

Color in the Age of Impressionism

Commerce, Technology, and Art

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Introduction

If there is one thing we all know about the Impressionists, it is generally that these artists' paintings, which are now revered and reproduced everywhere, from calendars to coffee mugs, were originally greeted with outrage and ridicule. From the oft-reproduced satirical caricatures by Amédée de Noé, known as Cham, to critic Albert Wolff's 1876 dismissal of the Impressionists as a group of "five or six lunatics," there is no shortage of evidence to support the idea: critics were generally unsympathetic to the new style, and this for reasons having mostly to do with the artists' unconventional use of color, deemed too visible, both in terms of its brightness and sheer material presence on the canvas (fig. 1).¹ "Try to make M. Pissarro understand that trees are not violets; that the sky is not the color of fresh butter, that the things he paints are not seen in any country on earth, and that no intelligent human being could countenance such aberrations," Wolff grumbled.² Wolff's and others' opprobrium gradually gave way to praise, however, and, then, widespread emulation. In the end, few topics have had as intense and long-standing popular appeal than the larger, brighter, more colorful "Impressionist palette" and trademark techniques, as evidenced by the myriad practical handbooks that promise to teach amateur painters "how to paint like an Impressionist" (fig. 2). Once feared and derided, Impressionists' way of handling color is now packaged and sold for the mass market, alongside other colorful goods, from computer tablets to dish towels.

Museum exhibitions examining the materials and construction of Impressionist artworks capitalize on this popular fascination with "Impressionist color"—its "hidden secrets" finally revealed by close examination under ultraviolet light, infrared, high-power microscopes, or other specialized technical methods—but additionally serve as useful reminders of how little we truly know about how these iconic artworks were made (fig. 3).³ Despite isolated attempts at curricular reform, technical art history is still not typically a part of art historians' graduate school training. And conservators' expert elucidations of Impressionists' materials and creative processes have yet to be fully integrated into mainstream art historical interpretations.⁴ But what if what was most important about the Impressionists was not their palettes and techniques but the way they employed them to critically reflect on how modern mass-produced color was transforming the look and feel of everyday life outside the artist's studio?

For, indeed, while the black suit soon became ubiquitous in the second half of the nineteenth century, at least among bourgeois men, new technologies, media, and consumer goods daily contributed to making vivid colors a central aspect of nineteenth-century urban life. Flowers, fireworks, posters, interior furnishings, paintings, and shop signs, not to mention women's clothing, alternately assaulted and seduced Parisians' senses. Baron Georges Haussmann's complete overhaul and redesign of the French capital had transformed Paris, as T. J. Clark has famously argued, into simply "*an image*, something occasionally and casually consumed."⁵ It seems hardly coincidental that this same Paris was also known for its taste for gaudy colors. When Parisians looked, what they saw was a city painted, illuminated, dyed, and splattered with color.

This book analyzes the impact of new color technologies on French visual and material culture, from the early commercialization of synthetic dyes (ca. 1857) to the Lumière brothers' perfection of the autochrome color photography process (ca. 1907). It shows how bright and shifting colors came to define modern visual culture, arguing, more specifically, that the development of a consumer culture based on the sensual appeal of color fundamentally transformed collective categories of visual perception and understanding. Moving away from established views that high art became increasingly abstract while popular commercial culture remained resolutely realist (or merely mimicked the modernist forms of high art), it suggests that the proliferation of color in visual and material culture challenged dominant understandings of realism, abstraction, and fantasy—the basic aesthetic schemata of modern visual culture.

As we shall see, the shift to a lavishly colored world alarmed French tastemakers, who frequently decried the gaudiness of women's outfits and the lack of harmony of modern interiors.⁶ In response to what they perceived as a generalized state of chromatic confusion, fashion, decorative, and industrial arts experts provided producers and consumers of goods with scientific laws of color harmony, which promised to eliminate all uncertainty in the selection and combination of colors. For these tastemakers, who sought to contain and control color, the struggle for aesthetic harmony was also very much a struggle for social order. The spectacle of loud colors that increasingly characterized modern Paris warned elites of the threats posed to the nation by industrialization, social heterogeneity, and political discord.

