

# The Actual Secrets of the Old Masters, part V

## The Art of Black, and the Worlds of Gray – Tad Spurgeon

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### The Art of Black

Is black a “good” colour, or a “bad” colour? Is black optional, necessary, or even crucial? The answer may be different depending on the home century of one's colour perception. Contemporary prejudice against black is often theoretical, or derived from confusion about how to use it effectively. From the perspective of gaining access to older colour schemes, learning first to use black as a type of blue, then integrating warm and cool gray values into the mixing system, offer tremendous potential as techniques. Black has also been used as a means of enhancing the perception of colour: even earth colours become vivid in context with grays. Fitting those grays smoothly into the envelope is an art, but there are many evolved examples of this art from the history of painting. In relation to light, physicists often say that black is not a colour. But for painters, working with the completely different optics of pigments, black *is* a colour. The injunction against black can be problematic because black is the most logical optical partner, and hence, tamer, of white. This is illustrated by the inspired simplicity of the Greek *tetrachromatikón*, and in countless ways in older painting. While black is commonly used to enhance visual drama, close-up images of older paintings often reveal a network of cool gray values woven loosely over a warmer colour of approximately the same value to create an optical vibration. This is part of the general older system of using warm and cool colours separately, for different passes on the painting, with cool-lighter following warm-darker.

However, this can be taken further in terms of integration. In *The Young Beggar* (c.1650), Murillo demonstrates the virtuoso use of a limited earth colour palette with an amazing variety of grays integrated by temperature, but used for both local colours and for cool reflections. This type of integration is intrinsic to Hammershøi, and can be seen in simplified ways in a variety of 19<sup>th</sup> century paintings such as *El Jaleo* (1882) by Sargent, or *The Ice Skater* (1898) by Anders Zorn. Overall warmer in tone, *The Forge of Vulcan* (1630) by Velázquez uses grays in a similar but more blended way. The 19<sup>th</sup> century French atelier method of integrating black into the envelope through gray can be seen in *Frédéric Bazille at his Easel* (1867) by Renoir, and in the elegant first version of *The Oyster Gatherers of Cancale* (1878) by Sargent, although this painting contains blue pigments as well. Sargent studied with Carolus-Duran, whose less formal paintings, such as *Portrait of Édouard Manet* (1880), illustrate his teaching principle of integrating grays over transparent warm tones.

While fundamental to older practice, in more recent painting the use of black is an art whose principles are typically learned incrementally. The work of Manet himself provides an example of this in practice. In early paintings, especially if they are executed alla prima, there are sometimes instances where the gray leaves the dimensional field and becomes noticeable in places as a form of flatness in the picture plane. But by *Luncheon in the Studio* (1868), Manet has solved the spatial issue: the interaction of the specific compositional planes is in fact the technical subject of the painting. By the time of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882), spacial and chromatic relationships have both become masterful. The colours are set off by a shimmering, integrated matrix of black, white, and multiple varieties of lavender and gray reflected in the equivocal “distance” of the mirror. Here Manet illustrates black integrated into a brighter palette, the principles of Impressionism synthesized with the 17<sup>th</sup> century approach to black and white as a team.

While Manet studied Velázquez, this method of framing colour in black and white was also developed – although in an entirely different manner – by Rembrandt in such portraits as *Agatha Bas* (1641). A general feature of older painting practice is the dramatic pairing of black with white in order to make even earth colours that much more focal and vibrant. This is often employed in Dutch painting through

clothing, or the dramatic checkerboard of a tiled floor, and is used by Vermeer for the painter's dramatic outfit as well in *The Art of Painting* (c.1666).

At this point, the colours available are so extensive and reasonable that black can be left out, and pairs of opposite colours substituted. Using natural ultramarine in a shadow would have been inconceivable for a Renaissance painter, but it is straightforward to do now in combination with burnt sienna. Another way of approaching this is through a foundation triad of transparent primaries that are used to create a dark chromatic neutral. This produces an enhanced perception of harmony from a minimum number of pigments. Still, black has a unique character, a remarkably varied history, and offers the simplest way to balance white through the integration of grays.

