

SAGGIO

Jean-Étienne Liotard: The Rules of Art and the Late Still Life Paintings

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Jean-Étienne Liotard (Geneva 1702–1789) was renowned for his pastel portraits throughout Europe, but in his late years, he painted still lifes like *Tea Set* (c.1781–1783) in the J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles). His short treatise *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture* was penned in these years and sheds light on the shifting viewpoints that characterise his depiction, which departs from the strict, one-point perspective taught in art academies. The discussion here will focus on the deliberateness of this departure as an exploration of the role of colour and light in creating pictorial space, demonstrating principles that he articulated in his treatise.

Keywords: Liotard, still-life, rules of art, colour, light, Leonardo da Vinci

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Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702–1789) devoted most of his long career to portraiture, gaining fame, wealth, and confidence that gave him the courage to depart from the popular ideals of his time. He received commissions from royalty and nobles throughout Europe, which provided opportunities to travel far from his native Switzerland to Turkey and England. His pastels were especially prized for their intensity of colour and delicacy of flesh tones. Towards the end of his life (1774–1781), he wrote a treatise on painting, declaring that his son had persuaded him to write down the principles that guided his success in colouring so that his secrets would not be lost.² He closed the treatise professing his hope that others would learn from his words for their personal benefit and for the perfection of his beloved art of painting:

Si mes vœux sont exaucés, je serais trop heureux d’y avoir contribué, en publiant cet ouvrage. Et cette idée sera la consolation de mes vieux jours, comme elle sera la plus digne récompense de mes travaux. (If my wishes are fulfilled, I will be only too happy to have contributed to them by publishing this work. And this idea will be the consolation of my old age, as it will be the most worthy reward for my labours.) (Liotard, 1897, p. 98).

Liotard’s treatise did not significantly impact his peers or the next generation of painters. Only in modern times did his treatise attract sufficient interest to be reprinted in new editions, of which there are now six.³ The revival of interest in Liotard’s art and the ubiquity of digital facsimiles has renewed interest in his theory and its relationship to his oil paintings and pastels. Marianne Koos and Noémie Etienne have discussed his ideas on the high finish, love of smooth skin and smooth surfaces, and a preference for sheen and lustre in the porcelain and lacquerware objects prized by his culture (Koos, 2007; Etienne, 2020).

This essay further explores his ideas as a testimony to the principles that guided him in colouring, which inspired him to explore new directions at the end of his life. Despite its lack of influence, the treatise is an important historical document that shows him to be an independent thinker willing to challenge the mainstream of criticism and theory. It also reveals that he was a reader of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Traité de la peinture*, first published in Paris in 1651 but available in Liotard’s lifetime in an inexpensive pocket edition by Pierre-François Giffart.⁴

²On the date of the treatise, see Roethlisberger, 2001, p. 65. I use “colouring” as the closest English equivalent for the French *coloris* and the Italian *colorito*, distinguishing the use of colours from the pigments themselves.

³ The edition cited in n. 2 above from 1897 was followed by a reprint in 1945 (by Caillier), a 1973 facsimile reprint (Minkoff, Geneva), modern French editions in 2001 (Geneva) and 2007 (Notari), and a 2020 Italian translation by Sira Riner and Stefano Maffesanti (Abscondita, Milan).

⁴ Leonardo da Vinci, *Traité de la peinture de Leonard de Vinci donné au public et traduit d’Italien en François par R.F.S.D.C.* [Roland Fréart Sieur du Chambray (Paris: Jacques Langlois, 1651)]. In 1716, Pierre-François Giffart published a pocket-sized edition (*Traité de la peinture par Leonard De Vinci* [Paris: Chez Pierre-François Giffart, 1716]) in which he reduced the shaded engraving to

Liotard's late still-life paintings have met an ambivalent critical reception. Upon purchasing *Still Life: Tea Set* (**Figure 1**), the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles devoted three essays to Liotard in their bulletin: to his still life paintings, to the technical examination of the Getty painting, and to an interpretation of its unusual subject matter and presentation (Roethlisberger, 1985, pp. 131-132; Lippincott, 1985, pp. 121–130; Leonard, 1985, pp. 131–132). While Louise Lippincott and Mark Leonard emphasised the artist's technical mastery, particularly the variety of subtle demonstrations of light and shadow (Lippincott), and the impact of changes made in the ground colours (Leonard, 2015), Roethlisberger found fault with "their repetitive manner and simplicity, with no hint of surroundings"; he questioned whether the artist's advanced age (80) "accounts for some awkwardness of execution and design, such as the irregular perspective of the tables" and proposed that because the paintings "were done as private objects free of any constrictions imposed by patrons," Liotard was free to create unique works (Roethlisberger, 1985, p. 109). In the 2015 exhibition catalogue of Liotard's life achievements, curator Maryanne Stevens rightly challenged Roethlisberger's assessment by pointing out that the Getty still life is as accomplished and as highly finished as anything Liotard did earlier; moreover, that Liotard was extremely proud of his late achievements, offering two of them to Catherine the Great of Russia and documenting their high estimation by his children and peers in letters penned in 1782 and 1785 (Stevens, 2015). Stevens also acknowledged Lippincott's proposal that these works (which postdate the penning of the treatise) were created as exemplars of the twenty principles espoused in that treatise.

