

Paul Signac, excerpts from *From Eugène Delacroix to Neo-Impressionism* (1899)

I. Documents

1. To think that the Neo-Impressionists are painters who cover canvases with little multicolored spots is a rather widespread mistake. We will prove this later on, but for now affirm it. This mediocre dot method has nothing to do with the aesthetic of the painters we are defending here, nor with the technique of Divisionism they use.

The Neo-Impressionist does not *stipple*, he *divides*. And dividing involves:

Guaranteeing all benefits of light, coloration and harmony by:

- i. *An optical mixture of pigments which are pure (all the tints of the prism and all their tones);**
- ii. *The separation of different elements (locally applied color, lighting colors, their reactions, etc.);*
- iii. *The balance of these elements and their proportion (following laws of contrast, deterioration, and irradiation);*
- iv. *Choosing a touch that is proportionate to the size of the painting.*

The method expressed in these four paragraphs will govern color for the Neo-Impressionists. Most of them will also apply the more mysterious laws which discipline lines and direction and guarantee harmony and beauty of order.

Informed in this way about line and color, the painter will definitely determine the linear and chromatic composition of his painting. Its dominant directions, tone and tint will fit the subject he is attempting to handle.

2. Before going any further, let us invoke the authority of the genius of Eugene Delacroix: the laws on color, line and composition that we have just listed summarize Divisionism and were promulgated by the great artist.

We will go through all aspects of the aesthetic of the Neo-Impressionists one by one. We will then compare them to the lines written by Eugene Delacroix on the same issues, in his letters, articles and three volumes of his *Journal*.¹ We will show that these painters are only following the teaching of this master and pursuing his research.

3. The Neo-Impressionist's technique aims, as we have seen, at obtaining a maximum of color and light. Is this aim not clearly outlined by the beautiful cry of Eugene Delacroix:

“The enemy of all painting is grey!”²

To obtain this colorful and luminous vividness, the Neo-Impressionists only make use of pure colors which are close to the colors of the prism, or as close as substance can be to light. Is this not another way of following the advice of one who writes:

“Ban all earthy colors”³

* The words tone and tint are usually used indiscriminately. By tint we specifically understand the quality of color, and by tone the degree of saturation or luminosity of a tint. The gradation of one color into another produce a series of intermediary tints and the gradation of one of these tints towards light or dark will move through a succession of tones. [Author's note]

Of these pure colors, they will always respect the purity. They will avoid soiling them by mixing them on their palette (except of course with white and with neighboring colors, for all the tints of the prism and all their tones). They will juxtapose them in clear and small brush strokes and through optical mixture, will obtain the desired result, with the advantage that while most blends of pigment tend not only to darken but also to lose their color, all optical mixture tends towards clarity and brilliance. Delacroix was aware of the prerogatives of this method:

“Colors of green and purple, roughly placed, here and there, in bright areas, without mixing.”⁴

“Green and purple: it is indispensable to apply these tints one after the other and not mix them on the palette.”⁵

And indeed this green, this purple are colors that are almost complementary. Mixed together as pigments, they would have produced a dull and soiled tint, one of these greys that are *the enemy of all painting*. On the other hand, when juxtaposed, they reconstitute a fine and pearlescent grey.

The treatment that Delacroix prescribed for green and purple, the Neo-impressionists merely generalized, following a logical pattern, and applied it to the other colors. Warned by the master’s research, informed by the works of Chevreul, they established this unique and safe method of obtaining light and color at the same time: by replacing any pigmentary blend of enemy tints with optical mixture.

4. As all flat tints seem listless and faint, they strive to make the smallest part of their canvases shimmer through the optical mixture of strokes of juxtaposed and graded colors.