## The Worlds of Gray

As a term, gray is used for many different things, and this can cause confusion in implementing the three types of gray effectively. Because all colours are relative to context, the use of these types is based not only on their component pigments, but on where they are placed, and how they are integrated. Grays are typically based on black and white until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when less expensive and more reliable pigments make the use of chromatic grays mixed from opposite colours viable as well. Black and white based **simple grays** are typically cool, and can appear literally blue in context with warm transparent earth colours. The strength of these grays is their distinctiveness, but this also means that they must be carefully integrated into the midtone structure to create a consistent illusion. This begins in fresco cycles made with earth pigments, was explored thoroughly by Rembrandt, and is a feature of Titian's more realistic work. The juxtaposition of a dark, warm, transparent underpainting with cool gray overpainting is a foundation of the way colour is used in the Low Countries in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. If the black is genuine ivory black, the grays are on the purple or even lavender side, as in the Rembrandt's *Self Portrait with Plumed Beret* of 1629. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, black and white based grays are most often made warmer with earth colours, but vermilion is sometimes used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The combination of black, white, and vermilion with earth colours is often a feature of English portraiture of this period.

An early **chromatic gray** combination is vermilion and Prussian blue, this is seen in both French and Italian painting later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The combination of cobalt or cerulean blue and vermilion becomes important in the 19<sup>th</sup> century first to Corot, then to Impressionism. Once synthetic ultramarine is produced in 1826, it is often combined with burnt Sienna for grays that can be made warm, cool, or neutral for daylight. The cold grays made from viridian and rose madder are often used for reflections by Sargent. The strength of chromatic grays is the ease with which they can be integrated into the chromatic architecture of the illusion.

More complex gray structures emerge when black and white are mixed with higher chroma pigments to make **compound grays**. A finely tuned tension between shimmering blue grays and midtone colour is often a feature 19<sup>th</sup> century French academic painting. The interaction of midtone colour with a specific structure of grays reaches a technical apogee in painters such as Mancini, who explored it in a variety of semi-tonalist ways using stone colours or a warm lavender gray, and Bouguereau, whose approach involved a highly refined blending of midtone hues with blue grays throughout the value structure, resulting in a trademark "celestial" refulgence for the entire painting.

Grays are used in four ways: as colours in their own right, such as for stones or overcast skies, as the vehicle for the envelope of a day or a room, as a form of tonalist filter used to establish a specific chromatic mood, and, within the triadic structure of shadow, midtone, and highlight, as reflections, the highlights occurring within lower values. This gives gray many possible functions in realism, and several possible positions in the chromatic architecture of the painting. It is important, when considering how grays have been implemented, to look at their purpose within the painter's intentions. Especially in situations where there are both gray objects and a gray shadow-reflection structure, unusual figure-ground interplay can occur, as in Murillo's *Beggar Boy*. Use of this becomes more conscious and systematic in 19<sup>th</sup> century French academic painting; an example being the interaction between the gray geese and their gray shadows in *Children Feeding Geese* (1881) by Julien Dupré. This painting mixes simplified bright midtones with a strong, consistent cold gray shadow structure reminiscent of the bright overcast of a cool Spring day. The puzzle of the lively, milling geese the children are feeding gives a predictable

genre scene the disarming technical focus of a detailed chromatic pun.

The most fully chromatic, therefore most genuinely realistic, gray structure is possible if the grays are made from a triad of red, yellow and blue pigments. This can be set up various ways depending on the style of the work. Ideally, these pigments would also be transparent, allowing them to function as the transparent shadow structure as well. The pigments most often used to illustrate this in colour theory are quinacradone rose, phthalo blue, and a translucent primary yellow: the process triad. While this triad works in theory, it tends towards an unsettling combination of the lyrical and mechanical in practice unless mixed with great precision. An alternative, more painterly combination of pigments for use in natural daylight painting is Pyrol red, ultramarine blue, and transparent Mars yellow. A more developed shadow and gray structure creates the most multidimensional potential for the diversity of colour to be fully integrated throughout the formal structure of shadow, midtone, and highlight, but it does involve premixing, or relatively precise spontaneous mixing.

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