I want to return to Lippincott's argument but invert its premise. The tight connection between the principles and the Getty painting did not arise because Liotard designed it to exemplify his principles, as there was no need to create yet another exemplar. He had already prepared seven exemplary prints to accompany the sale of the treatise. In the Preface, he wrote: "I scrupulously observed in their composition the principles revealed in that work [treatise]." Still, he added, "the prints are not so dependent upon the work" that they should stand for the principles: each has its merit, and one has to be read or viewed with cognizance of the other (Liotard, 1897, pp. 99–100; Roethlisberger, 2007, p. 153).⁵ I agree that the treatise throws light on the Getty painting (and other still life paintings from his last years), but not as a demonstration of his rules. On the contrary, the treatise reveals his belief in the limitations of representational art. At the writing of the treatise, those rules

line diagrams to lower the cost, on which see Mario Valentino Guffanti, "The Visual Imagery of the Printed Editions of Leonardo's Treatise on Painting," in C. Farago, J. Bell, and C. Vecce, *The Fabrication of Leonardo da Vinci's Trattato della pittura with a scholarly edition of the editio princeps (1651) and an annotated English translation* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 373–411.

⁵ In the original edition of 1781, this notice preceded the Preface to the treatise. On Liotard's sale of the prints separately from the treatise, see Roethlisberger, 2007, p. 153.

were the best he knew to make painting a seamless imitation of nature. Yet in the late works, he pushed the boundaries of those rules to attempt more complex representations, hoping to do what no one had done before.



Figure 1: Jean-Étienne Liotard, Still Life: Tea Set, c.1783., Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum of Art, inv. 84.PA.57, oil on canvas mounted on board, 37.8 x 51.6 cm (credit: Digital image courtesy of Getty’s Open Content Program).

The Treatise and its Prints

The *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture* introduces several general principles of pictorial practice and twenty rules, succinctly summarised by Lippincott and grouped into four categories. Most concern the practice of colouring, which includes light and shadow and its organisation in the composition. Liotard was renowned for his colouring, especially for the intensity of hue that he could obtain with pastels. He rejected the premise that colouring was inferior to drawing, composition, and invention and believed that colouring could be taught. His treatise addressed the goal of articulating the principles that had guided him in a lifetime of painting as a portraitist, where colouring that was flattering and “true to life” was highly prized. By referring to his seven exemplary prints, he demonstrated that his rules worked effectively and could not be dismissed as theoretical nonsense.

Of these seven prints, five of which are portraits and two Venus pictures, Liotard listed the particular values exemplified in each: the *Sleeping Venus* demonstrates contrast and grace; the print of the ancient statue demonstrates

“l’*effet*” and relief; the portraits demonstrate principles of harmony, of *chiaroscuro*, and the appropriate distance between light and shadow (Liotard, 1897, pp. 99–100).⁶ The portrait of his daughter (plate V) was also singled out for demonstrating the perfect rounding of muscles and anatomical parts. All principles were explained in considerable length in the treatise.

At the end of his life, he retired to his hometown of Geneva, where he painted primarily still lifes of fruit, flowers, and tea sets. Several passages in the treatise (printed 1781) hint at a desire to overcome difficulties in representation to surpass his earlier works. Although proud of his past success, he admitted that neither he nor the prized painters in his collection had been able to accomplish two goals: [1] to deceive the human eye into believing that a fictive painting with depth was true and real; and [2] to paint fruit and flowers as well as fictive shallow reliefs. He praised Jean [Jan] Van Huysum (**Figure 2**) for coming as close as possible in his pictures of fruit:

Il y a fort peu de peintres modernes, je n’en connais même aucun, qui aient trompé tout le monde. Jan Van Huysum les a peint aussi parfaitement qu’il est possible; mais ils ne produisent l’illusion.

(There are very few modern painters, I have not found even one, who could trick the entire world. Jan Van Huysum painted them as perfectly as was possible, but he did not [successfully] achieve the illusion.) (*ivi*, p. 97).

His own success at painting *trompe l’oeil* was a source of pride that he believed resulted from his choice to limit the pictorial depth to a shallow relief:

J’ai peint plusieurs bas-reliefs qui a trompé quelque personnes; j’en ait peint un sûrtout où il y avais peu de relief, et il a trompé tout le monde.

(I painted many bas-reliefs that deceived some people, and I painted one especially which, having shallow relief, tricked the entire world.)

This is probably the painting in the Frick Art Museum, New York, of two bas-reliefs and two drawings on paper, completed a decade before the treatise (Stevens, 2015).⁷

Another painting with shallow relief shows two bunches of grapes hanging on nails hammered onto a wooden board (**Figure 3**). He proudly related that he successfully deceived two young women into thinking they were real: the first, who was familiar with his art, thought he was playing a trick by hanging a pane of glass in front of two bunches of grapes so that she would misconstrue it as a painting; she blushed when she approached more closely and saw that the depiction was entirely painted. The other, a girl of thirteen or fourteen, entered the room and reached out to pluck a grape. Liotard was familiar with Pliny’s tale of the competition between

⁶ Roethlisberger, 2015, discusses three known copies by Liotard of the “Titian” Sleeping Venus as well as the source of the ancient Venus statue.

⁷ See: cat. 78; the work is signed 1771; the treatise was printed in 1781.

Parrhasius and Zeuxis but judged the outcome as misguided: Zeuxis should have won, he argued, because the depiction of grapes was much more complex than the depiction of a draped curtain, having more subtlety of light and shade, texture, and depth (Lippincott, 1985, p. 130).⁸ In discussing his painting of grapes, he brought up the maxim of Titian that Roger de Piles had popularised in a series of publications between 1668 and 1708: that a bunch of grapes demonstrates the principle of massing light and shadow to create a more effective impact than possible to achieve by depicting light and shade on each grape (Liotard, 1897, p. 86).⁹



Figure 2: Jan van Huysum, Still Life with Flowers and Fruit, c.1715, Washington, DC, The National Gallery of Art, Patrons Permanent Fund and Gift of Philip and Lizanne Cunningham, inv. 1996.80.1, oil on panel, 78.7 x 61.3 cm (credit: Open access, courtesy of the National Gallery, Washington, DC).