However, Delacroix spelt out clearly the principle and the advantages of this method:

“It is better if strokes are not materially blended; they melt into one another naturally at a given distance through the sympathetic law by which they are associated. Color thus receives more energy and freshness.”⁶

And further on:

“Constable said that the superiority of the green in his open spaces lies in the fact that it is composed of a multitude of different greens. The lack of life and intensity in the greenery of the common landscape painters is caused by the fact they usually paint it in a uniform tint. What he establishes here about the green of open spaces can also be said about all other tones.”⁷

This last sentence clearly proves the great artist’s presentiment of the decomposition of tints into graded strokes, this most important part of Divisionism. His passion for color would bring him to acknowledge, inevitably, the benefits of optical mixture. However, to ensure optical mixture, the Neo-Impressionists were forced to use brushwork of a small scale so that, when standing back sufficiently, different elements could reconstitute the desired tint and not be perceived in isolation.

Delacroix had thought of using these small brush strokes and suspected the resources this technique could open up, since he wrote these two notes:

“Yesterday, while working on the child that is near the woman on the left in Orpheus, I remembered these multiple little brush strokes on Raphael’s *Virgin* which resemble the work on a miniature. I saw it in rue Grange-Bateliere.”⁸

“Try to see the large gouaches of Correggio in the Museum. I think they are done with very small brush strokes.”⁹

5. For the Neo-Impressionist, the different elements that reconstitute a tint by their optical mixture will be distinct from each other: light and localized color will be clearly separated, and the painter will sometimes have one dominate, then the other, as he pleases. Is this principle of the separation of elements not present in these lines by Delacroix:

“Simplicity of setting and broad scope of light.”¹⁰

“One has to reconcile ‘color’ color and ‘light’ light.”¹¹

The balance and proportion of these separate elements are clearly outlined:

“To have light and large surfaces dominate to excess will lead to the absence of half-tones and as a consequence to decoloration. The opposite mistake is mostly damaging to large compositions that are meant to be seen from a distance. Veronese wins over Rubens by the simplicity of localities and the broad scope of light.”¹²

“So as not to seem discolored by such a large light, Veronese’s localized tint must be highly amplified.”¹³

6. Is the contrast in tone and tint that only contemporary artists—the Neo-impressionists—observe not defined and established by the master:

“My palette, brilliant with the contrast of colors.”¹⁴

“General rule: more opposition, more brilliance.”¹⁵

“The satisfaction that the beauty, proportion, contrast, and harmony of colors provide in the spectacle of things.”¹⁶

“Even though this runs against the law that dictates cold sheen, laying them dome as yellow on purple flesh tones, the contrast works to provide the desired effect.”¹⁷

“When, on the edge of a surface that you have solidly established, you end up with lighter tones than in the centre, you will emphasize all the more its flat surface or its protrusion ... Adding black as one might, one will not obtain a relief.”¹⁸

This comment in one of his notebooks from his trip to Morocco reveals the importance Delacroix granted to the laws of contrast and complementary colors. He knew these were an inexhaustible source of harmony and strength:

“Of the three primary colors, the three binary ones are formed. If you add to one of these the primary tone that is its opposite, it cancels it out. This means that you produce the required half-tone. Therefore, adding black is not adding a half-tone, it is soiling the tone whose true half-tone resides in this opposite we have just described. Hence the green shadows found in red. The heads of the two little peasants. The yellow one had purple shadows; the redder and more sanguine one had green ones.”¹⁹

7. According to the Neo-impressionist technique, the light, whether it be yellow, orange or red, depending on the hour and the desired effect, adds itself to a localized color, warming or gilding it in its brightest parts. Shadow, faithful complement to its regulator, light, is purple, blue or blue-green and these elements modify and cool down the darker parts of localized color. These cold shadows and warm lights constitute outline and relief through their interplay with each other and with localized color. Blended or contrasted, they spread across the whole surface of the painting, fighting it here, dulling it there, in places and proportions determined by chiaroscuro.

[...]

9. This technique, the optical mixture of small strokes of color methodically laid down one next to the other, does not leave much room for virtuosity and skill. The painter’s hand has little importance; only his eye and brain take on a role. Without being tempted by the charm of brushwork, and by choosing a less shiny albeit conscientious and precise execution, the Neo-Impressionists took into account the following admonition by Delacroix:

“The biggest challenge is to avoid the infernal convenience of the paint brush.”²⁰

“Young people are only infatuated by the skill of the hand. There is probably no greater obstacle to any form of real progress than this universal obsession to which we have sacrificed everything.”²¹

[...]

