

The Origins and Key Issues of Early Netherlandish Grisaille

Introduction

The term *grisaille* refers to monochrome or near monochrome paintings executed primarily in shades of grey, in other words a kind of monochromy that appears to indicate a visual reduction capable of attaining higher levels of meaning precisely by virtue of its monocolouredness, most often suggestive of stone sculpture.

In early Netherlandish painting the technique of *grisaille* was extremely widespread and of peculiar significance. In the first half of the 15th century painted figures and scenes appeared in niches on the outer panels of winged altarpieces that were reminiscent of stone statues. These “images couched within images” served the purpose of guiding believers toward the transcendent reality depicted by the altar’s inner face. The surrounding architecture and the sculptures themselves were painted in shades of grey as preludes to and explanations of the altar’s main scene on the inner panel.

My purpose in the present essay is to uncover the roots and traditions of monochromy and its rise to prominence in early Netherlandish altar painting. The first section provides a brief historical overview of the technique. The second section focuses on the use of *grisaille* in early Netherlandish altar painting and the two variants in which it appeared in the works of the most prominent artists, either as an autonomous sculptural image represented on the outer wings of altar pieces or as sculpture inserted into polychrome scenes. The third part refers to *grisaille* as a paradox. On the one hand this technique is more realistic than any other kind of painting, as it often represents an object rather than a re-created scene, while on the other hand its interpretation as a duel between painting and sculpture reaffirms the superiority of painting and reveals the illusionistic quality of this art, showing the contradiction between real and pictorial space.¹

1. The evolution of *grisaille*

The use of the French expression for monochromy first appeared around 1625, but the technique had already been in use for some time. It has also been called “*camaieu*”, “*cirage*” or “*monochrom*”, and the technique has been referred to as “*chiar-obscur*”. At the time of its emergence in the Middle Ages it was simply called “*painting in black and white*”, as illustrated by an entry in the inventories of the Duc de Berry (1340–1416) dating from 1401: “*Item, unes petites heures de Nostre Dame [...] enluminées de blanc et de noir*”. This description is not very precise, for *grisaille* paintings were not simply

black and white, but were combined with colours.² André Félibien calls *grisaille* “*peinture sur le verge*” being “*grey in grey*” defining it as “*camaieus*”.³ Denis Diderot calls panel painting *grisaille*, defining it as “*façon de peinture avec deux couleurs, l’une claire & l’autre brune*”.⁴

1.1. Early *grisaille* painting: stained glass

The traditions of *grisaille* painting date back to the stained vitrail windows of Cistercian monasteries of the 12th century. An order issued in 1134 by Bernard of Clairvaux concerning the prohibition of colour in the order’s buildings led artists to use shades of black on clear glass. Shortly thereafter, as the constraints eased, this monochrome technique, enhanced with a touch of colour, became popular outside the order as well. By the third quarter of the 13th century windows decorated in this manner were standard fittings in French churches, and occasionally the entire glazing was done in *grisaille*. The addition of colour to monochrome glass painting influenced figural glass painting as well. Namely, it led to the use of more delicate tones in contrast with the earlier preference for strong reds and blues characteristic of the beginning of the century.⁵

1.2. *Grisaille* wall painting

Monochrome figure representation has its origins in the 14th century wall paintings of Giotto at the Arena Chapel in Padua. In the Cycle of Virtues and Vices stone coloured allegories facing one another are situated in painted niches in the plinth section of the frescoes as the foundations of earthly existence and as pedestals for the multicoloured depiction of the History of Salvation. The painted statues are located in square shaped niches and are reminiscent of sculptures in French gothic cathedrals.⁶ Opinions diverge slightly as to the reasons behind Giotto’s primarily monochrome rendering and his occasional use of green and ochre, in addition to grey. What seems most likely is that the grey colour of this cycle refers to the material of the illusionistic statues, because neither the consequent abstraction of colour from shape, nor the introduction of an autonomous image-construction to the chapel’s visual program can be identified. Hence, monochromy in this case seems to be used as means of imitating stone.

The allegorical figures, subordinated to colourful scenes by their reminiscence to stone, have the highest degree of reality due to their illusionistic character. They are linked to the reality of the beholder not only spatially, through the niches, but also temporally, for their stillness

can be more easily understood than the distance and dynamism of polychrome scenes of Salvation.⁷ If they are perceived simply as stones, they do not have to be looked at as living people, which is Giotto's way of separating degrees of reality within the chapel's visual program.

Painted statuettes and architectural elements appear simultaneously in the inner contexts of coloured images as well, like those depicting scenes from the legend of St Francis in the upper church of the San Francesco Basilica in Assisi, where in contrast to the contemporary use of polychrome statues, Giotto uses stone colour to distinguish them from living persons and to define them as being of the same material as the building.

