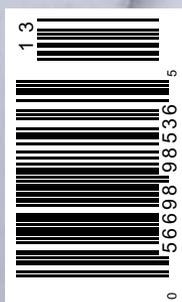


Cabinet

A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE

ISSUE 43 FORENSICS

US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7



COLORS / UMBER

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*"Between the doubled earth and dirt, dirt
There is not a single single thing..."*

—Nachtborg Haam, "The Still, the Soul, and the Soil"

The fragile art of painting has had, from the outset, two basic enemies: clay and gold, or, if you prefer, shit and splendor. Pliny, in his backhanded history of art (it is sandwiched between long sections on the medicinal uses of various minerals), deals with both. On the one hand, there is his lovely lamentation that the art of painting was once highly prized, before the *nouveau riche* Romans around him simply began gilding everything in sight, in lieu of commissioning handsome, traditional frescos. (Moral: sheets of gold trump pretty pictures; painting falls to tavern walls.) On the other, there is his ambiguous story about the daughter of Butades—she who made what was supposed to be the world's first portrait, a tracing on the wall of the lamp-lit profile of her lover. This young woman may be the mother of all two-dimensional representation, but her pioneering work is promptly doubled and displaced: her father—a potter, we are told—lays moist clay upon this first figuration, and fires it, producing ... well, what? No one is exactly sure. A bas-relief? A bust? A terra cotta shrinky-dink? Put the specifics aside, and focus on the moral: molded earth trumps crepuscular brushwork; real creation consists in manhandling the wet heft of dark matter (and painting is for girls and their girlie men, QED).

If one accepts this tendentious account of the painter's perilous course through a gilt Scylla and a Charybdis of filth, then the delicate business of picture making must forever thread its way precariously between those inclined to preen themselves in a golden mirror and those who prefer to play with the excremental stuff of the deep earth. One can even imagine a history of painting told as a pushing open of the narrow passage between these rival camps: along one side, the iconophilic narcissists (Byzantium to Damien Hirst); and down the other, the chthonic monsters (Bosch to Piero Manzoni). Think of that long gallery as a kind of gauntlet run between shine and shite.

Which brings us to umber. UMBER: a mineral pigment; a "natural earth"; one of those face-daubing mucks of the prehistoric hominids. Scratched up out of dead riverbeds, raw umber is more or less chemically identical to that other ancient cave paint, ochre (a mixture of iron oxide, silica sand, and a little aluminum oxide), but with the addition of a wee bit of oxidized

manganese, which walks the hue from mud-yellow over to mud-mud—to, let's just say it, *brown*. The true ochres, in their pure, straw-colored glory, can play at being gold; but the tainted umbers—and there are many of them, mined here and there, from Cyprus to West Virginia, from the Harz mountains to the Turkish steppes—know that they are dirt. Just dirt. They come from the dark side.

Literally. Since the word *umber*, of course, means nothing more or less than "shadow" (Latin, *umbra*; Old French, *umbre*; Middle English, *umber*; etc.). And, in fact, the painterly name for the color umber was, from Rembrandt to Manet and beyond, *terre d'ombre*: "the dark earth," if you like; or perhaps better, "the stuff of shadows."

There is, to be sure, a pervasive poetry in the nomenclature of pigments (*madder lake*, *Monastral green*, *Bohemian earth*, *cinnabar*), but where umber is concerned we are dealing with mere description: umber is *umber* because it actually constituted the matter from which shadows were made. Which is to say, you painted the deepest flesh tones of your figure, together with the shadowy zones of its milieu, by means of liberal admixtures of this tint. True, the history of the painted shadow is a history unto itself (Mantegna deepened his hues to achieve the effect; Leonardo laid on dark and filmy glazes; the nineteenth century fetishized the colored shadow), but the fact remains: it was umber that gave the premodern palette the substance of shade. Call it darkness visible. Not black, since veritable black is darkness *in-visible*. But rather *ombre*, that particular obscurity by which form itself becomes legible as such: the *scuro* of chiaroscuro, those tenebrous contours that reveal where the world is moving away from us, where it is *receding*; the dark slash of a *cast shadow*, those ghostly forms that testify to the solidity of all things, even as they remind us that every object (indeed every subject) is an instrument of privation. Everywhere, holes in the light. Everywhere, umber.

