

On Sorting, and combining Colors The Eleventh Chapter

(1) You, Students of the Art born of Nature,
Be so good as to lend your eager ears also to this:
I shall recount to you the manners in which
You may capably apportion your colors,¹
Sorting well, consonant with sound judgment,
Which [colors] (yet without mixing)*
Gladly adjoin and accompany one another,
As you apply yourself to fashioning Stuffs.

*Which colors are most
capable of being combined.

(2) If we can surely hit this mark, too,
Then with wondrous grace it will beautify our work,
Much as did the Maiden Glycera of Sicyon,*
Seller of floral wreaths, who, with uncommonly
Subtle art, knew how to plait her little flowers
Ten-thousandfold, especially with colors
So delightful that Pausias the painter,
Rejoicing [in them], subsequently wooed her.²

*Example: Glycera who sorted
floral wreaths with finesse.

(3) Let us thus sort our Stuffs,
Insomuch as Pausias, seeing this artful congress,
Did follow her lead in making Wreaths and Posies,
And himself became wholly skilled at such things:
Finally, he firmly set himself to ploughing further,
And with the utmost pleasure portrayed her
Sitting and fabricating Bouquets:
Stephanoplocos was what this work was called.

(4) Insofar as we, apropos the sorting of colors,*
Have now somewhat advanced in giving an account of florets:
Made various by virtue of natural painting,
They are poured forth in fragrant Springtime
Across the dales of Tempe, as if onto a green Tapestry;³
However many thousands bloom there fully opened,
Hardly one appears green, or fails to stand out well,
Thanks to sorting.⁴

*On learning from flowers,
how to sort colors.

(5) But distinguishing varieties of green from green,*
 So that one stands out from the other, brings beauty to the fore,
 Whether [the florets] be red, blue, purple, or pale as milk.
 Observe also the tree foliage and plants on the ground,
 Which, though green themselves, are exceedingly varied;
 And raising our eyes from these meadows,
 Let us pay heed to the well-sorted
 Vault of heaven, beholding it day and night.

*The sorting and distribution
 of colors in all created
 things is duly to be noted.

(6) I let the blushing dawn,*
 The messenger of Phoebus, sail past,
 With her glorious sorting, early and late;⁵
 But there on high (worthy of note), see
 How the golden Sun, intent on lighting the World,
 Dispatches the Years to and fro on a field of blue;
 So, too, the compliant Moon and Stars,
 How brightly they all twinkle like gold on blue.

*Example: the dawn and
 blue sky populated by
 stars, moon, and sun.

(7) Yellow and blue complement one another;*
 Thus may you arrange the colors of your fabrics:
 Red and green, too, love each other wonderfully;
 Red and blue, for diversity's sake,
 Likewise go well together; purple will not be loath
 To stand by yellow, and green will quicken
 By white, which adapts itself to all colors,
 No less than Vineyards accord with fields of Wheat.⁶

*Which colors find
 each other attractive.

(8) That Nature shows us how to sow by sorting,*
 Is to be grasped from all things
 That pleurably rejoice the eyes:
 Examples being the eloquent Parrot,
 Birds, shells, and other created things,
 How all their colors mutually connect.
 Thus Nature, who makes us wise in all things,
 Is nurse and mother to the art of painting.

*Nature instructs in
 the sorting of colors.

(9) Additionally, purple by green has no paucity of grace,*
 Blue and purple greet each other with alacrity,
 But red goes quite poorly with flesh-tints,
 For the nude [body] prefers to be in conversation

*It produces a sweet effect
 when no opposing colors
 are brought together.

With green, blue, or purple, if it can come by them;⁷
 Blue coordinates well with green; if one sees fit
 To dulcify, let various reds play together,
 And various yellows with yellows.⁸

(10) In a word, reds beside yellow, and green beside yellow,
 And also purples—for instance, bluish
 And reddish ones—mutually interwoven⁹
 With mixtures: but Bruegel, whose works appear alive,*
 Often fashioned various gray
 Stuffs, almost as if shaded without shadows,
 And amongst all that gray, there blossomed
 Very floridly, an azure or red that glowed like firelight.¹⁰

*Example: Bruegel let
 beautiful colors shine forth
 amongst a plurality of grays.

(11) In this respect, he was like the Poets, who sometimes
 Construct elaborate arguments and stories,
 Wherewith they gladden ears itching to hear,
 Occasionally slipping a pregnant Saying
 In-between, worthy to be ruminated:
 Or like the finely-feathered Peacocks
 Or the Indian Birds that stand out
 From other Birds.

(12) We, too, may abide betimes by this usage.
 I recall that a group of young Painters thus wrought
 At the Belvedere; Raphael da Rezzo dressed*
 His figures in an array of light grays, rather than
 Using the beautiful colors sought out by other [Painters]:¹¹
 But little Bees, hungry for nectar, could not
 Rush more hastily after thyme than our eyes
 Sped merrily to his things first of all.¹²

*Example of making
 do with many gray
 tints: Raphael da Rezzo.

(13) I could adduce more particulars
 About sorting colors, which the Painter
 Shall every now and then encounter along the way;
 Namely, with respect to nudes and fabrics,
 How to set the backgrounds apart, by type and character:
 And how to mix and match colors well, so that*
 All things project, one in front of another,
 In Landscapes and Buildings.

*Attend to projection.

(14) So, conduct yourselves according to what's just been said,
And devise for the best as you see fit;
For this great work oftentimes causes me to flag.
And I look to see whether, like Phaëton on his chariot,^{13*}
Sometimes rounding the East, sometimes the West,
I might finally, after much running of the course,
Accede to wished-for rest and a night's lodging,
And unharness my panting Steeds.¹⁴

*I desire [to make] an end
of [this] burdensome
work in progress.

End of the sorting and combining of Colors.