1.3. Monochrome in French manuscript illumination

The French manuscript established itself as another field for grisaille in the first part of the 14th century. The earliest surviving manuscript illuminated entirely in this technique is the work of the Paris illuminator Jean Pucelle. The Book of Hours dating from 1325–1328 was commissioned by Charles IV. (reign 1322–1328) for his wife, Jeanne D'Evreux, and consists of 209 pages with 25 full-page scenes depicting the childhood and Passion of Christ and significant events from the life of Louis IX. (reign 1226–1270). The grisaille figures are reminiscent of statues, and the use of colour reflects the traditions of the technique characteristic of the time: monochrome figures in various shades of grey are set against a colourful architectural background.

Pucelle was familiar with the innovations of late 13th and early 14th century Italian art, such as the works of Giovanni Pisano, whose pulpit in Pistoia had a visible influence on his art. The figure of St. Matthew holding a column, for example, is similar to the Atlas figure painted by Pucelle in the Hours of Jeanne D'Evreux in an illumination depicting the life of Louis IX. The grisaille technique used in the books of hours recalls gothic ivory items used in private devotion. A 14th century diptych at the Cleveland Fine Arts Museum depicting scenes from the life of St. Martin holds traces of paint on the background and the architecture, a method of colour use that can also be observed in Pucelle's illuminations.

It should also be noted that items of luxury of the period that were used and commissioned by women were usually made of ivory, which lead to the association of ivory with luxury and femininity. Therefore it seems less surprising that Pucelle chose this technique when painting the queen's book of hours.⁸ Allusions to branches of expensive art, such as enamel or ivory carvings, bestowed upon illuminations and grisaille an especially high value, as these representations were rare and used only in first-class manuscripts reserved for the ruling elite.⁹

1.4. Early grisaille panel painting

In less frequent cases grisaille was used in the production of panel paintings in the 14th century, as exempli-

fied by two panels originating from Naples dated from around 1340. They depict scenes of the Apocalypse and, although they were not painted in grey monochrome, but rather with shades of brown on white chalk priming, the use of pigment bears affinities with the classic grisaille technique of illuminated manuscripts. In this case the monochrome coloured sculptural groups represented in front of a deep blue background were not meant to imitate a specific material, but rather to evoke the sensation of preciousness and rarity.¹⁰

1.5. Monochrome altar clothes and liturgical textiles

The technique of grisaille was given a somewhat different interpretation in works made from textiles. Yet the technique represented a value in itself, namely the voluntary refusal to use colour appeared as a means of emphasizing its liturgical function. The Altarcloth of Narbonne is the earliest example of a liturgical textile decorated in monochrome grey shades. It was painted on silk in the 1370s during the reign of Charles V. (reign 1367–1380) and Jeanne de Bourbon and depicts the main scenes of the Passion of Christ, depicted under classical gothic arcades.

Information related to the purpose and use of this piece is found in an inventory of Charles V. of 1379: "Chapelles pour caresme cothidianes blanches" (white chapel adornments for daily Lenten use). The entry concerning daily use of altar cloths is important because it points to the liturgical role of monochrome: namely that it was used in the period of Lent to cover images and to keep the divine nature of Christ hidden until the Feast of the Resurrection.¹¹

2. Grisaille in early Netherlandish panel painting

Unlike the colourful sides of altars, grisaille representations in Netherlandish panel painting have never been the focus of much attention and were generally thought of as less valuable due to their monochromy. Grisaille scenes on the outer sides of altarpieces in the colours of sorrow were meant to prepare the spectator for the reception of the transcendental truth of Christ's resurrection, which becomes discernible after the end of the penitential season of Lent. Altarpieces were kept open during feast days, except on the annual feast of the Annunciation, which falls on the 25th of March and therefore always takes place during Lent. Thus it would seem reasonable for altars to be kept closed at this time. At the same time, this could be the principal reason why the Annunciation is the most frequently depicted scene.¹²

Professor Joseph Braun suggests that prior to the emergence of winged altarpieces retables were covered with liturgical adornments such as the Altarcloth of Narbonne, which could easily be removed and changed according to the liturgical calendar. With the appearance of winged altarpieces, shutters could be closed over the interior sculptures and paintings.¹³

The use of grisaille on liturgical textiles and their role during the observance of Lent is of special relevance for 15th century Netherlandish panel paintings that depict grey monochrome stone-like statues. In Panofsky's opinion, the figures of St. James the Great and St. Claire of Assisi on the back of the Prado "Betrothal" by Robert Campin are the first examples of painted monochrome statues. According to his theory, the illusionistic representation of painted stone statues can be interpreted as analogous to the portrayal of living human bodies, and in both instances the artist indulges in a tour de force that in the case of grisaille culminates in a serious alliance between painting and sculpture.

