

THE UNIVERSITY OF ART AND DESIGN CLUJ-NAPOCA

PHD THESIS IN THE FIELD OF VISUAL ARTS

**HYPOSTASIS OF THE
LIGHT IN FIGURATIVE
CONTEMPORARY
PAINTING**

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Thesis Summary

Light and colour, the most transient and the less tangible of all visual elements are perceived by our eyes only as they are made visible. Our response to light and color is instant and strong, they are as inseparable as space or shape. Without light there is no colour, while all the light is colour.¹

Light in painting is instantly perceived and yet is hidden as we cannot actual see it as an object, but it is very much present in the overall feeling a composition conveys. It is often considered that there would be no visual world without the existence of the light and some of the greatest artists have managed to create the paradox whereby light confines to the eyes of the spirit that which our physical eyes are not able to see in the world. Light is like ether, without it there will be no matter, but light, like the ether, is somehow outside of the matter. Almost immaterial and weightless it is a perceptible symbol of the invisible.

This current research thesis begins, on one hand, out of my personal interest as a painter in regarding the representation of the light in painting and to accessing in practice the various possibilities of expressing it, as they are still present in the contemporary figurative painting. On the other hand, the current thesis has as its premise the impossibility of ignoring the presence still alive on the contemporary figurative painting scene of the elements of "traditional " approach to light, such as tonal observation and the relationship between light and shadow with their major implication in the compositional structure of the pictorial image. The chapters that compose the current research paper are structured in such a way as to indicate the gradual transformation that has undergone through the history of painting, from the formula of the flat, two dimensional painting existing in the early antiquity, up to the conquest of the complex artistic expressions, depicting the visual world in a realistic manner, full of volume and space, which had become the trademark of western painting. The light as well as its effects transposed on the surface of the canvas had been the most significant factors that led to the evolution towards volumetric plasticity and to the better conveying of the sensation of the real world, present in so many paintings of the last centuries.

¹ Ray Faulkner, Edwin Ziegfeld *Art Today* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston New York,1969) p.316

Chapter I *On the nature and the perception of light*

This first chapter includes two subsections entitled respectively: *The history of the scientific approach to the phenomenon of light in relation to painting* and *Colour is light*. The chapter is centred on the theme of light perception and the scientific studies that led to the deciphering of its nature in relation to the mystery of human vision. From the theories of the Pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (540-475 BC) called “The Obscure”, we find the concept that the fire/ light is the primordial substance of the world, from which the actual substances of the different things descend², up to the findings of Isaac Newton. The chapter broadly follows the chronological path from antiquity to the dawn of impressionism in connection with scientific discoveries about light in relation to the study of optics and their influences on the practice of painting.

Another key feature is the colour of light and the second section of this chapter investigates the science of colour closely related with the study of light in painting. This science could be divided in two major eras: the first covers the time before Isaac Newton and the second one the time that was influenced by his discoveries. The first era was dominated by the ideological tradition derived in one way or another from Aristotle. One of the consistent aspects of this tradition, which clearly separates the two eras, consists in the idea that the colour exists as an actual property of the objects and their immediate environment and not as an eye sensation produced by certain characteristics of light.³ Another aspect of this tradition is the notion that colour is the result of combining in different proportions of the contrasting characteristics between black and white (light- darkness) of each colour. This idea corresponds to the painter’s observation regarding the different tonal values and it led to the concept of the chromatic scale, i.e. the arrangement of the colours in regard to their specific tonal values. The Aristotelian tradition traversed the Renaissance Colour Theory and had significant influence on the representation of light in painting up to the Nineteenth Century.

