

## Hanson on Kalba (2017)

Kalba, Laura Anne. *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Commerce, Technology, and Art*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2017, pp. 266, ISBN 978-0-271-07700-0

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To read Laura Anne Kalba's *Color in the Age of Impressionism: Commerce, Technology, and Art* is to gain both a richer understanding of how individuals experienced and interpreted color in nineteenth-century Paris, and a heightened awareness of the colors around us. Kalba, whose far-reaching study considers the hues of flowers, fabrics, fashions, furnishings, fireworks, and ephemera, demonstrates that technological advances in synthetic dye production initiated a "color revolution" in the late nineteenth century. By illuminating how this sudden increase in novel, vivid, and varied colors altered the marketplace and mass media, Kalba establishes a new context for examining the significance of the Impressionist palette and art critics' responses to it. To that end, Kalba shifts the focus of analysis from "Impressionist color" per se to art and everyday life, investigating the ways that Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir used their palettes to engage with these widespread chromatic changes. The author, then, succeeds in articulating a convergence of art, commerce, and technology around mass-produced colors.

Building on historian Michel Pastoureau's analyses of specific hues, Kalba deepens current thought about the meaning of color by consulting an impressive range of sources. These materials include art criticism and satirical cartoons, paintings and pastels, fabric swatches and color wheels, fashion plates and catalogs, horticulture journals and garden designs, pyrotechnical manuals and posters, and trade cards and photographs. Given the breadth of her research, Kalba relies on the theoretical lens of social history to provide a cohesive framework for her project. More specifically, the author invokes art historian Michael Baxandall's concept of the "period eye" to ground her investigation of color in everyday life and film scholar Miriam Hansen's notion of "vernacular modernism" to construe mass-produced color as a modern mode of signification. Kalba thereby articulates a history of color that, while expansive in scope, focuses intently on elucidating the ways in which new hues revolutionized visual and material culture.

Kalba's first chapter centers on the nineteenth-century French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul's ideas and activities, which form a thread that links her book's five thematic chapters and an epilogue. Chevreul was well known in France for advancing a theory of complementary colors and attempting to standardize the nomenclature and quality of pigments used in industry. Although Chevreul concerned himself mainly with artisanal and industrial applications of mass-produced dyes, art critics and historians of visual culture often cite his book, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs*, when interpreting painters' formal experiments with color. In response to this trend in art criticism and art historiography, Kalba argues that such narrow readings of Chevreul overlook both the relevance of his theories to a color revolution and artistic engagements with this surge of new hues. Kalba effectively intervenes in this literature by analyzing the reception of Chevreul's text among theorists, tastemakers, industrialists, and artists, whose lack of consensus about the meaning and uses of color she cites as evidence of its profound impact on everyday life. Kalba, then, reveals how Chevreul's prescriptions take on greater relevance when placed in conversation with advances in synthetic pigment production and an attendant profusion of mass-produced colors in the marketplace.

Kalba deftly interweaves sources from fields as far flung as horticulture and pyrotechnics. In chapters two and four, she expands conventional notions of visual and material culture by exploring the significance of color in two often overlooked forms of urban spectacle: ornamental flowerbeds and firework bouquets. The author's careful research shows that early horticulturalists and pyrotechnists devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to the discovery of techniques for manufacturing novel, vivid, and varied hues in their respective industries. By tracing the quests to develop a full palette of flowers and explosives, Kalba advances a central argument of her book—nineteenth-century Parisians longed for and embraced color, cultivating a sophisticated understanding of hues and their visual codes. In these and other chapters, Kalba also dispels the belief that nineteenth-century Paris was a gray and colorless city, a vision of the metropolis popularized by Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel.

At the heart of Kalba's study is her discussion of Impressionism, specifically the work of Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Kalba justifies her selection of these artists by explaining that all three men displayed a penchant for vivid colors in their representations of fashion. Indeed, Kalba cites paintings by Degas, Monet, and Renoir in which women wear, handle, and model bright dresses and hats with a riotous mix of ornamentation. However, as Kalba herself notes, the color revolution's impact on the fashion industry affected men and women disproportionately, as men favored the perennial

black suit, while women embraced clothing in new hues each season. Given this gendering of color, an analysis of paintings by the female Impressionist Berthe Morisot might have enhanced Kalba's study of art and sartorial commerce. Still, the author accomplishes a great deal in the way of demythologizing familiar narratives about Impressionism, furthering the scholarship of art historian Anthea Callen. Kalba explains that while, as Callen shows, the Impressionists used synthetic pigments, these artists' engagements with mass-produced colors extended well beyond the painted canvas to the world around them. A compelling example of this intersection of art and everyday life relates to Monet's series of paintings that depict Rouen Cathedral in different light and weather conditions. Kalba, drawing on the work of Joachim Pissarro, Paul Hayes Tucker, and Steven Levine, maintains that Monet exhibited twenty of these paintings at Durand-Ruel's gallery, arranging them according to color variations rather than chronological order, season, or time of day. Kalba interprets this privileging of chromatic experience over other concerns as an indication that the visual aesthetic of "chromatic variety," which department stores commonly deployed to market patterned fabrics in multiple shades, also structured the display, viewing, and sale of art.

Kalba's book, a valuable resource for scholars of visual culture and French studies, provides a crucial foundation for future explorations of the impact of color on social practices and cultural representations in the nineteenth century.

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