CONCLUSION: Printing Colour After 1700

Jacob Christoff Le Blon and the Invention of Trichromatic Colour Printing, c.1710

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Shortly after 1700, Jacob Christoff Le Blon, a miniature painter working in Amsterdam, revolutionised colour printmaking.1 He did not mix colours, as his contemporaries working in the à la poupée manner developed by Johannes Teyler, but instead invented a way to overprint transparent layers of the three primary colours (blue, yellow and red, in that order) in exact proportions that allowed any desired gradation to be achieved (Fig. 20.1); he later printed a fourth black or extra blue inked plate first to enhance contrast. Until this breakthrough, the best way to achieve precise colours was to apply individual inks, as in à la poupée printing, and allow the lines of opaque colour inks to interact with the white of the paper. But now a large range of colour gradations could be produced from three or four plates being printed on top of each other in transparent primary colours, with both the lower ink layers and the white of the paper shining through to create a joint hue, like glazing in painting. This technique produced intermediate tinges and offered various possibilities for new results and aesthetics.

It is often said that Le Blon merely followed Isaac Newton’s research,2 but this is untrue. Le Blon referred to Newton in his Coloritto where he, rightly, mentions that the mixing of various colours of ‘light’ will create white light ‘as the great Sir Isaac Newton has demonstrated in his Opticks’,3 but Le Blon was ‘only speaking of Material Colours, or those used by Painters’. Staying close to Aristotelian tradition as concerns divisions in seven (such as in musical notes), Newton observed the behaviour of light and distinguished seven colours from white light divided by a prism, with an extra area called ‘E’ between red and orange. Le Blon, on the other hand, reduced the available painter’s palette to three basic colours. His aim was to reproduce oil paintings in order to make good money, for which he developed a manner of overprinting the three primary colours from three mezzotint plates thereby creating composite hues. The Opticks could not have helped him with this, as Newton did not postulate a trichromatic colour theory,4 did not discuss the mixing of paints or inks in primary colours, and was not interested in art techniques let alone printmaking practice. Le Blon’s contemporaries writing about his colour prints and working method correctly understood the difference and did not attribute to Newton a distinction of the three primary colours or of a colour theory.5

The Newton-Le Blon link appeared only in 1749, eight years after Le Blon’s death, when his pupil Jacques-Fabien Gautier-Dagoty perhaps misunderstood or confused the ideas of his master and Newton.6 He first stated that Le Blon tried applying Newton’s theory to painting (‘Le Blond … essaya d’appliquer à la Peinture la théorie du grand Newton sur les couleurs’) and that he next invited engravers to apply this to printmaking; later in the letter, he correctly quotes from Coloritto. From this followed a long history of confusing Newton’s theories about light and Le Blon’s practical approach.

With Le Blon’s process, colour printing moved forward into modernity. Three- or four-colour intaglio

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1 On the spelling of Le Blon’s given names, see the Foreword, x, nt. 8.
4 J.C. Le Blon, Coloritto; or the Harmony of Colouring in Painting: Reduced to Mechanical Practice under Easy Precept, and Infallible
5 C. Mortimer, ‘An Account of Mr. James Christopher Le Blon’s Principles of Printing, in imitation of Painting, and of Weaving Tapestry, in the same manner as Brocades’, Philosophical Transactions, 57 [-37] (1731/1732), no. 419 (June/July), 101–07, esp. 101–02.
6 J.-F. Gautier-Dagoty, Lettre de Gautier à M. de Boze ... sur la Gravure des Coeleurs, Mercure de France (July 1749), 158–72, esp. 160–61, 166–67 (quoting Le Blon, Coloritto, 7, 9).
FIGURE 20.1 Jacob Christoff Le Blon, after Antonio Allegri da Correggio, St Catherine Reading, c.1720, mezzotint printed in blue, yellow and red ink from three plates, 44.3 × 32.2 cm
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