² Patrick George, Thomas White *Fragments of The Work of Heraclitus of Ephesus On Nature* (Baltimore N. Murray, 1857) p.57-69

³ Chapter 4 *Colour I The Aristotelian Legacy* p.264

Chapter II Testimonies from antiquity on the representation of light in painting

This part of the research examines the actual introduction of plastic elements in the pictorial practice from antiquity of the elements that suggest the preoccupation for light. From the discovery of the foreshortening and convincing three-dimensional solutions that become used in the fifth century BC mainly in the in Greek ceramic painting, to formulas that indicate the concern for light in the fourth century BC, “the whole process seems so logical and inevitable that it seems easier to arrange the different types of figurines found painted either on the clay pots or on the wooden panels so as to show the gradual approximation to reality. Conquering naturalism can be described as the gradual accumulation of corrections due to the observation of reality.”⁴

The transition from the flat, decorative representation to the three-dimensionality is closely linked to the concern for rendering the light. The artisan painters of the sixth and early fifth centuries BC were the founders of a new visual aesthetics being preoccupied with conveying as naturalistic as they could the visual world, which ultimately led to discoveries in representing anatomy, perspective, atmosphere and volume. The situation seems to be similar to that of the Italian Renaissance, where the artists have gradually rejected religious art formulas and sought expression beyond dogma.⁵

There are three distinct parts within this chapter, with titles such as: *The birth of the light in painting*, *Greco-Roman painting and its implications for western European painting: chiaroscuro, lighting and lustre* and a third sub-chapter devoted to the painting of Fayum. Stylistic methods made to convey the illusion of space and volume and an inclination to naturalism arise from the ceramic decorative painters. Pliny the Elder writes that “eventually painting differentiates itself [from the flat surface] and discovered light and shadows, colour contrasts that accentuates their mutual effect and later added lustre, which is different from lightening.”⁶

The conquests of the early painters that were concerned about realistic rendering in their art are registered beginning with Eumaros the Athenian who is famous for the distinctions he

⁴ E.H.Gombrich *Art and Illusion* , p.118

⁵ Stelios Lydakos *Ancient Greek Painting and Its Echoes in Later Art* p.98

⁶ Victor I Stoichiță *Scurta istorie a umbrei* p.14

made in the representation of the figures of women and men with their particularities, and culminate with the famous painter Apelles whose pictorial tradition had been transmitted further to Pompeian and Fayum painting. The list of the artists who have made contributions in this direction is rather broad and was registered in the written works of Pliny the Elder. This section of the thesis offers a compound part of that list. Using light and exploring its powerful effects, these artists have opened enormous opportunities for the painters that followed. Except for the mortuary portraits of Fayum, little evidence had remained of this practice that was most likely widely spread in the ancient world. The movement from circumscribing a shadow as Pliny described the origins of painting to rendering volumes seems to have been a complex process marked by changes in perception regarding the representation of light and three-dimensional space which gradually turned the flat ceramic surface, wood or canvas, “into a kind of a scene in which the characters could move naturally and rotate in space, atmosphere, light and air.”

Integrated in this chapter there are references to the chromatic palette used by the ancient painters in relation to the effect of light. A distinct element of naturalistic painting in antiquity is represented by the limited colour palette. In the fifth century BC, the artistic practice of the painters seems to have been governed by simplicity. There is written evidence⁷ that indicates that the painters used only four colours on their palette, the combination of which was able to create both the warm as well as the cold tones.

The topic of Greco-Roman painting and its implications on the European painting, conducted this research further to the study of three important elements for the effect of light, namely chiaroscuro, lustre and lighting.

When Pliny the Elder introduces the terms *lumen* for light and *splendor* for lustre or shine, he indicates the often misunderstood difference between lightning and reflection in painting. In general terms, lightning defines the formation of volume and space on a flat surface by means of tonal modulation. The classical tradition of the application of this principle started from a monochrome primed surface which functioned as a neutral shadow, on which lighter tones of local colour of varnish were applied. This separation of illumination from the local colour shows the distinction that the eye perceives in the physical world.⁸ This technique of light and shadow modulation would reach its peak in the European painting only after the Middle Ages.