⁸ See cit. of Liotard, 1897, p. 96 : “je crois que le trompé étoit plus habile que l’autre. Il y avoit peu de relief à exprimer dans la peinture d’un rideau, et par conséquent plus de facilité pour produire l’illusion; il ya infiniment plus de relief dans des grappes de raisin, et celui que a le mérite de la difficulté vaincue, mérite á mon gré la préférence.”

⁹ On De Piles, see : Teyssèdre, 1957; Puttfarken, 1985; Thuillier, 1989; DuFresnoy, 1668; Allen et al., 2005.



Figure 3: Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Weintrauben (Two Bunches of Grapes)*, c.1771–1774, Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum Gemäldegalerie, inv. Gemäldegalerie, 1843, pastel on paper, 40.5 x 32.0 cm (credit: KHM-Kunstmuseumsverband).

Opposition to De Piles’s Theory of Colouring

Roger De Piles (1635–1709) was the most famous proponent of colouring in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both for his writings and for his translation and commentary of Charles Alfonse Dufresnoy’s Latin poem *De arte graphica* (1668).¹⁰ In his last book, *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708), De Piles summed up the massing of light and shadow with a diagram of spheres and grapes to demonstrate “the unity of objects” and the distribution of *clair-obscur*; the popularity of the book of essays led to its translation into English in 1743, in which the plate was revised with English labels (**Figure 4**). In the first image, he showed the principle of central peripheral focus, a principle that Liotard explored in a drawing of Five Turkish women but did not put to use in his portraits of single

¹⁰ On the importance of Dufresnoy in England, see Lipking, 1965, pp. 487–504. On De Piles’s reputation in the eighteenth century, see Alpers, 1995, pp. 285–301. On the early history of *tout-ensemble* as a concept and in relation to similar concepts, see Heck, 2018, pp. 452–458; in that volume see also s.v. *l’effet*, pp. 189–195, and *groupe*, pp. 246–251.

individuals.¹¹ In the two middle diagrams, De Piles showed how *chiaroscuro* is distributed on a single sphere and how it should be massed on a group of small spheres (grapes) to produce what he called “*l’effet*,” a term designating the unity of the whole ensemble. In the fourth, the effect is dispersed as each grape is presented individually with its own light and shadow.

Liotard similarly wrote of *l’effet* as “la partie de la peinture qui frappe e attire le plus le regard des spectateurs” (the part of painting that catches and holds the gaze of viewers) (Liotard, 1897, p. 85).¹² Like De Piles, Liotard’s *l’effet* is the outcome of the proper distribution of light and shadow, but they differ in the particulars. Liotard emphasised the separation of light and dark tones of one hue and the necessity of sufficient distance between them. He expressed support for the principle of massing when he brought up the maxim of the bunch of grapes (without mentioning De Piles), but in practice, he departed from it often. In the Vienna *Grapes*, for example, he grouped the shaded side of the grapes with the shadow they cast on the board to build a shadowy mass, yet on closer examination, few of the grapes in each bunch are truly in shadow; most are less deeply shaded than the boards behind them, and they retain their colour (albeit in darker tones of yellow-green and purple) but lack the highlights that mark their surfaces as smooth and shiny. Those partially shaded grapes serve as a mid-tone or intermediate rather than being fully integrated into the shadowy mass, and neither bunch dominates the other.¹³ Compared to Van Huysum’s *Still Life of Flowers and Fruit* (**Figure 2**), where the principal light surrounded by the principal shadow pops forward and is easily distinguished from the secondary lights by its very white carnations, Liotard’s *Grapes* cannot be said to have one principal light and one principal shadow.

In the Getty *Tea Service*, Liotard departs further from the massing principle with each pot, cup, saucer, and spoon depicted individually, united only by the direction of the light source on the side, as in De Piles’s fourth example. Despite the prediction of a dispersed effect, the Getty *Tea Service* is nevertheless an eye-catching picture, and we can only wonder if Liotard, who had devoted his art to portraiture of single figures, was deliberately exploring how far he could go in breaking a rule he had once avowed.

Liotard’s principal opposition to the aesthetic qualities of paintings praised by De Piles and the many artists and connoisseurs who succeeded him was to their rough surface and visible strokes. Although he never mentions De Piles by name,

¹¹ An illustration may be found in Anne de Herdt, *Dessins de Liotard* (Geneva: Musée d’art et d’histoire, 1992), pp. 104–105, cat. 51.

¹² See: Rule 18.

¹³ It is possible that the shadow tones have darkened more in one area than another, exaggerating a distinction that was originally more subtle, although pastels do not degrade in the same way as oils. For Liotard’s rule of nine tones, see section “Aerial Perspective and Pictorial Space” below.

his familiarity is evident whenever he gives examples of faults by frequently choosing Rubens, the painter most championed by De Piles for his bravura brushwork. De Piles's influence had spread throughout Europe through translations and inexpensive pocket-sized editions of his many writings, making it likely that Liotard was familiar with them at least indirectly (Alpers, 1995).¹⁴ Liotard must have resented the hegemony of that approach to painting when he, and his illustrious patrons, valued the smooth surface of paintings that did not call attention to the marks of their makers. He attacked the unnaturalness of Rubens's bluish hints in the flesh tones and the artificiality of prominent dabs and *touches* of colour to signify highlights and shadows. His most persuasive (and frequent) justification was the judgement of the average person who ostensibly knows nothing about art but knows when things in nature are defective or ugly. Calling these people the *ignorants* by combining "ignorant" with "art," he commended their judgements to justify his own taste and preferences. Undoubtedly, the smooth, translucent skin, devoid of blemishes that mark the portraits loved by his sitters, appealed to the same penchant for unblemished, idealised forms that today drives fashion and food advertisers to photoshop their images. In two examples Liotard gave of the sensible judgements of such *ignorants*—they confused painterly touches as blemished skin, interpreted bluish-shades on the upper lip and chin as indecorous hints of a beard growing back—such common practices were not then acceptable imitations of true appearances. Furthermore, as Marianne Koos argued, the pock-marked skin of smallpox survivors added impetus to the quest for smooth skin as an ideal of beauty, an ideal that aligned with Liotard's love of parchment, porcelain, and other smooth surfaces (Koos, 2007).