Closely identified with women, children, and other "primitive peoples," including workers and overseas populations, color served in the nineteenth century as a useful mechanism for classifying and controlling the world. In other words, aesthetic debates about color had pronounced social and political implications.⁷ Yet, the history of color during this time is not primarily one of *chromophobia*.⁸ Attentive to the ways tastemakers' prescriptions failed to

match up with actuality, this book highlights the failures of expert knowledge and multiple practical expressions of *chromophilia* in nineteenth-century France, from the synthetic dye industry that, by the end of the nineteenth century, fully reversed Europe's dependence on exotic dyestuffs, to the application of color lithography to posters, labels, trade cards, and other ephemera.

Still, the history of color in the Age of Impressionism in France is more than simply another chapter in the history of taste, opposing chromophobes and chromophiles. Just as important, I argue, is the impact of mass-produced and -reproduced color on contemporary modes of signification and expression. Associated with film scholar Miriam Hansen, the expression *vernacular modernism* refers to the new modes of organizing vision and constructing meaning that articulated and emerged in response to modern urban life, marked, as sociologist Georg Simmel aptly put it more than ninety years before, by “the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions.”⁹ First among these onrushing impressions were those created by mass-produced color in the form of textiles, flowers, decorative household items, posters, paint, fireworks, and photographs. Indeed, while until now scholars building upon not only Simmel but also Walter Benjamin's famous essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” and its influential interpretation by Hansen, have mostly concentrated on the new experiences of shock and collage ushered in by popular commercial culture, it is clear that color, too, played a fundamental role in undermining long-held certainties about the nature of realism, abstraction, and fantasy, and not only in the realm of high art.¹⁰ At once highly evocative and changeable, mass-produced and -reproduced color gave rise to widespread and quotidian reappraisals of common modes of making meaning.

French men and women developed a sophisticated understanding of color, which they lived and worked with but rarely externalized as a specialized form of knowledge. Thus, in comparison to recent studies of the history of vision, which rely heavily on nineteenth-century medical and psychological literature, this book relies on a much broader range of documents, more directly related to the everyday production and consumption of colorful items.¹¹ Parenthetically, this is also what distinguishes my account from most existing histories of color, which are mainly concerned with tracing the intellectual history of artistic, scientific, and philosophical interpretations of color.¹² For example, aside from a brief discussion in chapter 5, the form of synesthesia known as color hearing, whereby the sight of a color automatically triggers an auditory experience and vice versa, only makes a cursory appearance in this book, despite being a major preoccupation for Symbolist artists, poets, and writers of the 1890s. Originally

articulated in the early eighteenth century, Isaac Newton's idea that a special correspondence existed between color and music, based on their shared vibratory characteristics, continued to inspire hundreds of years later. By the second half of the nineteenth century, alongside the growing popularity of synesthesia among artists, poets, and writers, scientists working in the field of psychophysics renewed their search for a biological explanation for this rare perceptual faculty.¹³ For the most part, however, the scientific, technological, commercial, and artistic actors discussed in this book had very little interest in the psychophysiology of color, synesthetic or otherwise. They were pragmatic experts, more interested in how color operated in the workshop and marketplace than in the eyes and brain of the individual perceiving subject.¹⁴

By drawing on a very different set of sources, more familiar perhaps to historians of business and technology than historians of art, it is possible to reconstruct the history of modern visual perception and signification from the bottom up—a history anchored not in medicine, philosophy, literature, or art but rather in the dyeing and printing of fabrics, the growing of flowers and design of gardens, the printing and display of posters, and other prevalent if undervalued and understudied visual media and practices. These media and practices, this book contends, are often much better indicators of widely shared assumptions about the visually intelligible and significant than scientific and philosophic texts explicitly concerned with the nature of vision. Indeed, it is helpful to remember that, in his landmark study introducing the notion of the “period eye,” *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972), art historian Michael Baxandall turned not to early modern philosophy, science, or medicine but to the social, religious, and commercial activities of daily life: dancing, preaching, and gauging barrels.¹⁵ Building on Baxandall's classic study, *Color in the Age of Impressionism* defines color as a material substance, visual sensation, and idea that nineteenth-century men and women encountered on a daily basis and through which they developed informal theories of realism, abstraction, and fantasy that, in many ways, are still very much with us today.