⁷ Pliniu cel Bătrân *Istoria Naturală*, cartea 35, cap.50

⁸ Rudolf Arnheim *Arta și percepția vizuală O psihologie a văzului creator* (Polirom 2011) p.294

The lightning is the relatively stable effect created by light on a surface and lustre is the reflection of light by the surface of an object, being an indicator of the object's texture and its position in space - the rotation from the light source as well as the curvatures or deformations of its shape. The reflection being mobile changes according to the position of the gaze. Reflections occur most often on the edges and the corners of the objects. All these artistic elements of the practice of painting are present in the Fayum and Pompeii painting.

Chapter III Aspects of light symbolism in painting

Starting with symbolic elements in byzantine painting, but particularly focusing on the early Renaissance painting, the four sections that make up this chapter are: *Byzantine painting in relation with the rendering of the light*, *Symbols of the light in the Early Renaissance painting*, *Landmarks of light representation in European painting Caravaggio and Rembrandt* and a final sub-chapter with the title of *Nocturnes or the painting of darkness*.

The colour system that derived from the ancient tradition has preserved its refinement in the art of the byzantine icon and the reflexes, an element of Hellenistic legacy, have gradually gained the appearance of a decorative tone system which incorporated a careful logic of the gradation of light, simple but effective. Overall however, the Byzantine icon image, due to the combination of the elements inside the picture that had different light sources and with the golden reflective background was capable of creating a feeling of unreal, timeless and mystical world.

In the Early Renaissance as in the art of painting up to that point, the naturalistic representation was primarily focused on the relationship between light and shadow before being touched the subject of colour. This concept continued in the Middle Ages where we find the interest in light even in the decorative liturgical objects adorned with shiny stones and gold, but also in the churches' stained glass windows.

The medieval concept of light perceived it on two levels: *lux*, the light source and *lumen*, the light reflected from the surfaces⁹. Translucent or very reflective substances such as precious stones, metals and glass were considered valuable, seeming to embody or generate light itself. Byzantine and medieval painters 'much appreciated this feature of light-the brightness, the

⁹ John Gage *Colour in Art* p.18

beauty which was identified with splendour, the sparkling of the precious gems and the lustre of gold.’¹⁰

In the Middle Ages, the ancient formula that associated white with light was modified by replacing the white with the gold, and thus dropping some of the tonal gradations in favour of a stronger effect of glare. In the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance as had been the case in the previous byzantine era, the light incorporated a variety of mystical aspects. From the late fifteenth century up to the seventeenth century, the painters show a predilection for subjects that symbolize light¹¹, such as the fire, the sun or even the glass. Their glaze adopts a throughout observation of the details of the materials and surface textures of the objects that are present in ever more complex compositions. A great attention is placed on the representation as accurate as possible of the human physiognomy and a notable progress in terms of understanding and careful observation of the light effects on the surfaces. These observations are remarkable especially in the northern Flemish painting.

Fascinated by light, the Flemish masters of the late fourteen and early fifteen centuries adopted a strong symbolic imagery, otherwise common in the medieval thought. Since the light is in coexistence with the air that we breathe, it is strongly connected with the spirit and so the associations between the light and the spirit were not new. The Parents of the Church in Medieval times, in explaining to the faithful the mysteries of the life of Christ, often resorted to metaphors such as Jesus being associated with light or the fire that Mary received and worn like a window through which The Divine Spirit came down to earth.¹²

A section of this chapter refers to the beginnings of the use of oil painting and the impact this new technique had on the painting that followed. The event named ‘the discovery of oil painting’ consisted firstly in the transfer of this precious bright quality that the golden leaf possesses into another medium, richer, deeper and more versatile. Gold reflects light creating around and within it an abstract, pure radiance. The colours used by the van Eyck brothers, unlike the tempera used before, absorb the light and allow it to pass through their crystalline substance and then redistribute it full of life and warmth. This was the great innovation in painting brought by the Flemish brothers¹³. Mastering gloss, glitter and shine which allowed

¹⁰ E.H. Gombrich *Moștenirea lui Apelles Studii despre arta Renașterii* p.17

¹¹ Millard Meiss *The painter's choice Problems in the interpretation of Renaissance Art* (Harper and Row, New York 1977) p3