Liotard took a courageous stance by opposing the prevailing acclaim of painterly facility. In Rule 7 he called this acclaim "a prejudice contrary to the principles I propose" and attacked its advocacy of facility, looseness, and beautiful brush strokes as antithetical to the naturalism he wished to promote (Liotard, 1897).¹⁵ In so doing, Liotard situated those who adhered to the theory of painterly superiority as elitists who were out of touch with a greater truth: despite the naivety of the *ignorants*, their criticisms were justified because their uneducated eye found major errors in representation in those criticised works—errors that included an insufficient perception of difference between the lights and the shades, exaggerated contrasts, or a failure to unify the colour tones of figures with their surrounding colour fields. The *ignorants*' criticism was justified by the maker's disregard for the rules that Liotard had deduced from a lifetime of observation and study, rules painters disregarded because they were swayed by elitist theory and did not paint what they could see with their own eyes. In rejecting bold facture and formulaic

¹⁴ See: n. 13.

¹⁵ See Liotard, 1897, p. 74: "facile, librement peintes, et bien touchée."

practices, Liotard was not alone. Other writers in the second half of the eighteenth century objected to De Piles's disparagement of a highly finished style (*style poli*) and favouritism of the bold style *ferme*, while conventions like the dark foreground *repoussoir*, designed to lead the eye into a deep landscape space, were also criticised by Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755) and several others (Radisich, 1977; Heck, 2018).

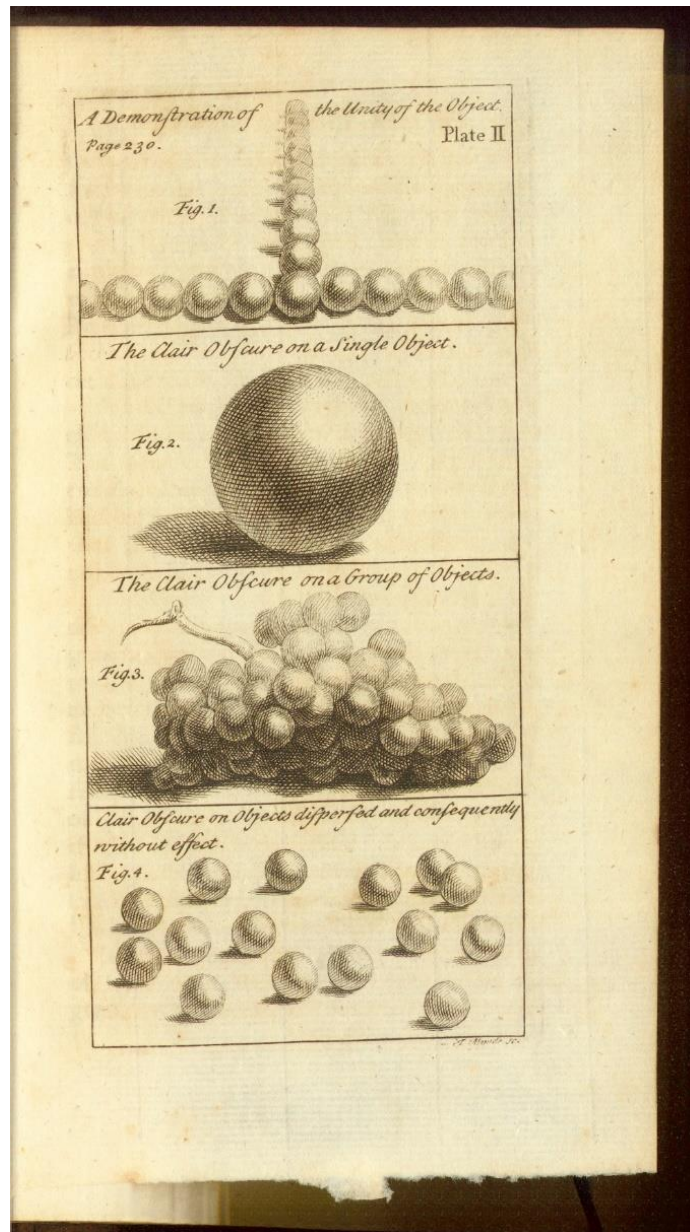


Figure 4: Roger de Piles, Demonstration of the Principles of Chiaroscuro, engraved plate facing p. 130 in *The Principles of Painting*, 1743 (credit: archive.org for HathiTrust).

Liotard as a Reader of Leonardo da Vinci

Some of the principles Liotard espoused recall Leonardo da Vinci's influential *Traité de la peinture*, which Liotard may have known in the 1716 pocket-sized edition by Pierre-François Giffart. In Chapitre XLV (45), Leonardo espoused the benefits of listening to many opinions, especially in representations of nature. He argued that painters often failed to discern their own errors and had to be particularly cautious in painting human figures because their own bodies served unwittingly as models, leading them to overlook disproportionate heads and limbs when they themselves had such defects. The common person, however, would readily recognize a hunchback or an oversized hand and could therefore serve as a reliable judge (Leonardo, 1716, p. 32). Liotard, as we saw earlier, emphasised the reliability of judgements from the unsophisticated viewer.