It is easy to see how color technologies contributed to the reigning taste for realism in nineteenth-century visual culture: for high-end artificial-flower makers, synthetic dyes were an important instrument in the reproduction of the natural world; meanwhile, lithographers called attention to the detail and nuance of their color copies of famed artworks, which they sometimes varnished and framed in order to better reproduce the appearance of oil paintings; and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, photographers vaunted their ability to capture the appearance of landscapes both near and far in all their chromatic richness. Less clearly understood, but no less significant, are the myriad ways that images, objects, and discourses about color invited viewers to contemplate color on its own terms, separate from line, form, and the strictures of

realistic representations. Paintings changed into ornamental patterns and theatrical fantasylands into pure abstractions, divorced from any outside referent. Looking at how a broad range of social and cultural actors understood and exploited color's ability to work in multiple aesthetic registers, the chapters that follow show how colorful images and objects fuelled and framed not only a revolution in taste but also, more importantly, a revolution in the ways that meaning was visually produced and exchanged in the modern world.

Impressionism both mirrored and mediated the change in the look and feel of everyday life resulting from the color revolution, and it is hardly happenstance that the artists associated with this movement have long served as paradigms for understanding color in the nineteenth century. As this book shows, however, Impressionist art emerged within an already restructured visual field, in which inexpensively produced and reproduced color functioned as the principal means by and through which modes of visual signification and expression were defined. More than simply adding a touch of fancy to everyday life, the bright and varied colors of French visual culture led Parisians to fundamentally reevaluate common modes of visual address.¹⁶ Stressing the inconsistency, irrationality even, of seeing color and seeing *in* color, the case studies examined in this book show how—in the context of the laboratory, the marketplace, the studio, and the home—color mediated between different aesthetic registers, forging the mental tools and visual practices that would serve to make sense of not only modern art but also modern life.

In situating the artworks of Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir, and their followers within the context of this broader transformation of modern visual and material culture, I mean to relativize and contextualize but not diminish the uniqueness of these artists' cultural contributions. At no time did any of these artists seek to transparently record the vibrant mix of colors that surrounded them. Through their choice of subject matter, materials, and creative technical approaches, Monet, Degas, and Renoir intervened, whether intentionally or not, in collective debates about the nature, status, and meaning of color in the late nineteenth century. Their paintings both added to the ambient chromaticism of late nineteenth-century France and provided original commentaries on it and thus constitute privileged windows onto the color revolution's refashioning of everyday experience.

Moreover, Impressionism, as noted earlier, has played a pivotal role in shaping our understanding of the history of modern color broadly defined. Accordingly, the "Age of Impressionism" in this book's title refers as much to a specific historical period, stretching roughly from the 1850s to the 1890s, as to a distinct set of perceptual and cognitive habits developed by French men and women to make sense of their visual surroundings. In fact, I

would argue that, in certain respects at least, we are still today very much living in the Age of Impressionism.

Recent years have seen a surge of scholarship on the historical origins of the visually saturated world of today, oftentimes focusing on the mass of inexpensively produced commercial images that proliferated in nineteenth-century cities and on urban dwellers' distinct modes of engagement with this new environment. Color, however, has received scant sustained attention in this context. Yet, as Karl Marx rightly noted, "the sensation of color is, generally speaking, the most popular form of aesthetic sense."¹⁷ Once laborious and expensive to produce, colorful images and objects became massively diffused and reproduced in popular commercial culture. Moreover, of all visual sensations, color is arguably the most inherently visual; it does not inhere in objects but exists only when looked at.¹⁸ It is, as historian Neil Harris contended, "the *most* pictorial of all the pictorial media's characteristics."¹⁹