Jacques de Baerze and Claus Sluter, the most prominent sculptors of the time, both had their sculptures coloured, while Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin depicted them uncoloured, as seen in the workshops of the sculptors. This led to the invention of a new figural style, which in Panofsky's words is akin to a revival of Sluter's statues. Just as the painter's simulated statues can be described as human beings turned into stone, so too can human beings depicted on the outer sides of altars be described as statues turned into flesh.¹⁴

Their colour scheme is closer to the colours of reality, since monochromy, given the lack of colours, leads to transcendence, which in the light of the divine mirrors the world of man and mediates between God and his creation. The expression of living stone, "lapides vivi," has a special meaning in this context, for it refers to the community of believers who together work on bringing about the city of God, the "civitas dei".¹⁵ The antique notion of "living stone" was not used in Christian iconography until it appeared in the First Letter of St. Peter. Here the apostle encourages believers to convert to Christ, the "living stone", who is meant to be the foot stone of the Christian church. In his Letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul calls on believers to join the House of God, which is built upon the foundations of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ as its keystone.

Durandus, when explaining the meaning of the expression of Ecclesia, returns to this metaphor and interprets the term "living stone" as the Church materialized in substance and spirit, as a building and as the community of believers. In virtue of its material existence as a stony structure, each church building reinforces this twofold interpretation and gives rise to the image of the spiritual church, while concurrently evoking its a-temporal community comprised not only of believers, but also of the saved, the apostles and the prophets.¹⁶

From the 13th century on the statues of apostles placed on columns simultaneously served as the spiritual pillars of the Church and supported the physical structure of the building itself. These figures were the first to have partaken of the Eucharist, and they were the bases upon

which the New Jerusalem was to be erected. Once we approach the grisaille statues on Netherlandish winged altarpieces from this perspective, figures of apostles come to function as mediators hailing the pious at the Gate of Salvation.¹⁷ In a metaphorical sense the elaboration of stone implicates Man's analogous elaboration by faith.

3. Traditional grisaille or a novel form of stone painting?

Belting draws attention to the twofold, intimately coupled outer and inner perspective of works decorating altars. In his view the complexity of issues surrounding grisaille is unjustly reduced and neglected if one focuses solely on the question as to why stone statues appear on the outer panels and the reasons pertaining to the use of monochromy, as opposed to the contemporary preference for vivid colours. A possible explanation for this is the transfer of the function of Lenten veils to altar painting, where outer panels serve as depictions of sorrow during the Passion, just as the images painted on their silken predecessors did. However, Belting uncovers the solution to the problem of grisaille in an analysis of the meaning of the images themselves. He goes so far as to claim that according to strict standards the Netherlandish works do not count as grisaille at all, but rather are manifestations of a new form of stone painting. In contemporary practice colour was used to lend liveliness to the figures depicted, stone statues were painted colourfully in order to animate their materiality. Yet in Netherlandish stone painting artists depict statues in their crudeness to avoid all associations with living persons. In Belting's opinion this leads us to a proper appreciation and understanding of the antagonism between the colourless outer panels and coloured inner panels, where the outer wings appear as a closed stony wall representing for the believer the utmost frontier of reality discernible to the senses.¹⁸

In this instance pictures define themselves as "image-and-material", for the illusion inherent to this form of expression reduces the image itself to a mere effigy. Robert Campin's Holy Trinity is a classic example of Trompe l'oeil where painted stony figures step out of the wall onto a trilateral plinth with Christ's right foot hanging slightly off the edge, covering part of the inscription, thereby creating the impression that the image shares the same space and reality as the spectator.

In this respect the Ghent altar provides the most important innovation, an innovation that makes the scenery ultimately empirical: in the lower zone of the image-space donors are portrayed praying to the statues of saints. By placing the donor figures inside niches Eyck brings them into physical proximity with the saints, though they are also separated by the dual setting created through the depiction of living persons with vivid colours and saints as stone statues. Nevertheless, the

figures remain on the plane of reality, visible to the naked eye. The outer wings erect the boundary where empirical experience ceases. Only upon spreading the wings of the altar can one confront the antithesis of the experiential world, a representation of Paradise that lies beyond empiricism.