An issue of great importance to both Leonardo and Liotard was the simultaneous contrast of light and dark. Long before Mach bands were identified in perceptual science, Leonardo had noticed the mutual intensification of light and dark at the edges of forms and grounds.¹⁶ He included these observations in his broader discussion of juxtapositions of light and dark, which he distilled into the general principle that painters should strive to place light against dark and dark against light, varying backgrounds as figures and objects varied from illuminated to shaded parts. One of the few illustrated chapters in Leonardo's *Traité* (1716) demonstrate how this shift could be arranged in depicting the apse of a building in a landscape (**Figure 5**).¹⁷ Leonardo explained that it was necessary to distinguish the edge of a convex surface terminating against a ground of the same colour by making it darker than the field against which it sits, and that a planar surface would also vary at the edges, appearing darker against a light ground and lighter at the edge of a dark one. The great benefit of these contrasts was to cause painted things to pop forward and separate from their grounds, a quality Liotard discussed in sections on relief and plasticity (*saillant*). Liotard advocated this principle and demonstrated it two prints accompanying his treatise. *La Chocolatière* (**Figure 6**) shows with variations in dark and light at the edges of her dress. On the left side of the print, her dark dress is mediated at the boundary with the background by a light collar along the top and waist, and below that, the neutral-toned ground is distinctly lightened along the border of her skirt. The opposite shifts take place on the right side, where the white collar and apron are edged by a band of shadow on the garment; but where the skirt is in half shadow, the ground rather than the edge has a dark band, so that the edge of the apron appears lighter. In Plate II, *La Liseuse*, the shaded side of the face meets a lighter background, as does the more deeply

¹⁶ Ernst Mach (1838–1915), an Austrian physicist, attributed in 1865 the intensification at the edge of light and dark bands as phenomenon initiated on the retina.

¹⁷ See Leonardo, 1716, p. 246 and facing plate.

shaded shoulder.

Liotard also reiterated Leonardo's admonition to place the most beautiful colour tones in full light. For example, *Traité de la peinture* Chapitre CL (150) reads:

La couleur qui est entre la partie ombrée, & la partie éclairée des corps opaques, sera moins belle que celle qui est entièrement éclairée; donc le premier beauté des couleurs se trouve dans les principales lumières.

(The colour between the shaded part and the illuminated part of an opaque body will be less beautiful than that which is entirely illuminated: thus, the foremost beauty of colours is found in its principal lights.) (Leonardo, 1651; Leonardo, 1716, p. 131).

Liotard restated this in Rule 4 under the heading: “Que la couleur d'un objet soit plus belles sur la partie la plus éclairée, et qu'elle diminue de beauté à mesure qu'elles l'est moins, jusqu'à l'ombre la plus forte qui n'a aucune couleur.” By beauty of colour, Liotard and Leonardo meant saturation of hue.

Liotard's treatise stands out for its emphasis on colouring. In the introductory section, he placed colour after design—not because it was secondary but because *dessin* is the first step in resemblance regardless of medium, underlying everything except colouring (Liotard, 1897). He proclaimed that colouring, and especially the beauty of colours, makes an imitation faithful, perfect, and true. Although he discussed light and shadow under different rules, he claimed them as a part of *coloris* because both light and shadow are created by means of colour (Lippincott, 1985, p. 127; Roethlisberger, 2001, pp. 67–68).¹⁸

He paraphrased Leonardo in asserting that colouring is more difficult than drawing because colour variations are infinite while the contours of objects and their parts are finite.¹⁹ He added that there are also numerous things in nature that have indeterminate colours, such as skin, as well as colours that are “reddish, yellowish, and bluish”—in other words, colours that hint at or seemed tinged by hues without being those hues themselves—and make colouring challenging. Farther on, in Rule 13, he advised painters to avoid trying to represent things that can never be painted well, like the sun, candlelight, or an arm reaching out towards the viewer (Liotard, 1897, pp. 81–82).

¹⁸Lippincott considered his discussion of colouring “perfunctory” and subordinated to light and shade; Roethlisberger emphasised the importance of his experience laying on colours in contrast to his general lack of knowledge of theory, yet admitted that he followed the rules of De Piles, Watelet, and Diderot.

¹⁹See Leonardo, 1716, p. 14 : “Les contours des corps se voient très-nettement; les couleurs de la nature au contraire, varient à l'infini, par le plus ou le moins de distance ou de degré de lumière, où elles sont vues”; compare with Leonardo's Chapitre LVI (56), Leonardo, 1716, p. 44. Corruptions in the Italian text made the passage confusing, as shown in Guffanti 2018, p. 927, which the French translation clarified by stating that drawing requires more knowledge but light and shadow greater breadth due to its greater difficulty and variations.

However, it is misleading to judge Liotard's praise of beautiful colours as the unsophisticated outcome of his early training in painting enamel. His praise is consistent with his attention to the qualities that *les ignorants* enjoyed and that he cultivated throughout his successful career as a portraitist. His praise of Correggio as the greater master of colouring was not just lip-service, as Correggio's colouring was prized for its grace, in contrast to Titian's boldness (*ivi*, p. 56).²⁰ He accepted his own love of beautiful colours in nature as a spur to develop more intense colour in his pastels, based upon the assumption that those who had not been brainwashed in an academy admired the beauty of colour: of a glowing sunset, of the luminous blue of clear sky, of the deep reds and pinks of flower petals.