During the premodern and early modern periods, dyestuffs were sought-after luxury items traded over long distances, along with exotic spices, silks, and slaves. In addition, sumptuary laws restricted the use of bright colors—scarlet and crimson, in particular—by members of the middle and lower classes. But, in the space of a few decades, thanks to the development of the synthetic dye industry, vibrantly colored fabrics became accessible to everyone (figs. 4 and 5). Simultaneously, the printing industry took a dramatic turn toward color. In the early nineteenth century, still, the great majority of printed images were colored by hand. By the end of the century, however, French lithographers such as Lemercier, Appel, Chaix, and others routinely printed runs of several thousand copies of full-color posters and trade cards. In addition to inventing the steam- and later electricity-powered factory, the working-class tenement, the automobile, and the skyscraper, the nineteenth century also saw the emergence of the first vibrantly colored fireworks, thousands of new flower varieties, inexpensive wallpaper, and the disposable full-color print.

In 1896, author Pierre de Lano noted, "Color, of which women possess the secret in fashion, is a modern taste, born certainly of the nervousness that torments our imagination, the dulling of our sensations, that constantly ungratified desire, which faintly tortures us and we apply to every aspect of our feverish life."²⁰ This and similar testimonies from contemporaneous observers make it hard to believe that, save for a few noteworthy exceptions, the role and status of color in nineteenth-century visual and material culture have not attracted more scholarly attention.²¹ One partial explanation lies in the centrality of photography as an object of historical study and theorization in nineteenth-century visual culture studies. Admittedly, Charles Marville's, Nadar's, Eugène Atget's and others' iconic photographs of nineteenth-century Paris make it

sometimes difficult to imagine the period in anything but black, white, and multiple shades of gray (fig. 6). As we shall see, however, no sooner was Louis Daguerre's invention announced to the public than a multitude of professional and amateur scientists turned toward developing a method of photographically capturing and then reproducing the world's colors. As Jacques-Henri Lartigue, an early adopter of autochrome photography, the first commercially successful color photography process, later recalled, "Even when I was a small boy I was itching for it to happen. Because, for me, life and color cannot be separated from one another; it had to happen."²² Indeed, it is important to remind ourselves that however *some* nineteenth-century photographs may look, for most men and women of the time life and color could not be separated either.

Another possible explanation for this long-standing historiographical colorblindness lies in early theorists' and scholars' general misgivings about industrial modernity. In his classic essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), Simmel noted, for instance,

Money, with all its colorlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability. All things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money. All things lie on the same level and differ from one another only in size of the area which they cover. In the individual case this coloration, or rather discoloration, of things through their money equivalence may be unnoticeably minute.²³

Colorlessness served for Simmel as a metaphor to describe the equalizing effect of capitalism, which converts everything it can into a quantifiable, monetary measure. Giving new meaning to the expression "money has no color," the sociologist's description of the modern metropolis is more the product of ideological perspective than of actual visual perception. Similarly, one of the premier historians of color, Michel Pastoureau, known for his comprehensive investigations of color symbolism, suggested in his early writings on the subject, "Urban chromaticism diminishes starting in the seventeenth century and ends in the nineteenth. Despite the posters, the neon lights, and all the signage on streets and houses, our Western cities have generally conserved the gray and dull aspect they received during the industrial era. Even the rivers are gray and dirty."²⁴ Here, again, the author's evaluation seems to have more to do with his ideological opposition to the modern industrial world—"Even the rivers are gray and dirty," he highlights—than its actual appearance. All the while remaining mindful of the economic, social, and ecological injustices generated by industrial capitalism, the history of modern mass-produced color presented in the following pages asks us to contrast our mental image of the "dark Satanic mills" of the nineteenth century with the colorful goods they produced.