14. [...] The Neo-Impressionists relinquished the golden frame. Its gaudy glitter modifies or destroys the harmony of a painting. They generally use white frames which constitute an excellent blend between the painting and its setting and intensify the saturation of colors without disrupting their balance.

We can entertain ourselves by commenting that a painting that is bordered by one of these white, discreet and logical frames the only one, other than a contrasted one, that cannot do any harm to a luminous and colorful painting is immediately and without examination excluded from the official or pseudo-official Salons, for this simple reason.

[...]

V Divided Brushwork

Divisionism is a complex system of harmony, an aesthetic rather than a technique. The dot is only a method.

To *divide* is to seek the strength and harmony of color by representing colored light by its pure elements and by employing the optical mix of these separated pure elements, measured out according to the essential laws of contrast and gradation.

The separation of elements and an optical mixture guarantee purity, meaning the luminosity and intensity of the tints; gradation enhances luster; contrast, by regulating the concordance of similars and the analogy of opposites, subordinates these powerful albeit balanced elements to the laws of harmony. The basis of Divisionism is contrast: is contrast not art itself?

The *pointillist* chooses a means of expression by which he applies color on a canvas in small dots rather than spreading it flat. This involves covering a surface with little multicolored and close-set strokes of either pure or dull tints and attempting to imitate through the optical mixture of these multiplied elements, the varied tones of nature. This is done without any desire for balance, with no concern for contrast. The dot is nothing more than a brush stroke, a technique. And like all techniques, it does not matter much.

The *dot* has only been used, as a word or as a texture, by those who were unable to appreciate the importance and the charm of a contrast and a balance between elements. They have only seen the means of Divisionism and not its spirit.

Some painters tried to verify the advantages of Divisionism and did not succeed. In their works, the paintings in which they tried out this method are inferior, in their harmony more than in their luminosity, to ones preceding or succeeding their period of research. This is because only the method was used, and the *divina proportione* was absent. They must not blame Divisionism for this failure: they are *Pointillists* and not *Divisionists*. . .

We have never heard Seurat, Cross, Luce, Van de Velde or indeed Van Rysselberghe or Angrand speak of dots. We have never seen them be preoccupied by Pointillism. Read these lines, dictated by Seurat to Jules Christophe, his biographer:

“Art is harmony; harmony is the analogy between opposites and between similar elements of tone, tint and line. By tone I mean light and dark; tint is red and its complementary: green, orange and its complementary: blue, yellow and its complementary: purple... The method of expression relies on the optical mixture of tones, tints and their reactions (shadows that follow very strict rules).”²²

Within these principles on art, the ones of Divisionism, is there any question of dots, any trace of a petty concern with Pointillistic methods?

One can also *divide* without being *Pointillistic*.

For instance, a small sketch by Seurat, drawn from life on a panel like the bottom of a thumb-sized box in a few brush strokes. This sketch is not pointillistic, but is an example of Divisionism. Indeed, despite the hasty aspect of the work, the style is pure, the elements are balanced and the contrast is maintained. And it is these qualities alone, and not a meticulous pickiness, that constitute Divisionism.

The role of a pointillistic method is more modest: it simply renders the surface of a painting more vibrant. However, it does not guarantee luminosity, or the intensity of colors, or harmony. This is due to the fact that complementary colors are favorable to and intensify each other when they are set in opposition and are enemies and destroy each other when they are blended, even optically. A red surface and a green surface, when adjacent, stimulate one another. Red dots blended into green dots produce a grey and colorless whole. Divisionism does not

require strokes in the shape of dots. It can use this technique for small-sized canvases, but totally repudiates it for larger formats. Threatened by decoloration, the size of the divisionist stroke must be proportionate to the dimensions of the work. The divisionist stroke is changing, alive and like light. It is therefore not a dot, uniform, dead, “matter”.

[...]

VI Summary of the Three Approaches

So many words. But it was necessary to produce all the evidence to be convincing about the legitimacy of Neo-Impressionism, by outlining its origin and its contributions. Could all these sentences not be condensed into a synoptic table?

