

Artists and Colormen

Constant de Massoul

Constant de Massoul was an artist's colorman who operated a shop on Bond Street in London at the end of the eighteenth century. We know of him only through his publication, *A Treatise on the Art of Painting, and the Composition of Colours*.¹ As for so many artisans, even the educated artisan-merchants such as he seems to have been, there are few documents describing his life or his practice. In this case, it is even unclear whether Constant de Massoul was his full name or only his last name: I suspect the latter, but will treat it as the former, according to convention. Whatever he should be called, de Massoul's treatise is now a regularly-cited source for information about eighteenth-century painters' practice. As a Frenchman who worked in England, it would seem that de Massoul might know about practices in both places. Some evidence exists that *A Treatise on the Art of Painting* was a common reference work in its time; the painter John Constable owned a copy and, we assume, used it along with his 1782 edition of Thomas Bardwell's *Practice of Painting*, and George Field's *Chromatography* (1835).² R. D. Harley, an art historian with a special interest in the production and use of fine-art materials in Britain, described de Massoul one of the first manufacturing artists' colormen to publish a literary work.³ de Massoul's publication is often characterized as a late-century practical treatise that contained useful information and that was, in fact, used.

M. Constant de Massoul has taken some pains to produce a small volume on the art of painting, which he has culled from . . . others who have discussed this subject; thus claiming, with true Gallic finesse, the need bestowed on original exertions . . . Being a man of honour, he conceals the amour: but the process of making colours, so ostentatiously detailed, furnishes us with a clue to discover the intrigue; and from the tints, blushes, and the adoption of *rouge*, we pronounce his mistress to be a coquette.

[S.R.] "[Review of] *A Treatise on the Art of Painting*. . . " *Monthly Review* Vol. 29 2nd ser. (1798), 108.

The place given to *A Treatise on the Art of Painting* by modern historians of art materials makes the disgust expressed in a contemporary review particularly interesting.⁴ While good enough for those with little knowledge about theories of scientific color or painting, it is, the reviewer pronounced, a work of deception. The writing is unoriginal but unattributed, whereas the title page implies it is the author's own. It isn't even entirely French: The author stole from Robert Dossie and Joshua Reynolds as well as from Charles du Fresnoy, Roger de Piles, and others. Personal economics guided the contents of this book, the reviewer suggests. The "colour grinder" is more important than artists or philosophers in Constant de Massoul's hierarchy he complains, and an example of the result is that de Massoul advocates the use of more colors than are truly necessary.

COULEUR LOCALE, est *en Peinture*, celle qui par rapport au lieu qu'elle occupe, & par le secours de quelqu'autre *couleur*, représente un objet singulier, comme une carnation, un linge, une étoffe, ou quelqu'autre objet distingué des autres. Elle est appelée *locale*, parce que le lieu qu'elle occupe l'exige telle, pour donner un plus grand caractère de vérité aux *couleurs* qui lui sont voisines. M. de Piles, Cours de Peint, par princ. P.304.

Encyclopédie (1751-80; reprint Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1966), 4:333

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They call *Local Colour* in Painting, that which by the situation it occupies, and by the help of some other colours, represents a particular object, as flesh, linen, a stuff, or any object distinguished from the others. It is called *Local*, because the place it occupies, requires it to be such, in order that it may give a truer character to those colours that are near. *Local Colour* could agree with the truth and the effect of the distances.

Constant de Massoul, *A Treatise on the Art of Painting* (London, 1797), 123–4.

Unlike many authors who compiled from the works of others, Constant de Massoul did present the contents of his *Treatise on the Art of Painting* as if the information were his own. And, despite the suggestion of the full title, it has proved impossible to trace an earlier, French edition. His disingenuousness—or laziness—was extreme, as much of his information appears to have been culled from the *Encyclopédie* and the *Encyclopédie méthodique* and not the original works of his source-authors.⁵