The modern mass-produced and -reproduced color I describe in this book is visible everywhere today. From Bakelite plastics to computer graphics, color in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries has a rich industrial, commercial, and cultural history, which others have expertly analyzed elsewhere.²⁵ It is in the nineteenth century, however, that the visual practices and pleasures associated with color first became democratized and, by the same token, first began playing a dominant role in defining concepts of realism, abstraction, and fantasy. In the twentieth century, color became a major consideration in the design of automobiles, household appliances, and other durable goods. It is in the nineteenth century, however, that the association between color and fashion was originally formalized. Industrialists had yet to devise strategies for standardizing their palettes; efficiency in design, production, and distribution were still a far while away. By examining the origins of the color revolution we gain a better view of the commercial, technological, and aesthetic horizons originally opened up, foreclosed, or overlooked by its main actors.

Many of the transformations related to the production and consumption of color described here were not restricted to France. Nevertheless, the French case constitutes an especially felicitous framework for the color revolution of the nineteenth century, for both historical and historiographical reasons. The emergence of modernism, as signaled by French Impressionists' experimentation with color, constitutes a pivotal moment in the history of art and visual culture more generally. Along with its pioneering role in the arts, nineteenth-century Paris was also the uncontested center of fashion. The city's role as fashion trendsetter justifies a focus on France, even as the synthetic dye industry became increasingly concentrated in Germany by the end of the century. Certain of my conclusions about the color revolution in France undoubtedly also hold true for other countries, where French art and fashion exerted an often powerful influence on the upper classes, but I have left it to specialists of these regions to determine exactly how and to what extent this was the case.²⁶

Organized thematically into five chapters, each focusing on a different color technology, the bulk of the book concerns the period from approximately 1850 to 1890, which marked, as I have noted, a crucial turning point in the production and consumption of colorful goods and images. The book begins with a consideration of the color theories of chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul, including the law of the simultaneous contrast of color and his system for scientifically identifying and classifying colors.²⁷ Up until now, scholars have principally looked to his theories for what they suggest about the evolution of scientific understandings of color or as a source for artists' innovative uses of color in painting.²⁸ Chapter 1 focuses instead on the reception of Chevreul's theories among industrialists and tastemakers and the broader

technological, commercial, and intellectual context in which his ideas emerged and gained currency. As the chapter shows, the chemist's failure to reform product design and manufacturing confirms the growing importance of color in the marketplace and the fundamentally uncoordinated and unsystematic nature of this transformation. While generally enthusiastic about Chevreul's ideas, producers failed to adopt the chemist's system for identifying colors and persisted in manufacturing goods that violated the aesthetic standards laid out in his *De la Loi du contraste simultané des couleurs* (1839). At the same time, tastemakers such as Charles Blanc and Emmeline Raymond, who played a major role in disseminating Chevreul's law of color harmony, resisted the chemist's understanding of color as a purely optical and abstract property. Colors, these fashion and interior-decorating experts insisted, also served to express ideas, emotions, and the most individual and intimate aspects of a woman's personality. Two conflicting conceptions of color thus collided and overlapped in popular discourse: one, proposed by Chevreul, treated color in strictly visual terms; the other, prevalent in practical advice literature, encouraged expressive and symbolic understandings of color. Taking Chevreul's theories and reform efforts as its starting point, chapter 1 demonstrates that the absence of consensus about the meaning of color and how best to employ it was what most characterized the color revolution and the new visual landscape it created.

Advice manuals frequently advised designers of fashionable household items to turn to nature for inspiration. As chapter 2 demonstrates, however, the growing and selling of flowers in nineteenth-century France were increasingly determined by the imperatives of commodity culture, in particular the perpetual quest for novelty and variety that characterized the fashion industry. Horticulturalists and nurserymen created new varieties of flowers, whose colors gardeners heightened through clever plantings and juxtapositions. Together, they promoted an intensely visual experience of gardens, which blurred the distinction between the artificial and the natural, defined as an original state of being, untouched by human art. Likewise, in the artificial-flower industry, which was also blossoming at the time, the pressure to come up with new designs each and every season led many manufacturers to experiment with color, often resulting in the creation of eye-catching flowers that had no parallel in nature. Thus, while the demand for color led horticulturalists and garden designers to blur the boundary between the natural and the artificial, many flower makers were compelled to travel from the real to the imaginary. Moving back and forth between the categories of the natural and the artificial, the real and the imaginary, this chapter shows how these ideas were interwoven at the time, defining a distinctly modern way of seeing.