Writing of Jean (Jan) Van Huysum's paintings of fruit and flowers, Liotard praised the artist's choice of "les plus belles couleurs" for imparting such a great brilliance to his paintings that no other oil painter could compare to him in the freshness, vivacity, and imitation of nature: his works have "l'éclat de la peinture en émail." He shows no hint of believing that toning down the brilliance of colour was a necessity or a sign of greatness as Pliny had related in accounts of Apelles's *atramentum*. If anything, Liotard sought ways to intensify colour, noting that painters' colours were reduced in brightness compared to colours in nature (*ivi*, p. 62). He certainly knew Leonardo's Chapitre C (100): "How to make colours lively and beautiful" which reads:

Il faut toujours preparer un fonds tres blanc aux couleurs que vous voulez faire paroître belles, pourvû que elles soient transparentes; car aux autres qui ne le sont pas, un champ clair ne sert de rien; comme l'experience le montre dans les verre colorez, dont les couleurs paroissent extrêmement belles."

(You must always prepare a very white ground for the colours you wish to make appear beautiful, provided that they are transparent; for those that are not, a light ground will serve no purpose. The experience of looking through coloured glass shows us this where the colours appear extremely beautiful.)
(Leonardo, 1716, pp. 89-90)²¹

Indeed, Liotard's paintings on transparent glass attest to his fascination with the luminosity that painting upon or colouring glass provides. Perhaps Leonardo's *Traité* inspired him to try it as a support.²²

²⁰ On the critical reception of *Correggio*, see Spagnolo, 2005.

²¹ In addition to differences between additive and subtractive primaries, the challenge in comparing colour in nature (or digitally produced) to pigments arises from the factor of luminosity and its relationship to psychological perceptions of brightness. Natural pigments also varied greatly in intensity with their source and preparation.

²² Leonardo also suggested working on panes of glass in Chapters 32, 71, 278, and 352.

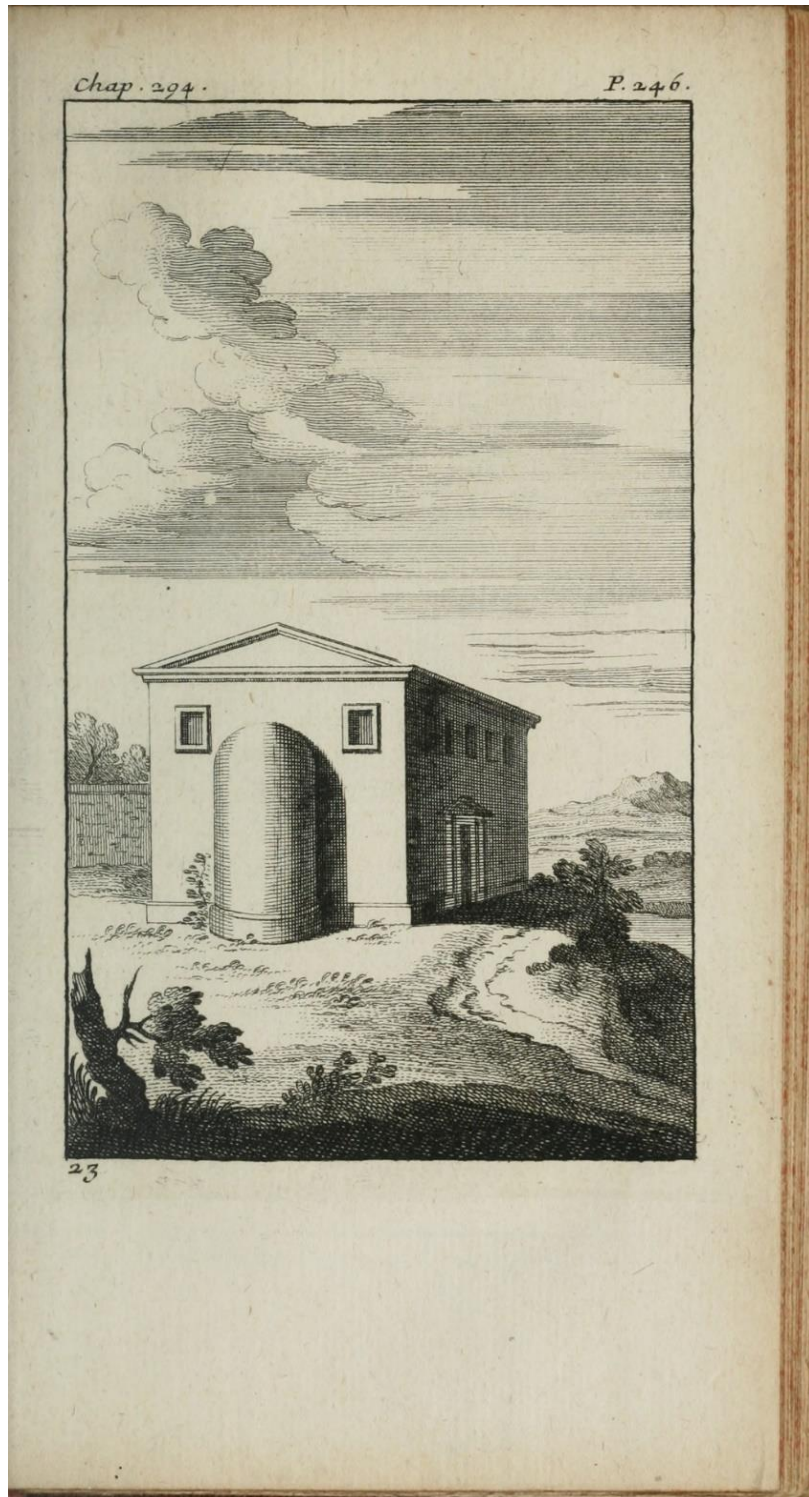


Figure 5: Pierre-François Giffart, Illustration to Chapitre 294, facing p. 246 in *Traité de la peinture* par Leonard de Vinci, Revû et corrigé: nouvelle edition, Paris, Chez Pierre-François Giffart, 1716 (credit: archive.org for The Elmer Belt Library, University)



Figure 6: Jean-Étienne Liotard, La Chocolatier, mezzotint engraving of a pastel sold in tandem with the treatise, from *La vie et les oeuvres de Jean Etienne Liotard*, p. 101 (credit: archive.org for The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles).