At the same time, this negative review of de Massoul's treatise may have meant little to his clientele. It may have resulted from the same kinds of petty rivalries and contentiousness visible in so many other publications during the eighteenth century. It could be a misunderstanding by "S.R.," the reviewer: Samuel Rose, was the son and nephew of the founders of the *Monthly Review*. A lawyer, he was at best an amateur practitioner or an interested observer of the arts.⁶ It could be that the otherwise anonymous de Massoul was a target for antipathies unrelated to his livelihood. Among his examples and authorities are Henri-Pierre Danloux, Marc-Louis Arlaud, and Louis Bélanger, all painters with connections to the French court, all residing in London during the 1790s. According to Danloux's diary, these artists were acquainted with each other, and it seems likely that de Massoul was trying to draw connections between sales at his shop and the royalist French émigré community in London.⁷ The reviewer's metaphors for the treatise, which emphasize its debauched and dissipated style, matches the strongly anti-Royalist focus of the *Monthly Review* editors; not all French or other foreign writers received such withering treatment.

Like optics, [painting] makes use of all that can deceive the eye, and, varying its sites, it pleases itself in representing the same object under a thousand various forms. It even produces effects to which Sculpture can never attain: it represents water air and fire—the rays of the sun—the soft light of the moon, and stars—thunder, lightening—the rising and setting sun—clouds twilight and night! . . .

Constant de Massoul, *A Treatise on the Art of Painting* (London, 1797), 9–10.

Knowing that it is a synthetic work, it is still interesting and instructive to consider

both the information de Massoul included in his *Treatise on the Arts of Painting* and its presentation. The book contains separate sections about different aspects of painting such as aesthetics, technique, the work of famous painters, and details of colors—including the composition of coloring materials and colors and suggestions for their use. Its format creates a sense of cohesion and deliberation many compilations lack, while providing a context to the standard elements of a painting manual. De Massoul begins by drawing familiar analogies between painting and poetry; both are distillations of ideas that express the facts of history and inventions of imagination. The book continues with the extremely practical (but again not uncommon) declaration that learning to paint will increase appreciation of all painting.

A good artist should understand the materials as well as the aesthetics of the art, and both are part of the grounding de Massoul offered his reader. In providing this information, his is no different from other, contemporary works. Like many compilers, he regrets that he cannot include every detail of every stage of painting. Missing is information about chemical operations of colormaking: instead de Massoul promises that his manufacture offers colors as solid as each can be made. Perhaps his intention was to assure those who are less interested in the scientific operations that, while useful, this understanding is not essential to painting skills, especially for an amateur. Perhaps, as a middleman, he was unfamiliar with those techniques.

The balance of de Massoul's advice was in equal parts practical and familiar, and it is easily summarized. He wrote of the usefulness of painting, and of the pleasures it offers. Painting is the art of imitating all objects in nature. It is best to learn technique by copying the masters. Diligent use of publications could substitute for training at the academies, famously exclusive institutions. de Massoul also provides a list of supplies to present to the colorman, should the reader decided to teach her or himself. In this list, de Massoul differentiates between oil colors used in portraiture and those in landscape, with lists of appropriate colors for each. This was a common distinction, and one with a practical origin, as manipulating the flesh tones of portraiture and manipulating those to recreate verdure had different chemical properties and different visual constraints.

Imbibed . . . is the effect that oil produces upon a canvass, that has not been long painted. It soaks into those colours that are underneath, and causes the upper ones to appear sunk.

Constant de Massoul, *A Treatise on the Art of Painting* (London, 1797), 24.

De Massoul, in his manual, describes different popular or famous painting practices and gives details on the composition of colors themselves. The inclusion of a glossary of terms may have given readers who were novice artists the confidence to discuss the aesthetics and expectations of different painting

techniques; de Massoul includes clear descriptions of painting in enamel (most solid and durable but the most difficult), mosaic, fresco, gouache, miniature, watercolor, pastel, and crayon. There are ten pages devoted to specifics of color, including recipes for colormaking. The instructions are compiled from other publications, including in Dossie's *Handmaid to the Arts*. Again, de Massoul's book contains instructions with enough detail to support confident discussion of differences among colormaking recipes and, perhaps, to convince readers to purchase pigments rather than make them at home.

All the white leads prepared, will, in time, turn Yellow or Black. This is occasioned by the phlogistic vapours with which the air is always, more or less, impregnated; or to speak in the language of the Chymists of the present day, they become oxygenated by their union with the oxygen of the air. Mr. De Morveau first conceived the idea of substituting Lime of Zinc, instead of Ceruse, and by that means has rendered a very essential service to Painting.