Chapter 3 returns to the relationship between realism, color, and fashion—this time from the perspective of Impressionist painting. The chapter begins by explaining how the growing popularity of synthetic dyes, starting with William Henry Perkin’s mauve in the 1850s, established a new understanding of color as bright, varied, cheap, evanescent, and toxic. Next, focusing on select artworks by Degas, Renoir, and Monet, the chapter goes demonstrates how Impressionist artists simultaneously evoked and participated in color chemistry’s transformation of nineteenth-century visual culture. This evocation and participation took several forms. As documented by conservationists, a number of Impressionist artists experimented with synthetic pigments, which were typically brighter and less expensive than traditional materials. Yet the influence of color chemistry on the Impressionists went beyond their materials into the very way they saw and represented the world around them. Degas, Renoir, and Monet sought to fix on canvas the *bariolage* of everyday life—the multiple and shifting play of colors that characterized the modern world. I argue that, in doing so, Impressionists partook in the elaboration of a chemical aesthetic centered on a practical understanding of color’s variety, vividness, and inherently fugitive nature. Impressionism, we already know, was about much more than recording the appearance of natural, prismatic light. However, contrary to recent scholarship that relates Impressionists’ challenges to optical realism to the nineteenth-century science of psychophysics, the evidence provided in this chapter points to artists’ critical engagement with their immediate visual environment and the materials of their craft.²⁹

Moving from the quotidian spectacle of fashion and dyes captured in Impressionists’ paintings, chapter 4 takes up the momentous, large-scale spectacles of light and color created by pyrotechnists. More specifically, based on the business records of one of the oldest French fireworks companies still in operation and contemporaneous accounts of fireworks shows, the chapter reveals important similarities between the visual rhetoric of enchantment created by political authorities on special occasions and those generated by capitalism on a more routine basis. Looking at visual representations of fireworks, including James McNeill Whistler’s controversial *Nocturne in Black and Gold, the Falling Rocket* (1875), the chapter also investigates the challenge posed by representing that which by its very nature sought to surpass visual expectations, as well as the overlapping of fantasy and abstraction in this endeavor.

Chapter 5 looks at the democratization of color in print, from high-end chromolithographic reproductions of paintings to the mass-produced posters, labels, and trade cards of the fin de siècle. It shows how, in the context of the irreversible takeover of everyday life by color, it became increasingly imperative for bourgeois men to establish the terms of their participation in this polychromatic visual culture. As this chapter explains, this largely happened in the final

decades of the nineteenth century by way of poster criticism and collecting. Influenced by the psychophysical theories of Charles Henry and Symbolist philosophy, critics writing in the 1890s quickly elevated posters above the vast realm of commercially produced color images—including art reproductions, trade cards, scraps, labels, and so on—collected by women and children. As the poster craze continued, however, practices of poster collecting largely eroded not only many of the key distinctions between posters and trade cards but also the male elite's tenuous hold on the color revolution.

The book's epilogue shows how the parallel developments of Neo-Impressionism and color photography marked an important turning point in the production and consumption of color, characterized by artists' and photographers' retrospective engagement with the images, materials, and perceptual habits that emerged earlier in the century. The paintings analyzed in this chapter, including Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* (1884–86) and *Models* (1886–88), reveal artists' critical encounters with not only their contemporary visual surroundings but also the recent history of color-image making, which they sought to mobilize and redeploy to convey, as Paul Signac put it, a more “authentic reality.”³⁰ First presented to the public in 1907, the Lumière brothers' autochrome photography process likewise promised a more authentic version of reality. Rather than simply document their visual environment or upgrade pictorialist photography through the artistic addition of color, however, early adopters of autochrome photography assembled a visual archive of the color revolution, codifying in the process its most distinctive modes of realistic, fantastic, and abstract signification.

