

ANDRE MASSON:  
*color and the lithographer*

I offer to a possible reader these random notes or fragments on an inadequately understood medium of expression: color lithography. I hope that I shall be excused for insisting upon certain particularities of a material nature, for the kindly reader may be a future lithographer. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed an event which, as regards the problem we are here concerned with, was of the highest importance. Edouard Vuillard, a painter whose career began most brilliantly, published his *Twelve Colored Lithographs*; the work was brought out by Vollard. It is well to add that at the same time the same publisher issued Pierre Bonnard's *Aspects of Parisian Life*. There is no need to dwell upon the fact that this event went almost unnoticed, but it is well to note in passing that these masterpieces of engraving are still, even at the present time, very little appreciated.

It is not my purpose to inquire into why they were so unjustly disregarded upon their appearance, but it is proper to dwell upon a stranger fact, that is, that these masterpieces still remain, even today, very little known. I find this disregard, or scorn, particularly striking since, on the one hand, I consider Vuillard's collection a remarkable monument of universal art (and his other color prints as well) and, on the other hand, as the point of departure of genuine color lithography. As regards Bonnard, I shall make a few reservations which I shall go into later on... . At this moment I see my potential reader (he is very knowing) smiling and murmuring, "What about Lautrec?" Very well, triumph, dear reader; that splendid artist, that prodigious draughtsman, remains their uncontestable father.

Having said this, I must make the following distinction: what Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec had in view most often was the poster, the placard, the cover page of a program. And he logically employed suitable means: the Japanese blot, well filled out, and also the clever *crachis*, that little rainfall so easily obtained by mechanical means. Vuillard, on the other hand, evokes from color lithography its noblest manifestation: it is not a poster (which has to achieve the maximum effect immediately) , nor is it a reproduction or an imitation of a painting - it is something quite intrinsic : it is a tinting of surpassing subtlety accompanied by the lithographic pencil alone; in the Vollard collection

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the tinting remains for the most part muted. Hence, our most exquisite colorist was also the most raffiné of lithographers; he achieved maximum efficiency with maximum discretion. For example, in the title print of *Twelve Lithographs* he attains, using only two colors, a purplish grey and an emerald green of incomparable richness. He is, of course, well aware that *the white of the paper* is an element to be reckoned with and played with. But he was also able, by using flat colors to the virtual exclusion of all others, to achieve results as admirable as with his pencil smearings on a lightly washed base; at all times, however, taking into account the paper.

Starting about 1892 and continuing into the 1900's other artists, and not unimportant ones, were taken with chromography : Renoir and Cézanne for example ... but a critic who was devoted to their cause noted sadly that "this movement, despite appreciable successes, stopped short." Redon, who did so much for the revival of engraving on stone, was frankly hostile to it. He was afraid of "falling into imagery." Indeed, this is one of the dangers of the color print, and, if I am not mistaken, Degas, in the rarest and most masterly pieces he has left us, remained attached to the glamor of the black which is as "royal as purple." So much for the contradiction. And what now? Now the field is once again open. Léon used to say that if the effort of Vuillard, Bonnard and their colleagues was so brief, it was because of the lack of success with which they met. I know nothing about that, but it is evident that if, after them, lithography in black and white retained all its prestige in the eyes of painters, its speckled sister has been decidedly neglected. But it is timidly making its reappearance today and it is in large part to Georges Braque that this honor is due. This eminent painter manages, in his latest color prints, to rival his own paintings. He thereby departs from Vuillard's example and finds himself closer to that of Pierre Bonnard (this comparison is of a technical order). Bonnard *pictorializes* his prints more than does Vuillard or Lautrec; his genius was not graphic; rather it displayed itself in an even greater blossoming of his lyrical coloring. The admirable thing about Vuillard, and that *is* why I keep dwelling so fervently upon his name, is that he was able, while retaining his genius as a painter, to keep from forgetting that engraving is also *printing* and that by virtue of that very fact must abstain from too great resemblance to painting and above all that its support is the paper and that it must know how to make use of this white or ivory "base" as an essential color. It is by means of this that he will remain - and let there be no doubt about it - the great master of this medium of expression, a medium which brings together such great qualities that it really should interest more artists and amateurs than it does. In the first place, it is an excellent discipline for the painter since the supreme goal is to succeed with a great economy of color, *values* having a prime importance. Furthermore - and this is not to be neglected from the point of view

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of the diffusion of the work of art - the print is not a reproduction - should not be one. It is an original creation and its price is infinitely more accessible to the amateur of modest means than a painting or drawing.

Having said this, off to work ! And good luck !

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