Constant de Massoul, *A Treatise on the Art of Painting* (London, 1797), 134–135.

Like the *Encyclopédie méthodique*, and invoking the support offered by Arnaud Vincent de Montpetit de Massoul extols the virtues of zinc white, a pigment that was rejected by the Paris Academy of Painting and Sculpture a decade earlier and had not yet found a market. He writes at length about Vincent de Montpetit's eludoric painting, further suggesting a connection to French court painters, or else his assumption that the authority of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* is more extensive than it was, as it included a long passage on that quickly-lost art.

How can we understand this treatise? Because it is one of a few publications that can be connected to an eighteenth-century colorman and the only one that offers to bring French technique to a London clientele, we need to consider seriously its claims and its contents. De Massoul hints at his own ideas (whether formed through personal experience or through the employment of skilled artists) about the consumption of painting techniques, and his beliefs depend on certain assumptions about the appeal that French style might have to British artists and amateurs. Who might need or want to own this, and how does it supplement other sources of information? *A Treatise on the Art of Painting* offers more-varied information than do other manuals of painting practice organized by or for painters and colormen, for example William Williams's *An Essay on the Mechanic of Oil Colours*.⁸ It has a breadth of topics but no depth to its presentation of them; the treatise may have been as interesting to read and as difficult to use as the *Encyclopédie méthodique*. Above all, de Massoul assumes the need for personal demonstrations, suggesting a similarity between this book and those issued to accompany lecture series. Clearly, the book was designed to instruct and to expand its subject matter and its author to new levels of importance. De Massoul's success in this is unclear; and his anonymity and lack of connection to the community of English painters in London suggest he had little. His work, then, is important to us for its inferences and its choices of information, but there are no certainties of its meaning in Constant de Massoul's own time.

Notes:

Note 1: Constant de Massoul, *A Treatise on the Art of Painting, and the Composition of Colour, Containing Instructions for All the Various Processes of Painting; Together with Observations upon the Qualities and Ingredients of Colours. Translated from the French of M. Constant de Massoul* (London, 1797).

Note 2: Leslie Carlyle, *The Artist's Assistant: Oil Painting Instruction Manuals and Handbooks in Britain, 1800–1900, with Reference to Selected Eighteenth-Century Sources* (London, 2001), 16. On Bardwell, see M. Kirby Talley and Karin Groen, "Thomas Bardwell and His Practice of Painting: A Comparative Investigation Between Described and Actual Painting Technique," *Studies in Conservation* 20 (1975): 44–108. On Field, see John Gage, *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (Boston, 1993), 213–16; R. D. Harley, *Artists' Pigments c. 1600–1835: A Study in Documentary Sources*, 2d ed. (London, 1982), 27–28; and R. D. Harley, "A Nineteenth-Century Book of Color Samples," *Bulletin of the AIC* 15, no. 2 (1975): 49–54.

Note 3: Harley, *Artists' Pigments*, 24–25. See also Ann Massing, "Painting Materials and Techniques: Towards a Bibliography of the French Literature before 1800," in *Die Kunst und ihre Erhaltung: Rolf E. Straub zum 70: Geburtstag Gewidmet* (Worms, Germany, 1990), 84.

Note 4: [S.R.] "[Review of] *A Treatise on the Art of Painting, and the Composition of Colours, Containing Instructions for All the Various Processes of Painting*," *Monthly Review*, 2d ser., 29 (1798): 108–9.

Note 5: *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751–80; reprint, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1966); *Encyclopédie méthodique: Beaux-arts*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1788, 1791); *Encyclopédie méthodique: Arts et métiers mécaniques*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1782–91).

Note 6: Benjamin Christie Nangle, *The Monthly Review, Second Series, 1790–1815* (Oxford, 1955), 58.

Note 7: Henri Pierre Danloux, *Henry Pierre Danloux, peintre de portraits, et son journal durant l'émigration . . .*, ed. Baron Roger Portalis (Paris, 1910).

Note 8: William Williams, *An Essay on the Mechanic of Oil Colours* (Bath, 1787).