Aerial Perspective and Pictorial Space

Liotard’s objections to aerial perspective have been noted, but a closer look indicates that he only objected to its exaggerated use: “N’outres jamais la perspective aérienne,” he wrote in Rule 8 (Liotard, 1897, p. 76).²³ Leonardo da Vinci had coined the term “aerial perspective” and developed a theoretical underpinning for a well-established practice in fifteenth-century Florence, but its practice only become widely diffused when manuscript copies of his treatise began circulating in Italy (Bell, 2022). Scientific advances in understanding nature—that there was something called “atmosphere”—altered how people thought about the medium of air and its effect on vision (Martin, 2015). In 1730, Philippe de la Hire published a discourse identifying five visual cues to distance, two of which painters used: [1] apparent size on the retina; and [2] vivacity of colour (de la Hire, 1730). Vivacity of colour, however, had not been mentioned by Leonardo, who advised degrading diverse hues towards blue—as one sees in distant mountains—and to diminish the visibility of edges and details, as seen in atmospheric fog conditions.

Liotard primarily objected to an excessive diminution of light intensity and shadow darkness which many painters used to indicate the effects of distance, whether in interiors or outside in nature. He gave the example as a painting with a figure in the foreground, another at six paces back, and a farther one at ten paces: when the shadows on the figure ten paces back are lightened as much as in nature, the relationship between *les clairs* and *les ombres* will be ruined; one will no longer clearly discern the distant *ombres* from the darker *clairs*, and the distant shadows might be confused with the light tones. But a subtle diminution rate, as in Van de Heyde’s landscapes and the flower paintings of van Huysum (**Figure 2**), was acceptable.

To better understand Liotard’s objection, we must return to his ideas on systematically approaching the imitation of light and shadow. He emphasised a strict division of the lights from the shadows, which he recommended be accomplished by subdividing each hue into nine tones: the four lightest gradations are “*les clairs*”; the four darkest, “*les ombres*.” The intermediate tone between them is considered neither light nor shade and should provide a transition that creates unity and grace. What is unusual about this is his insistence on a perceptible “sensible” distance between the darkest light and the lightest shade (that is, between tones 4 and 6). This distance must be ample enough to distinguish one as “light” and the other as “shade.” He criticised the error of those who depicted a relative, not an absolute, difference, between the *clairs* and *ombres* and who made their darkest lights darker than their lightest darks, leading to a confused perception

²³ See Lippincott, 1985, pp.126–127; he concluded that he did not promote its use and found his argument against it confusing.

(Liotard, 1897).²⁴ In reality, this is rarely confusing to a viewer, because the human eye distinguishes shadow as relative to light; and in optical texts, shadow was defined as a diminution of light, not its absence. Nevertheless, Liotard made it a hallmark of good colouring that built upon one of his first rules: to bring together (*rapprochez*) the lights (Rule 1) and to bring together (*rapprochez*) the shadows. We observed these practices in the Vienna *Bunches of Grapes* (Figure 3).

Therefore, in Rule 6, Liotard presented guidance on how to adjust the colour modelling tones in the representation of distant objects. Focused on the goal of creating plasticity on a flat surface, which requires adjusting the lights and the darks to account for distance as well as light intensity, his advice was to reduce, in the distance, the size of the intervals between those nine tones; this way, the difference between light and shadow (“the noticeable distance one must have between the light and the shadow”) could be maintained (*ivi*, p. 66).

Realising that painters would wonder about the correct way to indicate distance, Liotard immediately followed with advice: to appear more distant, these parts must be painted with fewer details. The diminution of acuity, which comprises the visibility of details and the crispness of edge, had been a controversial practice in painting. Leonardo had insisted upon its validity because human vision functions this way and because mathematically, lines do not exist around the edges of solid objects.²⁵ His ideas had met with objections in Milan, voiced in a lost treatise by Bernardo Zenale and summarised by Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (Bell, 1998; Bell, 2022). During Liotard’s lifetime, however, support grew for acuity perspective as a necessary part of *la perspective aerielle*, with Francesco Algarotti advocating it in his *Saggio sopra la pittura* (Venice, 1756), perhaps due to Chardin’s success employing it (Baxandall, 1985a et 1985b).

Liotard also advocated diminishing the force and vivacity of colour. In Rule 5, “Qu’aucune couleur ne perce,” he gave the example of two figures one hundred paces apart, warning that “the colour of the garments of the farther should never be as saturated (beautiful) nor as light as that of the foreground person.” (Liotard, 1897, p. 65).²⁶ Thus, he clearly accepted what Laurent de la Hire regarded as the principal coloristic cue to distance.

The colouring of the Getty *Tea Service* reveals this attention to subtle diminutions of colour, acuity, and light and shadow. The pictorial space is shallow, although somewhat deeper than Van Huysum’s fruit and flower painting in

²⁴ See pp. 63 and 66 under Rule 3: “de cette manière vous arrivez au plus grand *effet* de la peinture, qui consiste dans la difference très-sensible que l’on doit mettre entre le *clair* et l’*ombre*” (from this manner, you attain the greatest effect in painting, which consists of a very perceptible distance that you must place between the light and the shadow).

²⁵ I discuss Leonardo’s theory in several articles, most recently Bell, *op. cit.*, where n. 36 provides bibliography to earlier discussions that explore the visual processes believed to underly the painter’s practice.