This playful attitude toward *Trompe l'oeil* is acceptable if it serves the purpose of questioning the reality of the physical world. Thus, Rogier van der Weyden confronts us with evanescence on the outer wings of the Braque triptych, where an inscription and a human skull that is leaning against a broken brick are meant to draw attention to the ephemeral and fleeting nature of the world. The vessel, the outer surface of the altar, is finite, like the life of Jean Braque, which ends with earthly death. The world of faith is revealed to him in the same manner as his wife gains access to the inner pictures by opening the outer wings.¹⁹

The twofold approach to painting – the antagonism between “inside” and “outside” – consists of signs. On the outer, dead surface we merely find symbols of fleeting earthly existence in opposition to which the inner ones are transparent and gesture towards a higher plane of reality. In this case, the opposition is more of a connecting link instead of a separating line, since the pictures’ analogical complexity makes even laypeople experience the self-contradictory nature of their existence as souls trapped within physical bodies. In virtue of its dual view, the painting is an analogy of itself and therefore a symbol of the human being as such. Hence it can represent the human condition in a radically new conception and rise to become an expression of the inner and outer worlds of the beholders. Much as each painting conceals an inside hidden behind its outer panels, the parallel of an invisible soul within a fleshly body unfolds before our eyes.²⁰

4. Summary

In conclusion, the semi-realistic stone paintings created with the technical means of *grisaille* are stone-like pseudo-creatures, *lapides vivi*, entities between human and stone statue. The life-likeness they represent surpasses reality, and they work as portals that veil the divine. Grey is neither the colour of mourning, nor the symbol of Lent, nor even a sign of lesser value, but rather works as mediator between different spheres of reality, functioning as meditational assistance for the pious. The *grisaille* figures are discernible elements of a colourful vision in which inner and outer, central and peripheral express themselves chronologically or as thesis-antithesis. Materiality corresponds to the earthly, while lack of colour rises to the Divine. Representation in shades of grey lends *grisaille* figures the highest

degree of reality, for their presence is more genuine than that of figures populating the inner images.

In this sense *grisaille* functions as a boundary object, a mediator between spheres of reality; it seems graspable yet remains intangible. Light, seemingly emanating from an external source, gives the impression that the stone figures could literally transgress the lines dividing the spheres and step into the physical reality of the beholder. Bonaventura calls this the shadow of eternal light with which the devoted must be lead across to arrive at the Spiritual. This is what *grisaille* sets out to accomplish.

Notes

- 1 MARANDEL, Patrice: *Introduction*. In: *Gray is the Color, An Exhibition of Grisaille Painting*. Houston, Texas, Rice Museum, 1974. 16.
- 2 KRIEGER, Michaela: *Grisaille als Metapher, Zum Entstehen der Peinture en Cameieu in frühen 14. Jahrhundert*. Wien, Holzhausen, 1995. 46–53.
- 3 FÉLIBIEN, André: *Des principes de l'architecture, de la sculpture, de la peinture et des autres arts qui en dependent. Avec un dictionnaire des terms propres a chacun de ces arts*. Paris, 1676. 251.
- 4 *Encyclopédie. Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers. VII*. Réd. Denis DIDEROT, Jean le Rond D'ALEMBERT. Paris, 1757. 950.
- 5 KRIEGER, 1995. 46–53.
- 6 GRAMS-THIEME, Marion: *Lebendige Steine: Studien zur niederländischen Grisaillemalerei des 15. und frühen 16. Jahrhunderts*. Köln, Böhlau, 1988. 2.
- 7 KRIEGER, 1995. 55–61.
- 8 FERBER, Stanley: *Jean Pucelle and Giovanni Pisano*. *Art Bulletin*, 66. (1984). 65–72.
- 9 KRIEGER, 1995. 68–72.
- 10 KRIEGER, 1995. 75–81.
- 11 TEASDALE SMITH, Molly: *The Use of Grisaille as a Lenten Observance*. *Marsyas*, 8. (1957–1959) 44.
- 12 TEASDALE SMITH, 1959. 46.
- 13 BRAUN, Joseph: *Der Christliche Altar in Seiner Geschichtlichen Entwicklung. II*. München, Alte Meister Guenther Koch & Co., 1924. 360.
- 14 PANOFKY, Erwin: *Early Netherlandish Painting*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Cambridge University Press, 1953. 161–162.
- 15 GRAMS-THIEME, 1988. 10–12.
- 16 PLUMPE, John: *Vivum saxum, vivi lapides. The concept of “living stone” in classical and christian antiquity*. *Traditio*, 1. (1943) 1–14.
- 17 GRAMS-THIEME, 1988. 54–55.
- 18 BELTING, Hans – KRUSE, Christiane: *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes*. München, Hirmer, 1994. 60–61.
- 19 BELTING–KRUSE, 1994. 61.
- 20 BELTING–KRUSE, 1994. 62.