AIM

DELACROIX

IMPRESSIONISM

NEO-IPRESSIONISM

To maximize the brilliance of color.

MEANS

DELACROIX

1. Palette made up of pure colors and darkened colors;
2. Mixing on the palette and optical mixture;
3. Cross-hatching;
4. Methodical and scientific technique.

IMPRESSIONISM

1. Palette only made up of pure colors which are close to the ones of the solar spectrum;
2. Mixing on the palette and optical mixture;
3. Brush stroke in the form of a comma or of a sweep;
4. Technique relying on instinct and inspiration.

NEO-IMPRESSIONISM

1. Same palette as Impressionism;
2. Optical mixture;
3. Divided brush strokes;
4. Methodical and scientific technique.

RESULTS

DELACROIX

By repudiating all flat tints and through the technique of gradation, contrast and optical mixture, he succeeded in extracting a maximal brilliance from the partially darkened elements at his disposal. The harmony of this brilliance is guaranteed by the systematic application of the lams that regulate color.

IMPRESSIONISM

By composing his palette solely with pure colors, [the Impressionist] obtains an effect that is more luminous and colorful than Delacroix’s. However, he diminishes its brilliance through pigmentary and soiled mixing and also

restricts its harmony by only applying irregularly and intermittently the laws that regulate color.

NEO-IMPRESSIONISM

Through the suppression of all soiled mixture, by the exclusive use of optical mixing and pure colors, by methodical division and by observing the scientific theory of colors, [the Neo-impressionist] guarantees maximal luminosity, color and harmony to an unprecedented degree.

1. All references to Delacroix's Diaries are from the Paul Flat and Retie Piot edition, Paris, Plon, 1893-95, 3 vols, in-8. Signac used this edition. For today's reader, we will complete these with references to the latest edition by Andre Joubin, Paris, Plon, 1961, 3 vols, in-8.
2. *Journal*, II, p. 136; no date, 1852 [Joubin, I, p. 500].
3. *Journal*, III, p. 209; 13 January 1857. [Joubin, III, p. 16].
4. *Journal*, II, p. 59; 5 May 1851. [Joubin, 111, Supplements].
5. *Ibid.*, p. 143; 15 January 1853. [Joubin, II, p. 5].
6. Cited by Charles Baudelaire, *L'art Romantique*, Paris, 1885, p. 12.
7. *Journal*, I, p. 234; 23 September 1846. [Joubin, 111, Supplements].
8. *Ibid.*, p. 281, 5 March 1847. [Joubin, I, p. 199].
9. *Ibid.* [Joubin I, p. 200].
10. *Ibid.* -- From the sentence: "in this last picture, Veronese wins over Rubens by the simplicity of setting and the broad scope of light."
11. *Journal*, 11, p. 40; 29 September 1850. [Joubin, I, p. 418].
12. *Ibid.* [Joubin, *ibid.*].
13. *Ibid.* [Joubin, *ibid.*].
14. *Journal*, II, p. 14; 27 July 1850. [Joubin, I, p. 392].
15. *Ibid.*, p. 42; 3 November 1850. [Joubin, I, p. 420].
16. *Ibid.* [Joubin, *ibid.*].
17. *Journal*, 111, p. 426; 1 January 1861. [Joubin, III, p. 318].
18. *Journal*, I, p. 198; no date, 1843. [Joubin, 111, Supplements, p. 427].
19. The notebook where this sentence appears was only published, in facsimile, in 1913 by J. Guiffrey. Signac therefore must have consulted it at the Conde Museum, in Chantilly. This Moroccan travel document was bought at the Delacroix sale by the painter Dauzats for the Duc of Aumale. The latter bequeathed his collection to the Institut de France in 1886.
20. *Journal*, I, p. 137; 20 July 1824. [Joubin, I, p. 118].
21. *Eugene Delacroix's Letters*, published by Ph. Burty, Paris, 1881, vol. II, p. 211.
22. J. Christophe, Seurat, in *Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui*, no. 368, March-April 1890.