²⁶ See p. 65: “la couleur de l’habit du dernier ne doit être ni si belle ni aussi claire....”

Washington (**Figure 2**). In Van Huysum’s work, we must imagine the depth of the bouquet but get a clear presentation of spatial recession in the foreground, where some loose flowers, peaches, and three bunches of grapes are arranged along a diagonal on the table supporting the fictive bouquet. In Liotard’s *Tea Set*, the high viewpoint allows us to look down on the tray and to see each of the objects in its entirety with two exceptions: the large teapot overlaps the lidded pot behind it, obscuring its left edge; and the slop bowl, which is crowded against the saucer next to it, blocks a view of its full circumference.

Both paintings use the same diminutions of colour, acuity, and light and shadow, although Van Huysum’s reduction of colour vivacity is less subtle and depends more on shading to indicate more distant flowers. Since all of Liotard’s tea set is the same light porcelain with multi-coloured images in a Chinese-inspired style, the contrast between light figure and dark ground dominates our first impression (Etienne, 2020).²⁷ The shadows on the pots and cups retain a transparency that reveals their colours, and it is only through the juxtaposition of these sections that one can perceive the less vivid colour of the far-most pot on the left, as well as its lesser clarity of edge and detail (Lippincott, 1985).²⁸ These shifts in clarity of edge are coordinated with the naturally lesser clarity of edge of matte objects in accord with his approach to distinguishing such surfaces as “moins nets et moins arrêtés que ceux des corps polis.” (Liotard, 1897 p. 82).²⁹ Where the cups cast shadows on their saucers, we see authentic tones of *ombre*, tones that are not only noticeably darker but also dark enough to hide the colour of their object, leaving us uncertain as to whether that part is white or coloured. In the rearmost cup, however, the shadow cast on the saucer is light enough to show the colours of the painted design so that we see a darkened green and a darkened red, much less distinctly portrayed. Compared to the high gloss and sheen of the cup in the left front corner, which is closest to the light, the cups in the back row are noticeably diminished. These visual cues convey their greater distance, supporting the perspectival convergence of the sides of the tray and the overlapping that reveals their positions in space.

It is worth noting that although the pictorial space of the Getty *Tea Set* is no deeper than a tray, it is deeper than Liotard’s *trompe l’oeil* painting of bas-reliefs and his *Two Bunches of Grapes*. This greater depth is also the case with his still lifes of fruit from the mid-1780s. This group of paintings bears comparison with *Two Bunches of Grapes* in that he chose to paint fruits of the same variety in many, among them the *Apricots* in a private collection (illustrated in Roethlisberger, 1985,

²⁷ Etienne established that imitations of Chinese porcelain sets with similar decoration were manufactured in England and that by 1770, there were two porcelain factories in Switzerland.

²⁸ Lippincott also noticed these adjustments but, without the benefit of an historical context on the theory and practice of aerial perspective, considered this advice in the treatise confusing.

²⁹ See: Rule 14.

fig. 8) or the *Apples* exhibited in London (Stevens, 2015, cat. no. 82, private collection). Such simple arrangements allowed the artist to master the challenge that, he claimed, no one before him had successfully done, with Van Huysum coming as close as possible yet failing to achieve a perfect illusion (Liotard, 1897, p. 97).³⁰

Like grapes, apples and apricots are one hue but not uniformly coloured; each fruit varies in parts that are redder and less red, riper and less ripe, and some fruits are paler or slightly greenish; thus, a single variety allowed exploring colour relationships in space within a limited range of hues as Liotard had done in the *Vienna Grapes*. Since Liotard had argued that a successful *trompe l'oeil* required a very shallow space, the challenge of his fruit still lifes was to attain the same success of illusion with a considerably deeper space.

At times he used well-known *trompe l'oeil* effects—a stray leaf or fruit separate from the group, often protruding over the visible edge of a table, a knife placed obliquely, a partly opened drawer with something poking out. These devices always define the foremost plan, the space between the viewer and the picture surface or the front of the depicted illusory space. The colouring conforms to the principles of the juxtaposition of opposites, light against dark, dark against light, each varying in some way from the other. Some have light fruit against a dark ground, others a varied ground colour that darkens more on one side of the group than another. Whereas in the *treatise* he advocated Leonardo da Vinci's principle of contrast juxtaposition—that light parts should be against a dark background and dark parts against a lighter ground—in the late fruit paintings, he explored many permutations, including light against less light, dark against less dark, one hue against a different hue of similar value. Perhaps he decided that the principle was not universal in nature and that the simple contrast relationships he had explored in the *Vienna Grapes* and portraiture did not apply to all settings, light conditions, or coloured objects.

Laboratory analysis of the *Getty Tea Set* reveals his intense concern with such colour relationships: Liotard initially painted the table blue-green, then changed his mind and overpainted it with a red; the dark green background was added later and covered some of the red and blue-green layers (Leonard, 1985). An earlier restorer had removed the red, concluding that it was not original, but the Getty restorers determined it to be Liotard's final intention; they related that when they took the layers down to the original blue-green, “the table assumed a jarring presence of undue importance, contrasting violently with the subdued balances found throughout the rest of the painting.” (*ivi*, p. 132).

In conclusion, although Liotard was known as “the painter of truth,” his approach to imitating nature involved considerable artifice. He was aware of this,

³⁰ See: n. 11.

often noting that painters must depart from nature in service to a higher truth: to make the painted objects look as real as possible. In pursuit of this goal, he pushed the limits of those rules in the Getty *Tea Set* and other still life paintings from the last decade of his life, inventing works that, while deceptive in their simplicity, justify their acclaim (Roethlisberger, 1985, p. 109).

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