¹² Sf. Fulgentius citat de Millard Meiss in *Light as Form and Symbol in some Fifteen Century Paintings* (The Art Bulletin, XXVII, 1945) p. 177

¹³ Henri Focillon *The Art of the West* vol.II Gothic Art p.168

painters to convey the textures of the objects, flourished in the painting of the first decades of the fifteenth century north of the Alps¹⁴. The new created light by the use of the oil paint, contributed to achieving new subtleties in the appearance of the characters represented and enveloped in fine atmosphere the space between them and the seemingly static outer world. Observed in the subtle differences of intensity as it trickles the features of Giovanni Arnolfini the Apostles in the *Tribute to the money*, the light seems to extend and enhance human consciousness. Dynamic and intangible, light was often seen as a correspondent of the mind. In nature as in art, it troubles feelings and sustains moods.¹⁵

The sub-chapter entitled *Landmarks of light representation in European painting: Caravaggio and Rembrandt* offers a comparative study of the use of light and shadow in some of the works of two of the most famous painters of all time, known for their particular use of light.

The chiaroscuro technique has played a decisive role in the oeuvre of these two masters. Beyond its function of moulding the masses of colour, the effects created by it involve psychological connotations able to strengthen the emotional tension of the action depicted in the painting, as well as to emphasize the essential points of the composition. The dark, sometimes gloomy background specific to both painters creates the feeling of infinite depth while light acts on it as a focus on the objects and the characters in the composition. The way the viewer is introduced into the depicted scene, most often as a dark scene, where the eye is carefully gradually directed to the source of light as the light is the element that tells the story inside the painting, it has a narrative action. Although both Caravaggio and Rembrandt are equally considered masters of chiaroscuro and the similarities between their paintings had often been in discussion, however they use the method of revealing the light often in very different ways. The expressive power emitted by their works lays on the special role attributed not only to the use of light, but also to the way the darkness and shadows are manipulated.

The next and final section of this chapter is entitled *The nocturnes or the painting of the darkness*. A special place in the study of light in painting is held by the images that are painted at night, with artificial light sources or diffuse light capable of creating fine, special effects. Symbols of night and nocturnal themes are present in European painting even starting with the antiquity, where we discover a small fresco from Pompeii entitled *Luna and*

¹⁴E.H.Gombrich *op. cit.*, p.37

¹⁵Millard Meiss *The painter's choice Problems in the interpretation of Renaissance Art*, p.4

Endimion, which illustrates the myth of the romance between the goddess of the moon and the Aeolian shepherd, the first mortal known to have observed the phases of the moon.

A brief summary of the nocturnal paintings incorporates topics such as the allegory of the moon and night light effects casted by the stars at night, candle or fire light and macabre themes such as scenes of terror or representations of religious themes. The nocturnes became a popular topic and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe were there were a few Dutch masters specialized in this subject matter. Between 1820 and 1850 there were more autonomous night scenes painted than at any other time.¹⁶ Making use of the artificial light sources, the painters observed the possibilities of creating strong emotional impact in their works by the dramatic use of the night light.

Nocturnal representations are often associated with intense emotional states, even distress. A good example in this respect is a small engraving executed by Rembrandt in the year 1651 in preparation for the painting *The flight to Egypt*. Rembrandt used the etching technique in order to transmit intense feelings such as fear and tension that we can perceive just by looking at this small engraving.

This part of the current research contains further references to the nocturnes organized in different categories, such as the artificially lit interiors, the nocturnal landscape, the nocturnal representations of social and political themes and the mystical religious paintings done by night light.

Chapter IV Painting between illusion and reality

This chapter is divided in two parts, the first part deals with the topic of illusion and it is entitled *Reality and perception*, and the second part is entitled *On the method, imitation or science. The mathematics of painting*.

