

When Color Turns into Setting: Ways and Means of the Use of Solid Colors in Goya's Painting

Eva Sebbagh

(University of Paris-Sorbonne, France)

Abstract: Where does the scene take place? Most of the time, this simple question cannot be answered in front of Goya's works. In emblematic paintings such as *The Clothed Maja* and *The Nude Maja*, *the Second of May 1808* or *Saturn Devouring His Son*, the blurring of the foreground and the background produced by the introduction of dark solid colors prevents the precise identification of any referential context. Many portraits and still lifes also show this particular but never commented practice — sometimes intensified by subtle shades or trichromatic palettes — that invests color with an unusual structuring function. What are the terms of such a material abstraction? How do things stand regarding the artistic and public impact of this pictorial treatment? This paper aims to offer some basic lines to better understand the implications of color's conversion into a full-blown setting in Goya's paintings by analyzing their distinctive chromatic restrictions and comparing them with the ones of contemporary artists like Thomas Gainsborough, Anton Raphael Mengs or Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun. In doing so the study brings out Goya's original tendency to prevent any contextualization to the advantage of chromatic prominence in his compositions and finally underlines the decisive role of his pioneering use of solid colors in the invention of modern art.

Key words: Goya, painting, solid colors, setting, referentiality, abstraction

1. Introduction: Towards a Definition of the Notion of “Solid Color”

In this paper the notion of “solid color” intends to translate the French word “aplat” which has no exact equivalent either in English or in Spanish. The word “aplat” appeared during the second half of the nineteenth century to refer to a way of putting a single color “à plat”, that is to say on a flat surface. It was initially used by the printing world to talk about the way of placing each color into delimited areas, as illustrated by the Épinal prints. Consequently this term at first seems to be unsuitable regarding Goya's use of solid colors in painting, considering his death in 1828.

However, it would hardly be inappropriate to apply the word “aplat”, especially in a precursory sense of the term, to Goya's art. Goya's creations were mainly executed at the turn of the nineteenth century, precisely when the profound changes produced by the incipient Industrial Revolution induced a crisis in the then prevailing illusionist system of representation in graphic arts. So they were also made when color was beginning to gain a new fundamental part in painting, the part of structural component. This fundamental role was not completely

Eva Sebbagh, Ph.D. Student, Sorbonne Université; research areas/interests: theory and history of Spanish art, collective memory and national identity. E-mail: eva@sebbagh.net.

“new” since it had something to do with the important position that colors had occupied in ancient mural compositions or in medieval illuminations, before the advent of oil painting, but in any case it drove the use of the word “aplat” outside of printing to allude to the style of some painters in the late nineteenth century, like Cézanne or Gauguin. Finally, the same term came to be almost monopolized by contemporary painting to describe abstract art and especially the technique of Color Field painters such as Piet Mondrian, Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman.

The diversity of historical periods and styles related to the term “aplat” justifies applying the same designation to Goya's practice and leads to the consideration of the use of solid colors in a renewed meaning, not as the simplest expression of painting and an absence of material treatment but as a significant element in a pictorial language. In this regard, the translation of “aplat” by “solid color” is particularly relevant because the adjective “solid” insists on color's substantial part in composition. “Solid color” also emphasizes that in the present case color is not viewed in its traditional opposition to shape, as inferior to drawing — or to *disegno*, to take the word used in the argument that broke out between Florentines and Venetians, and then between Poussinists and Rubenists — but considered as a formal material in itself.

As a result, this paper proposes tackling Goya's pioneering use of “solid colors”, meaning through this expression a plain, but not necessarily featureless, part of a pictorial representation which works like a full-blown setting, that is to say which has an independent structuring function. Far from a philosophical focus on color or a psychological approach of it, the purpose is to concentrate on the ways and means of a chromatic construction and its visual impact, and to take a close look at a technique and its public reception.