Though, in fact, in the history of painting, less actual "umber" than one might have thought. In a telling aside in his miscellaneous and erudite book *Color and Meaning*, John Gage, the redoubtable scholar of all things chromatic, comments passingly on the almost total want of any serious reflection on brown in the European traditions of aesthetics and perceptual physiology:

As a non-spectral color, brown has been especially resistant to theory, and philosophers and experimental physiologists have generally argued that it is simply a darkened variety of spectral yellow.

As if darkness were merely a peculiar form of bright. If only. One glimpses again the long hall of shine and shite: Down one side, ochre; down the other, umber. Such a narrow hall. It would seem that, like the rest of us, art is born *inter urinas et faeces*—between, if you like, the golden glow of a *Piss Christ* and an open can of *Merda d'artista*; between the glinting reflection of Narcissus in his mirror pond and the shadowy work of Butades *et fille*.

Interestingly, Gage goes on to note just how late brown hues enter the visual idiom of continental painting, suggesting at one point that it is not really until the seventeenth century (in the work of Velázquez and Ribera) that the umbracious tints come to serve as a unifying pictorial element. When they do, they create the general atmosphere for a line of paintings so obsessed with darkness that their tenebrism feels more metaphysical than terrestrial.

How could it be otherwise? Where shadows are concerned, this has always been the problem. The story of Butades, like the whole history of art in the Western tradition, is perpetually haunted by the shadow-tale of Plato's *Republic* (by shades of the cave, where we learn to suspect that we have never seen anything but cast shadows) and by the denunciation of artistic representation itself that follows on Socrates's indictment of every dilapidation from an original. Hence "sciography"—shadow tracing, the science of reconstructing forms from their shadows, the Butadian gambit—always has about it an air of desperation, of redemptive yearning, a sense that it is reaching *back* toward the light and the things seeable in that light. To put it in coloristic terms, umber, one fears, is forever dreaming of ochre, its next of kin, the golden child across the hall.

...

In his provocative essay *A Short History of the Shadow*, the Romanian philosopher-critic Victor Stoichita formally sets Plato's cave against Butades's daughter to argue that these two mythic origin stories are pendant mirrors, however dark, in which to see ourselves thinking about thinking:

The myth regarding the birth of artistic representation and the one regarding the birth of cognitive representation are both centered on the motif of projection; this early projection is a dark spot—a shadow. Art (real art) and knowledge (real knowledge) are its transcendence.

For all the elegance of Stoichita's formulation, it retains some of the theological nostalgia of its subject matter.

Who would not like to transcend the shadow? To see, as it were, face to face? We are, ourselves, more umber than ochre, and are forever thinking about ways to step into the light.

I know of only one truly great response to this endless preoccupation with shadow transcendence, and it comes at the end of Michael Baxandall's odd, late meditation *Shadows and Enlightenment*. There, after 144 pages of slightly strained (even, as he puts it himself, "morbid") ruminations on the pictorial workings of "local deficiencies of visible light," the aged critic rounds suddenly on the whole Platonic tradition and the Butadian account of representation it drags in its wake. It is a moment of some magic:

From Plato on, projected shadow has ... had to appear in the role of bearer of imperfect knowledge of the object that projects it. So it is, on its own, but it is not normally on its own, and ... the knowledge it offers is not always about the object that projects it. Even in Plato's cave it must have offered some sort of information about a light source and a wall, if that was desired, but probably it was not.

"But probably it was not." One could weep. No, probably it was not. And yet, and yet ... *why not? Why not really look at the wall*, at the shadow play there in the cave? Could that be enough? Look closer. So much to see right there in the shades—in their texture, tint, and trembling contours. This too is a world. Or, perhaps, Socrates, this is the world.

To the ineluctable posture of critique built into the structure of Plato's cave ("you're confused!"), Baxandall, the old man, the lover of art, his head firmly fixed *forward*, offers what we might call the *riposte esthétique*: "Nope, I'm not confused; I'm *looking*."

One senses he was tired of trying to see through or past the shadows. He was ready to look right at them. To see the *terre d'ombre* up close and personal. Forget ochre. Show me the umber. I am not afraid.

Baxandall himself became clay shortly thereafter.

opposite: Joseph Wright of Derby, *The Corinthian Maid*, ca. 1782–1784 (detail). Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