The 1890s marked the beginning of a new, more controlled and coordinated relationship to color. Indeed, as if to further highlight the end of one era and the beginning of something new, the synthetic dye industry, now predominantly located in Germany, redirected its resources away from the invention of new dyes toward the standardization and marketing of a more limited range of products.³¹ The First World War, with its massive dye and pigment shortages, would require Parisians to temporarily redefine their visual expectations. Still, from Piet Mondrian to Victor Fleming's *Wizard of Oz*, the terms under which color would be produced, consumed, and experienced during most of the twentieth century had already been largely established. Color, if still bright, varied, and unstable, was no longer as much of a mystery.

Through his *Vite* (1550), the founding text of Western art history, Giorgio Vasari specifically intervened in ongoing debates about the relative merits of *disegno* versus *colore*.³² Indeed, through the present book's focus on color, I intentionally revisit one of the most traditional topics in the field. Tuscan design against Venetian color, Poussinistes against the Rubenistes, and,

finally, the Ingristes against Eugène Delacroix and his followers—few controversies in art history have had the same longevity and fervidness as that which, in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries, pitted artists and critics who believed that drawing was the primary element in painting against those who insisted that color was the leading creative force.³³

Familiar with the terms of the debate, contemporary observers expressly interpreted Impressionism as marking the definitive defeat of *disegno* at the hands of *colore*. As Symbolist artist Paul Gauguin noted in the late 1890s,

The characteristic feature of nineteenth-century painting is the great struggle for form, for color. For a long time two sides fought to gain the upper hand. . . .

Form, or draftsmanship, which is infinitely rich in vocables, can express everything and do so nobly, either by line alone or by using tones which shape the drawing and thereby simulate color. . . .

Then came the Impressionists! They studied color and color alone, as a decorative effect, but they did so without freedom, remaining bound by the shackles of verisimilitude.³⁴

This narrative, chronicling the “liberation of color” first from drawing and, eventually, from the responsibility of representation altogether, infiltrated twentieth-century Formalist interpretations of Impressionism, including, most notably, that proposed by art critic Clement Greenberg in his influential 1960 essay “Modernist Painting.” “The Impressionists, in Manet’s wake,” he wrote, “abjured underpainting and glazes, to leave the eye under no doubt as to the fact that the colors they used were made of paint that came from tubes or pots.”³⁵ According to this reasoning, the so-called liberation of color functioned as an essential mechanism by which art drew attention to itself as art.

This book shares with these now old-fashioned Formalist analyses of Impressionism from the 1950s and 1960s a deep interest in inscriptions and marks—the constituent elements of visual language. Where Greenbergian Formalism falls short, however, is in its rigorously internalist framework, whereby conclusions about form are strictly limited to the realm of painting, as if the minor and industrial arts were devoid of form and the Impressionists’ pictorial choices—the minimization of tonal variations and flattening of space, the size and rhythm of brushstrokes, and so on—were unrelated to the broader historical context, including ways of producing and consuming color in more everyday contexts.³⁶ Pastoureau gets it right when he insists that the history of color should be more than a specialized subfield of the history of art. “The history of painting is one thing; that of color is another, much larger, question. Most studies devoted to the

history of color err in considering only the pictorial, artistic, or scientific realms. But the lessons to be learned from color and its real interest lie elsewhere,” he writes. “Any history of color is, above all, a social history.”³⁷

The aesthetic and semiotic challenges posed by the mass production of colorful images and objects in nineteenth-century France, particularly with regard to collective understandings of realism, fantasy, and abstraction, represent the core focus of my study. And it is through the lens of these broader historical developments that I consider the history of Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist artworks. Modeled in part on the material analysis of capitalism that Walter Benjamin undertook in the *The Arcades Project*, the current volume can perhaps best be described as a historical interrogation of the German philosopher’s insight that “the technique of Impressionist painting, whereby the picture is garnered in a riot of dabs of color, would be a reflection of experiences with which the eyes of a big-city dweller have become familiar.”³⁸ It is as much, if not more, about the urban visual culture and reconstruction of dominant modes of visual signification and expression through color as it is about art. It hopes to offer a critical contribution to the history of sensory perception and popular aesthetics and, on a more methodological level, a practical example of how, by embracing the larger field of visual culture, art history often finds itself returning to its origins.