2. Goya's Original Continuous Suspension of Referentiality

2.1 The Bibliographical Silence

In most cases, authors choose a biographical and therefore a chronological approach rather than a thematic perspective to speak about Goya; and when they mention the undefined and monochrome backgrounds produced by the artist, they do so only in passing (Bray, 2015). Even in non-chronological publications that focus on a restricted topic, color never receives any special attention (Bozal, 1994; Tomlinson, 2002). A recent paper explores the oddness of Goya's neutral and silent backgrounds but the study is confined to pinpointing the lack of perspective and in this case to the chromatic significance of the pictorial treatment is ignored (Sabbah, 2016).

The same silence appears in the specialized bibliography about color, especially in John Gage's reference work *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*. The author duly notes color's fundamental role as a constructive material but he never refers to Goya (Gage, 1993).

2.2 Reasons of This Gap

Such an invisibility of Goya's particular relation to color must be connected to a real invisibility at once. Indeed, the common absence of colored reproductions in art books before the first decades of the twentieth century has long constituted a major obstacle (Laneyrie-Dagen, 2007). The black and white pictures art historians had to work with made chromatic investigations very difficult to carry out and almost completely prevented them.

Secondly, the lack of analysis on this subject is also related to the moral discourse that has always denigrated color in front of drawing, pointing out its seductive, illusory and insidious nature as an uncertain stain — *macchia* in Italian — and denying the separate part it usually plays in composition (Lichtenstein, 1989). Such a discredit of color and its material quality, which allowed the promotion of painting to the rank of a liberal art, in contrast to the

degradation of manual work, certainly prevented observers from considering color in itself for a long time¹.

Last but not least, the silence regarding Goya's chromatic singularities has definitely been caused by the complete lack of accounts that could tell about the artist's outlook on color (López Vázquez, 1994). Despite the myth of the fiery painter throwing pictorial material on the canvas, in the very few texts that have been preserved in which he evokes his practice, the artist insists on the dignity of painting as an intellectual creation but never gives details concerning the way he goes about handling pigments. His works are then the only entry point to a study focused on solid colors.

2.3 Some Defining Features

Nonetheless, in front of Goya's paintings one observation stands out: fairly often it is impossible to say where the scene takes place. It is not an invariable phenomenon — for instance it does not happen in the tapestry cartoons, which were commissioned by the king, however in a significant number of the artist's canvases the introduction of dark solid colors creates an undefined background that prevents from identifying any real place. Contrary to how things traditionally work, in these paintings the ground represented is hardly ever more than a neutral mass of chromatic substance that shows overtly its own materiality and doesn't give any tangible clue. Generally the background isn't any more eloquent: the horizon is obstructed and no suggestive detail emerges. None of the classic *parerga* — those peripheral elements that are supposed to guide the interpretation of the pictorial scenes in which they are included — come forward.

Thus, long before the arising of non-figurative art, many of Goya's paintings seem to frustrate all attempts of referential integration. In many compositions solid colors act like a new kind of setting that structures the pictorial space, inscribing the various elements of the canvas in a close materiality and producing a continuous suspension of referentiality that depart from the conventional narrative device of illusionist representations.

3. A Generic Approach of Goya's Distinctive Use of Solid Colors

3.1 Methodology

Without striving for an exhaustive approach, this paper develops several specific cases studies. These cases were chosen so as to establish parallels with other contemporary artists' creations that make evident the continuous suspension of referentiality previously described, showing that this pictorial phenomenon implemented by means of solid colors is a distinctive feature of Goya's art. For a broader analysis, each example corresponds with a different category of the traditional hierarchy of genres.

3.2 Comparative Analyses

Concerning history painting, a comparison between *The Second of May 1808*² and *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* by Jacques-Louis David³ is revealing. In Goya's painting it is impossible to identify the kind of place where the scene happens; it could as easily be a simple street as a square or a crossroads. Goya's ground is a

¹ In this respect, Vicente Carducho encapsulates the position of the vast majority of art theorists who came before him when he writes, in the fifth part of his *Diálogos de la pintura*: “[...] colores sin forma, ni proporciones viene a ser materia y accidentes, y no constituye nada; mas la pintura sin colores, pintura es, y de mucha estimación, y que consigue su fin [...]” (“[...] colors with neither shape nor proportions come to be material and accidents, and constitute nothing; but painting without colors remains painting, even of great value, that achieves its aim [...]”). This opinion will hardly change with Ceán Bermúdez in the early nineteenth century, but only after Goya's entry in the art world (Menéndez Pelayo, 1940).

² Francisco Goya, *The Second of May 1808*: 1814, oil on canvas, 268.5×374.5 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

³ Jacques-Louis David, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*: 1799, oil on canvas, 385×522 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

brown solid color. Unlike the space represented by David, no pictorial sign of stones, plants or geographic reliefs is included, in other words no element refers to a real ground beyond the materiality of the chromatic substance. The demonstration is even more effective by having a look at Goya's background, because on the upper right corner of the canvas no referential surroundings are recognizable. On this very spot the architecture behind the characters is neither a castle nor a credible house, rather it is a chromatic area. Such singularity is all the more noteworthy as this specific genre of painting is supposed to be a narrative one, with a didactic purpose that should exclude vagueness.

Regarding now the hybrid genre of nude, which has something to do with allegorical painting and sometimes with portrait; the same phenomenon stands out through a parallel between *The Nude Maja*⁴ and François Boucher's *Portrait of Marie-Louise O'Murphy*⁵. In Boucher's representation the space of the room is distinctly perceptible, with the wall in the background, the yellow curtain and the roses on the floor, whereas in Goya's painting there is no wall, no concrete spatialization. The background is a dark brown solid color that plays with the white linen and the transitional velvet green so as to crystallize the presence of the model.

Other examples of Goya's use of solid colors as a full-blown setting can be found in scenes of everyday life, also called "genre painting". In *The Water Carrier*⁶ for instance, the sky behind the character is not the meteorological sky represented by Thomas Gainsborough in *A Peasant Girl with Dog and Jug*⁷. Both paintings show a similar liveliness regarding brush strokes, but in Goya's composition there are no clouds, no shadows and no atmospheric effects: the blue spread on three quarters of the canvas works as a solid color whose own materiality takes an active part in structuring the pictorial space and giving an immediate presence to the woman. This particular case also shows that even if exterior scenes seem bound to call for a reference framework, the genre of landscape is equally concerned by Goya's chromatic restrictions and suspension of referentiality.

As for still life, the representation of inanimate objects which are either natural or man-made, here again the same observation can be made looking at Goya's *Still Life of Sheep's Ribs and Head*⁸ against Bartolomé Montalvo's *Still Life with Calf's Head, Fish, Fruit and Fowl*⁹. Except for the traditional black background, which is a specific convention of this kind of compositions, Goya does not observe the classical set-up used in Montalvo's contemporary painting. He paints an undefined space, which doesn't refer at all to a wooden surface, instead of a kitchen table. The solid yellow color employed even appears to be intentionally lighter than that of wood as if the painter deliberately wanted to prevent any referential effect and to highlight the structuring function of color in itself.

3.3 Findings

Therefore, despite the bibliographical silence about Goya's use of solid colors, the various parallels previously drawn reveal that this uncommon practice and its correlative suspension of referentiality are frequently involved in the Spanish painter's works, regardless of their genre. In such cases, the plain backgrounds acquire the original role of substantial settings and their structuring function is often strengthened by means of di- or trichromatic palettes that increase the salience of the represented scenes, as demonstrated by *The Nude Maja* and

⁴ Francisco Goya, *The Nude Maja*: about 1797–1800, oil on canvas, 97×190 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

⁵ François Boucher, *Portrait of Marie-Louise O'Murphy*: 1751, oil on canvas, 59.5×73.5 cm, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum.

⁶ Francisco Goya, *The Water Carrier*: about 1808–1812, oil on canvas, 50.5×60 cm, Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts.

⁷ Thomas Gainsborough, *A Peasant Girl with Dog and Jug*: 1785, oil on canvas, 125×174 cm, Private Collection.

⁸ Francisco Goya, *Still Life of Sheep's Ribs and Head*: about 1808–1812, oil on canvas, 45×62 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

⁹ Bartolomé Montalvo, *Still Life with Calf's Head, Fish, Fruit and Fowl*: 1806, oil on panel, 55×72 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

Still Life of Sheep's Ribs and Head.

The comparative analyses also lead to consider that this particular use of solid colors most likely influenced the reception of Goya's art. Indeed, the neutralization of peripheral details produces a focusing effect that intensifies the visual impact of the representations, justifying partly why many of the paintings previously mentioned figure today among Goya's most emblematic creations.

4. How is the Tradition of Portraiture Reinvented by Way of Solid Colors?

4.1 The Special Case of Portraits

So far, the second genre in the hierarchy's order has not been mentioned because Goya's original contribution in this case requires a separate analysis. His use of solid colors in portrait painting settings can actually only be studied by taking into account some specific conventions of the genre, especially the difference between two main options of composition: the head and shoulders portrait and the stand-up portrait. Once again, a comparative method is developed in order to provide an effective demonstration.

4.2 Head and Shoulders Portraits

Long before Goya, a whole tradition of the head and shoulders portrait has used a wide variety of monochrome backgrounds¹⁰. To give just a few examples from different places and times: the background in Jean Clouet's *Portrait of Marguerite of Angoulême*¹¹ is red, the one in Hans Holbein's *Portrait of a Young Merchant*¹² is green; it is blue in Agnolo Bronzino's *Portrait of Eleonora of Toledo*¹³ and other in Frans Hals' *Portrait of Sara Andriesdr Hessix*¹⁴. In such a tradition, apart from a decorative function, plain backdrops are reminiscent of the golden backgrounds of Christian icons and mostly aim to bring out the model's social dignity.

Without obliterating this particular tradition, Goya accentuates the visibility of the chromatic substance in his head and shoulders portraits: once again he assigns an unprecedented structural role to the materiality of solid colors. Since the vast number of paintings involved in this pictorial practice prohibits a complete analysis, this paper opts for focusing on the pattern of the armchair, repeated in various creations such as the portraits of *Francisco Bayeu*¹⁵, *Countess of Haro*¹⁶ and *Rafael Esteve Vilella*¹⁷. Indeed, these three examples show that the armchair introduced between the character and the background plays an active part in the portrait's construction. It is not an ornamental element, but a concrete support that maintains the prominence of the person represented. Its materiality adds depth to the immobile body of the model and usually works as a counterpoint so as to give some dynamism to the entire composition.

A comparison with the function of the same pattern in other contemporary artists' paintings confirms this observation. In Anton Raphael Mengs' *Portrait of an English Gentleman*¹⁸, for instance, the armchair enhances

¹⁰ Some manuals even dedicate passages to describing the special skills required for their "management" (Burnet, 1827) and, in 1857, Eugène Delacroix himself, in a draft for a *Dictionary of Fine Arts*, will create an entry "Fonds" ("Backgrounds"), whose tautological definition – "L'art de faire des fonds" ("The art of making backgrounds") – suggests that it is a long-standing and elaborate practice.

¹¹ Jean Clouet, *Portrait of Marguerite of Angoulême*: about 1527, oil on panel, 76.9×85.8 cm, Liverpool Royal Institution.

¹² Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of a Young Merchant*: 1541, oil on panel, 34.8×46.5 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

¹³ Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Eleonora of Toledo*: 1543, oil on panel, 46×59 cm, Prague, National Gallery.

¹⁴ Frans Hals, *Portrait of Sara Andriesdr Hessix*: 1626, oil on canvas, 70×87 cm, Lisbon, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum.

¹⁵ Francisco Goya, *Portrait of Francisco Bayeu*: 1795, oil on canvas, 84×112 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

¹⁶ Francisco Goya, *Portrait of Countess of Haro*: about 1802–1803, oil on canvas, 36×59 cm, Madrid, Collection Alicia Koplowitz.

¹⁷ Francisco Goya, *Portrait of Rafael Esteve Vilella*: 1815, oil on canvas, 75.5×100.6 cm, Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia.

¹⁸ Anton Raphael Mengs, *Portrait of an English Gentleman*: about 1754, oil on canvas, 73.3×99.1 cm, Providence, Risd Museum.

the man's upright position but it is a peripheral object. The green backrest is cut by the framing and its color is exactly equivalent to the one used for the wall in the background. On the contrary, in the *Portrait of the Dowager Marchioness of Villafranca*¹⁹, another example of Goya's original exploitation of the armchair, the inanimate object is an essential part of the model's representation. It is impossible to separate the woman, the seat and the background: all three are part of the same portrait. The dark green shades of the backrest refer to the texture of the black dress, respond to the gray woolen-like hair and offer a chromatic transition to the background.

Another parallel between Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun's *Portrait of Charles-Alexander of Calonne*²⁰ and the famous *Portrait of Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos*²¹ definitively demonstrates this atypical and fundamental position of the armchair in many of Goya's portraits. Unlike Vigée Le Brun's luxurious red chair, the seat created by the Spanish painter is less an object than a chromatic element that contributes to structuring the individuality captured: the yellow armchair plays with the golden desk and the ochre undefined ground to elaborate a subtle camaïeu that points out Jovellanos' melancholy.

4.3 Stand-up Portraits

In the last two examples, the visibility of the entire – or almost entire – body of the model eventually drives to distinguish the case of stand-up portraits. As regards this type of representation, which shows the person from head to foot, Goya's particular use of solid colors is yet more obvious because the inclusion of undefined surroundings does not fit with a well-established tradition. There are precedents of compositions that isolate the model against a plain background without including any significant detail, as demonstrated by Holbein's *Portrait of Christina of Denmark*²² or Velázquez's *Portrait of Pablo de Valladolid*²³; but contrary to head and shoulder portraits, this kind of paintings never granted a structuring role to chromatic substance and the two cases mentioned before must be seen as exceptions.

Stand-up portraits were originally the prerogative of kings, until they also came to be a privilege of high society. As a result, every detail of the composition was supposed to manifest public power and nothing in the representation could be released from a strategic purpose. Mariano Salvador Maella's *Portrait of Charles III Dressing the Cloak of His Order*²⁴ or Franz Xaver Winterhalter's *Portrait of Empress Eugénie in Court Dress*²⁵, to take a later example, perfectly exemplify such type of portraits. In these two paintings, the crown, the sumptuous court dress, the ostentatious red draperies, the column, and the opening on an idyllic space are all symbols of strength and lasting prosperity. The least part of each canvas seems to be serving a display of power.

Goya's *Portrait of Ferdinand VII in Court Dress*²⁶ is clearly different from this conventional device. Unlike Franz Xaver Winterhalter, the Spanish painter does not include a step to raise the royal character. The king appears directly in front of the observer, without any mediation. Solid colors are even the only element that gives some relief to the monarch. The trichromatic palette established by the brown ground, the dark background and the red

¹⁹ Francisco Goya, *The Dowager Marchioness of Villafranca*: 1796, oil on canvas, 72×87 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

²⁰ Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun, *Portrait of Charles-Alexander of Calonne*: 1784, oil on canvas, 130.3×155.5 cm, Londres, The Royal Collection.

²¹ Francisco Goya, *Portrait of Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos*: 1798, oil on canvas, 133×205 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

²² Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of Christina of Denmark*: 1538, oil on oak, 82.6×179.1 cm, London, National Gallery.

²³ Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of Pablo de Valladolid*: about 1635, oil on canvas, 123×209 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

²⁴ Mariano Salvador Maella, *Portrait of Charles III Dressing the Cloak of His Order*: 1783–1784, oil on canvas, 165×260 cm, Madrid, Palacio Real.

²⁵ Franz Xaver Winterhalter, *Portrait of Empress Eugénie in Court Dress*: 1853, oil on canvas, 154×241 cm, Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

²⁶ Francisco Goya, *Portrait of Ferdinand VII in Court Dress*: 1814–1815, oil on canvas, 142.5×208 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

substance of the cloak confer to the man his entire consistence. A similar phenomenon happens in many other stand-up portraits painted by Goya²⁷. Each time, the striking emptiness of the representation is counterbalanced by the materiality of solid colors and the character is given a very special aura, almost a dreamlike presence.

5. Conclusion

As this paper shows, in a significant number of paintings representing all genres of the traditional hierarchy, Goya uses solid colors, giving them an unprecedented structuring function that comes close to material abstraction. In this respect, his art demonstrates the inanity of the intellectual duality between color and shape — color in itself is a construction — and his pioneering role regarding the invention of modern art must be considered.

The study of Goya's uncommon use of solid colors also contributes to solving the mystery of his creations' impact in collective imaginary and helps to understand their everlasting topicality through time. Indeed, the undefined plain surfaces that often organize the pictorial space usually draw the attention to the current presence of the subject represented while reinforcing its visual power. From this point of view, *The Dog*²⁸ could well be a pinnacle of Goya's singular way of arranging pigments. In this unclassifiable painting color in itself is the main actor of the pictorial work: the chromatic substance is a dynamic setting without any points of reference that gives birth to the little animal and defines a two-tone universe today commonly recognized as the announcement of the disturbing modernity.

References

- Bozal V. (1994). *Goya y el Gusto Moderno*, Madrid: Alianza.
- Bray X. (editor) (2015). *Goya: The Portraits*, London: Yale University Press.
- Burnet J. (1827). *Practical Hints on Colour in Painting. Illustrated by Examples from the Works of the Venetian, Flemish and Dutch Schools*, London: James Carpenter, Old Bond Street.
- Carducho V. (1633). Diálogo quinto. Tratase del modo del juzgar de las Pinturas, singularidad de la Perspectiva; que es Dibujo, y que es Colorido: y pruebase, que los antiguos fueron grandes Artífices. *Diálogos de la Pintura: Su Defensa, Origen, Essencia, Definición, Modos y Diferencias*. Madrid: Francisco Martínez.
- Gage J. (1993). *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Gállego J. (1976). *El Pintor de artesano a artista*, Granada: Universidad de Granada, Departamento de historia del arte.
- Laneyrie-Dagen N. (2007). "Le bleu des primitives", in: J. Pigeaud (Ed.), *La Couleur, les Couleurs: XI^{es} Entretiens de La Garenne-Lemot*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, pp. 179–193.
- Lichtenstein J. (1989). *La Couleur Éloquente. Rhétorique et Peinture à L'âge Classique*, Paris: Flammarion.
- López Vázquez J. M. (1994). "Ideas estéticas de Goya a través de sus textos", in: X. Fernández Fernández (Ed.), *Experiencia y Presencia Neoclásicas. Congreso Nacional de Historia de la Arquitectura y Del Arte*, A Coruña: Universidade da Coruña, pp. 67–74.
- Menéndez Pelayo M. (2017). "Capítulo IV. de la estética en los tratadistas de las artes del diseño durante el siglo XVIII", *Obras Completas. Tomo I. Historia de Las Ideas Estéticas en España II*. Santander: Editorial de la Universidad de Cantabria, Real Sociedad Menéndez Pelayo, pp. 1037–1097. (Original work published 1940).
- Rudel J. (2018). "APLAT, peinture", *Encyclopedia Universalis*, accessed on 27 February 2018, available online at: <http://www.universalis-edu.com/encyclopedia/aplat-peinture/>.
- Sabbah J. (2015). "Ors, éclairages, fonds lumineux. Réflexions sur quelques effets de lumière chez Goya", *Les Langues Néo-Latines*, No. 375, pp. 79–91.
- Tomlinson J. A. (Ed.) (2002). *Goya: Images of Women*, Washington: National Gallery of Art.

²⁷ See for instance Goya's *Portrait of the Marchioness of la Solana* (1794-1795, oil on canvas, 122×181 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre) or his *Portrait of Vicente Isabel Osorio de Moscoso y Álvarez de Toledo, The Count of Trastámara* (1787-1788, oil on canvas, 104×138.5 cm, Private Collection).

²⁸ Francisco Goya, *The Dog*: about 1819-1823, oil mural on plaster transferred to canvas, 79.3×131.5 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.