Since the ancient times the illusion was considered a major part of the visual arts. Artists have explored the power of the illusion and have experienced its effects on stage, in sculpture or in painting. The power of the art to suggest, to translate or to create emotion inspired by the illusion of reality was more often than not considered one of its most precious assets. Plato named the painted images “dreams created for those who are awake”¹⁷.

¹⁶Andreas Bluhm, Louise Lippincott *Light! The industrial age, Art , Science, Technology and Society* p.25

¹⁷E.H. Gombrich *Art and Illusion*, (Phaidon Press Londra, 1962) p.7

There two distinct philosophical directions that address the topic of representation and illusion in art. The first belongs to Plato and it appears in *The Republic*, where it argues that the image represents an object by copying its shape and colour. Art mimics the external shape of an object to the extent that “progress in rendering the pictorial reality creates the illusion of life itself.”¹⁸

The second direction, which appeared later in the history of philosophy as a response to the first, states that a picture is an object that produces a special type of experience in the viewer’s mind. The original source of this doctrine is Descartes’ *Optics*. The author writes: “the problem is to understand how images allow the soul to have sensory perception of the various qualities of the objects to which they correspond, and not knowing how to resemble them.”¹⁹

This chapter refers to the issue of Mimesis and to the degrees to which imitation after nature can rise according to Plato. In this section we study the role of the light and shadow in creating the illusionistic effects in painting and some pointers are given on the topic of atmospheric perspective in relation to the illusion in painting. We conclude with a quote that, “today however, the only tolerable perspective is that none of the art practiced is representative.”²⁰

The second part of this chapter focuses on the rules and cannons existed in antiquity and later in Byzantine and Renaissance art on art methodology. These methods are found in various schools of painting and later in landscape painting for example of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Chapter V Light represented in contemporary figurative painting

The first part of this chapter deals with the topic of the landscape painting of the impressionists and their fascination for natural light, and the second part indicates signs of light representation in contemporary painting. The focus remains on the European contemporary figurative painting.

The painters of the twentieth century seem to have gradually adapted their palette to the external, natural light, which was also under the influences of environmental factors and the

¹⁸Rudolf Arnheim, op.cit., p.16

¹⁹Rene Descartes *Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge University Press,1985) p.166

²⁰R.G.Collingwood *The Principles of Art* (Oxford Press, Londra,1964) p.43

effects of human existence (pollution, urban life). As we can see for example in the urban landscapes of the Spanish painter Antonio Lopez, where he manages to capture the large panoramas of Madrid with its atmosphere loaded with the patina of the passage of time, as his predecessors surprised atmospheric elements that influenced the effects of light. At the dawn of the modern era, a look at the painters shows us how from generation to generation they open up their palette and get more light and colour on their canvases.

It is considered that the art of the twentieth century performs a gradual withdrawal from the representation of the reality²¹ and that the concept of description will soon become just an antiquarian's interest. The fragmented image, the landscape emptied of content through abstraction, the consummated image by the paste of colour or the graphic lines by which is formed, the image composed by repeated signs emptied of meaning by repetition, the blurred image or the quasi-image have all redefined the limits of pictorial space reopening the question of transposition of reality in the image. In this context, painting is doing what it has always been doing: it withdraws to its simple origins.

In general terms we call contemporary art the phenomenon whose manifestation is located in the years after 1950, which developed after post-modernist art and is broadly characterized as a distinct cultural phenomenon of art than the earlier periods marked by the versatility of the expression mediums, unprecedented diversity and complexity of events that compose it.

VI. Reflections on my own artistic production

Regarding personal artistic concerns addressed during doctoral research program, the last part of this approach assumes the task of providing some pointers on personal artistic practice. Although the approach of the light and its representation in painting is a matter of particular concern of mine, it is obvious that this broad theme involves practically infinite possibilities of artistic approach. Restricting these possibilities to a series of works which, due to the time factor, can be completed on period such is the current doctoral research program, study and

²¹ Clement Greenberg citat de John Hyman in *The Objective Eye* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2006) p.1

observation of light have been restricted in practice to the exclusive thematic of portraiture which is in itself a particularly versatile subject.