisture was believed to turn black under the influence of heat, for example, from the sun. Unripened grapes are yellower because their moisture has not yet blackened. Heat will make them darker green, and more heat will darken them further to purple. A still-life may show a variety of these stages of maturity. The principles described in the *DC* are widely applied, for example, in one painting a fire on a building in the distance is turning the sky darker, that is, is blackening the sky through the effect of heat. A painting by Cornelis de Heem (1631–1695) depicts a magnificent parrot with long, sweeping tail perched on an overturned basket of fruit and flowers which are cascading diagonally across the canvas, a direction which mirrors the parrot's tail. The very pale green grapes have clearly only recently been exposed to the warmth which will darken them.

The long-accepted notions of colour as exemplified by the *DC*, became greatly problematic by the end of the seventeenth century. It had been believed that we hardly ever see pure colours, namely, the 'inherent' colours of an object, as they are always mixed, and altering as a result of processes such as heating and soaking. Nonetheless, effects like iridescence were hard to explain. In the seventeenth century, however, scientific methodology was being developed, and researchers into optics investigated the difference between 'real' and apparent colours. There was a shift at the end of the century towards believing that *all* colour is apparent rather than inherent. The age-old doctrine of the four elements clashed with the findings of microscopists who observed that, under magnification, all colours seem to look washed out or greyish. It became evident that it was the reflection of light from an object which 'created' its colour in the human visual system. The earlier philosophy and symbolism of painting had been undermined.

Prof. Leonhard's most recent article is:

'Painted Poison: Venomous Beasts, Herbs, Gems and Baroque Colour Theory' (*Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 61 (2011), 116–147).

## News

If you have suggestions for, or offers of GCSG meetings (any format), please contact Carole Biggam at [c.p.biggam@btinternet.com](mailto:c.p.biggam@btinternet.com) Please note that we attempt to produce a balanced programme (i.e. different disciplines) and do not necessarily accept talks in the order in which they are offered. Nonetheless, all offers are most welcome and will be acknowledged.

Please report any new publications (books or articles) or other colour-related news on our discussion list at [ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk)