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Seeing colour in abstract painting and in stained glass. Two case studies: Pat Lipsky and John Piper

PLATE 3 (overleaf):
Ingvild Dubfest,
SEE pp. 108–109).

It is always quite tricky to get ready to look at an abstract painting. It is different if there are figures in a picture, or if it is like a mirror or window, or even if there are figures obscured within the material of the paint, as these pictures can be slid into with a sideways glance as one walks around the room, allowing the eye to come in at the edge as if through a door. To have to hesitate for a moment before getting a proper sight of an abstract painting must be a common experience in a gallery of modern art. To look at figurative painting involves merely a straightforward shift of status between looking at the room itself and looking at a representation – these are two kinds of space, but at least they differ only within the same order of magnitude. But on the sight of an abstract painting, the address has to change. The kind of looking demanded is not into a perspective space with something in it, and it is not the same kind of looking that asks for the skill of navigating around objects. It is necessary first to clear the eyes, at least to blink, or better to rest them for a moment or look out of the window at something that doesn't matter, and so escape briefly the necessity of day-to-day relations of cause and effect.

This slightly more rarefied approach is also the way that the artist has looked at the abstract painting, and what we see is the consequence of his or her repeated stares. There is nothing else there to see, no outside referent, and since the artist's choice in making the picture included every shade of colour available and every variety of touch, the painting is peculiarly reduced to this record of many acts of looking. An individual artist's work is recognisable by the range of colour he or she has used, just as much as Giovanni Morelli could distinguish Filippino Lippi by his preferred way of drawing the little finger. These typical figures and these colours become the self portrait of the artist, or, more exactly, of that part of the artist's mind that we are allowed to share, as seen through our own selves. Artists invent the colours of paintings, and there is still an infinite number of colours yet to be seen, just as Josef Albers was able to find colours that Paul Klee seems never to have wished to or be able to fabricate. There are few ways, none absolute, of knowing how another person has seen colour. The range of high-keyed, radiant colouring available for us to look at is vast. But for a long time in the past there were few bright colours to be seen, and all of them were fabulous through their association with wealth or with the extremes of nature. Old master paintings make an inventory of the strong colouring then visible: in the clothes and jewels of the rich and the saintly, in the exceptional effects of nature – flowers, birds and butterflies, the sky at dawn and dusk, the rainbow – and in the vital parts of the body, its blood and the mottled irises of the eyes. At the time when intense colours were rare, their most common location was in the eyes of friends and strangers, and in a different and most lofty context, they were also to be seen in church interiors where sculpture was gilded, jewelled and painted, appropriately to its holy image. The only source of radiant colour that was accessible to everyone in the West was found in the stained glass of churches and cathedrals, tinting the light of the sun.

An artist stares at the colours that become a finished painting, yet now it is only specialist artists who reproduce the brightly coloured objects that used to appeal to the old masters, whether in flora or jewellery or anything else. The strongest colours seen in the modern painting rooms of an art gallery are there to represent clothes or decoration, following the fabrics of Henri Matisse, or in the landscapes and interiors of the expressionist tradition of Vincent Van Gogh and the German painters. Among the artists within the Paris and New York tradition of Modernism, that is to say the art that is found in the painting galleries of American museums, those who use the most intensely striking colours are the abstract painters of pure colour. They have often made an issue of just that difficult approach to vision, by shaping their pictures into outlined, spatial things, like Ellsworth Kelly's paintings and Donald Judd's sculptures, or even the colouring of light itself in the case of Dan Flavin, so that in these ways the colour takes up some extra presence that brings it forward. These Modern masters seem to make a precondition of sharing their experience by willing the viewer to drop all associations with any other kind of colouring. Their art is a world in itself, and to step into it is to be led into a space of its own kind. The eyes of the visitor indeed have to be rubbed, revved up, freed of obstruction and prejudice, and made ready to be welcomed into something new. But there are exceptions to this exclusive practice: abstract artists using pure colour who also test and extend their own observation elsewhere, in a way that leaves a record. This points to at least one aspect of how abstract art – serious, free-standing, and with no hint of illustration – operates in the mind. One of these exceptional American painters has found a new but parallel topic in the study of Medieval stained glass, linking the coloured arts of two very different ages and cultures.

In 2000 Pat Lipsky added this diversion to a long career of abstract painting, at first by drawing some free copies of the stained glass at Chartres Cathedral.¹ She had regularly visited the great European cathedrals, as a tourist and admirer of architecture like anyone else, but had not initially sketched what she saw there. But then she noted the colours of the glass in words as she sat drawing in Chartres, and later made larger copies in colour in her temporary studio in Paris, remembering the colours as best she could and incorporating them into her own practice. The motivation for her interest, which swelled over a few years to become a passion, is not the kind of thing that can be attributed neatly. She has explained that it was based on a fascination with the colour of the stained glass, joined with amusement at the narrative scenes in the windows taken at face value, especially as if everyday comedies. Her practice of sketching may have grown incrementally, from a diversion to a habit, although she was so intrigued at the beginning that she went off to several of the cathedrals in easy reach of Paris. This apparent throwback to tradition corresponds to a general trend, since during the Millennium there was an extraordinarily widespread revision of hierarchies in the arts. Museums across Europe and America decided independently to look back through the past, to bring out older and overlooked works from store, and allow visitors to reconsider



FIG. 1:
Pat Lipsky,
exhibition in
Cathedral of St
John the Divine,
New York, 2006.

alternative tastes. This may have been a failure of nerve in the contemporary, or a sense that turning a Millennium obliged a more open view of history. But it is more likely that it corresponded to a wider sourcing in contemporary art, that grew to include the sciences as well as Medieval art as part of its legitimate subject matter. There was a quite general wish to review the art of the past, to query accepted taste, and to turn over old things to see if they could be of value to the present, and this included an interest in stained glass.

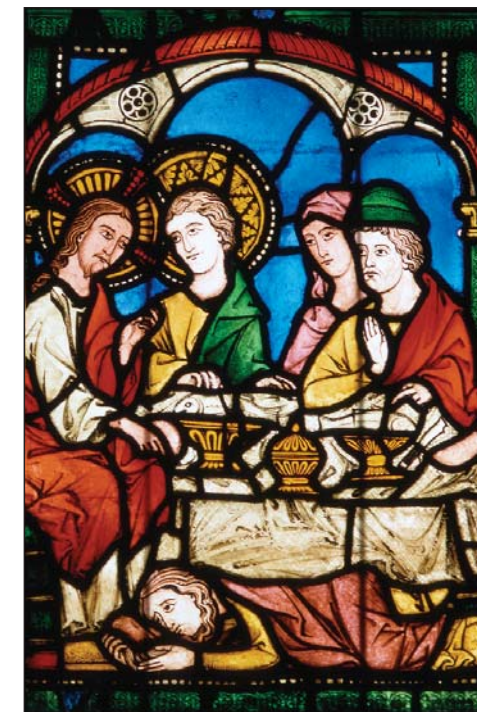
Lipsky gave time to her painted versions of Medieval glass during visits to France and Germany in 2000–03, and travelled to Bourges, Chartres, Sens, Troyes, Strasbourg and elsewhere to work in the cathedrals and museums. In New York she read up on their history. Her procedure in making the copies was this:

- 1) Draw in outline in front of the glass, in pencil on a sheet about twelve inches across. There was a benefit if the glass, like that in the ambulatories at Bourges, was low on the wall.
- 2) Enlarge the outline drawings to about eighteen inches by photocopying.
- 3) Trace the enlargement onto watercolour paper in the studio in Paris, and colour it in gouache from notes, memory and as wished.

The stained glass chosen by Lipsky was specifically the distinctive examples of the early thirteenth century, a period when the colour of the glass was at its most intense and used in striking contrasts. She selected individual medallions to draw separately, one at a time and without the complex repeated pattern of the whole lancet, and was attracted to scenes of action. These were copied in viewer's perspective, as seen from the cathedral floor, so that circles appear as wide ellipses, and figures are shortened in proportion.

These sheets of clear gouache copies, immediately attractive, with something of the clarity of children's cartoons (and of Roy Lichtenstein's versions of cartoons) were included in Lipsky's exhibition at the Galerie Gerald Piltzer, Barbizon, in 2001, framed together as a single item and titled *Les Vitraux*. They were arranged in a close group, somewhat like a fragment of a tall lancet with many different scenes abutting. Another selection of these drawings was exhibited in 2003 at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York, and then again later in the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York, where they were displayed on a wall across the unfinished transept in October 2006 (FIG. 1). The feeling that these works were received as demanding, and difficult, was indicated by the embarrassed reactions of visitors later on to her studio, where these copies were again grouped together on show. Viewers found it difficult to know how to simultaneously admire both the seriousness of abstraction and a practice that was not only a copy, but a copy of such an undervalued art. One of the fascinations of these pictures is precisely that they do enlarge the agenda of art. They bring into modern practice one of the great sequences of European art that had fallen into a limited special interest, even in museums, although the art of architectural stained glass has itself recently enjoyed an extraordinary revival. A further fascination is the very considerable difference between Lipsky's versions and antiquarian copies of such glass, and from the appearance of the glass to anyone else on the spot. Lipsky's gouaches are new paintings in themselves, and neither decorative nor souvenirs.

What disappears from the stained glass in her new paintings are its pitted surface and marks of age, to be replaced with a simplicity and clarity of colour (possibly more like its original appearance). The designs are streamlined, with detail eliminated. The black leads that divide the colours are reduced in width or taken away, so that the outlines are more decisively a clear contrast of colour rather



than a rhythm of black lines. Drawing is sometimes added, to give the subject physiognomic expression, and the position of details is slightly changed; for example Lipsky gives the 'elder brother' in the *Prodigal Son* window at Bourges some legs to stand on, but in the original glass they are behind cattle and not visible. The delight of these gouaches is the pitch of their colour, both in itself and in its function as narrative. The design retains its gaps and punctuation, and the gestures are as simple as can be. All is moment and action, specific, and exemplary of a crucial episode in the dramatic histories of the Bible. The two pairs of figures in the medallion from Hagenau, *The Meal in the House of Simon the Pharisee*, mirror each other in colour, and are joined by what looks like a curved bridge but is in fact their roof (FIGS. 2, 3). This symmetry emphasises the contrast of hand gestures, of acceptance and of dismissal. It points to the carrying on of the rhythm in an inversion of the 'bridge' at the bottom of the medallion, which shows the physical contact between Christ's bare feet and the hand and hair of the Magdalene as she dries his toes. Seen at a distance, the colour, even on its small scale, has an architecture and clarity which is made more effective by the brilliant tints. Similarly, in *Poor Lazarus* from Bourges, the evident loss of symmetry tells the story visually, as two dogs race out of the rectangle of red that gives a powerful impression of negative space, opposite the figure. It follows from the centralised, geometrical shapes of the medallions that most of the designs take advantage of this potential symmetry, making any difference between the expected reflection on both sides an emphasis on the action.

The connection to Lipsky's abstract paintings is, at its simplest, quite straightforward: areas of pure colour are placed in contrast, and the pitch of the colour is clear and intense (FIG. 4). The colours were named in the pencil copies of the stained glass, but in making them rather stronger than they now appear, Lipsky

FIG. 2:
Pat Lipsky,
*The Meal in the
House of Simon
the Pharisee*
(2003), gouache
44.4 x 38.2 cm.
Private collection.

FIG. 3:
*The Meal in the
House of Simon
the Pharisee*
(c. 1250), stained
glass 67 x 43 cm,
perhaps from the
Convent of the
Madelonnettes,
Hagenau
(Bas-Rhin).
Musée de
L'Oeuvre
Notre-Dame
de Strasbourg.
Photo Musées
de Strasbourg,
A. Plisson.

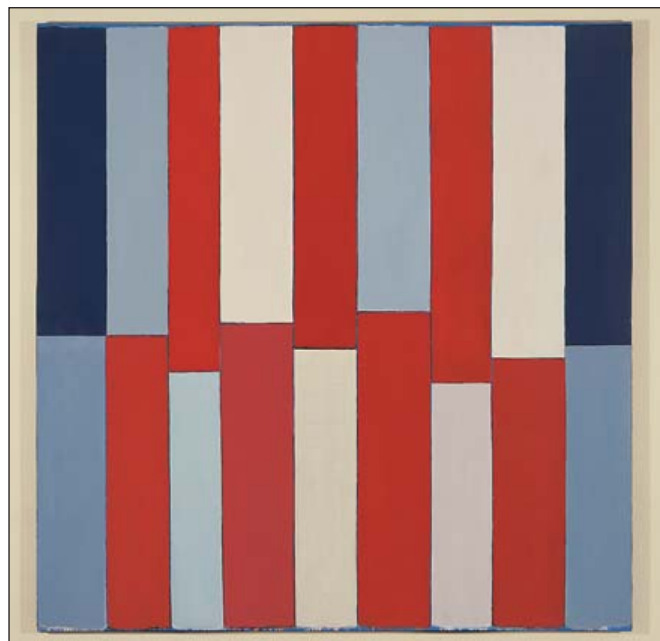


FIG. 4:
Pat Lipsky, *Blue
Border* (2002),
oil on canvas
179.0 x 174.5 cm.
Collection of
Patricia and
Mitchell Udell.

pushes their power of contrast. It does seem that, as with the study of a new language, the vocabulary and personal associations of her range of colour have been extended – although one would not be aware of this if viewing only her abstract paintings. In the exhibitions of gouache copies and abstract oils shown together there must have been a suggestion of the artist's enhanced vision of colour, and a certain clustering of her interest in particular areas of the spectrum. Some abstract paintings were given cathedral titles such as *Bourges* and *Chartres* to indicate a parallel with the glass, and can be seen to have been directed in design and colour by her experience.² But there are further consequences of this association with the art of the Middle Ages.

The medallions and panels were narrative, representing here and there, for example, a political assassination, someone's vision while sleeping, the construction of a castle and a temptation by devils. The four quarters of each medallion sparkle with tension. Artists sometimes create demonstration pictures, making more explicit within the terms of their own vocabulary what their art is really about. In this way, the gouache glass copies point to the simmering activity within the calm and regular spacing of the abstracts. The colour and the design are never quite architecturally equal, and, as Stephen Westfall wrote, 'that undulating horizon draws you into a narrative space.'³ A 'narrative space' within an abstract painting is a paradox. But the stained glass copies suggest the extremes of narrative that could lie behind the absolutely un-particular tensions of lines, colour and space in the abstracts. The pictures relate to the tensions within this world, even though in no way can they be reduced to anything specific. The Mary Magdalene of the glass performs a shockingly sensual act, with a compulsive voluptuousness that precedes a violent death. Yet above her, the attitude of the dinner guests within this scene is emphasised with parallel bands of pure colour. To admire the glass properly, beyond design and narrative, requires an imaginative step back, to long-gone Christian culture of gender, of the law and of the supernatural. The paintings similarly need an input of everyday morality. As Lipsky wrote in a statement for a catalogue: 'I have been trying to make pictures that speak to the present moment, works that clearly and silently question the values I see everywhere.'⁴ This is the same explicit paradox, just as 'silent' and 'clear' are mutually exclusive in the spoken arts.

All of this reveals a potential context of narrative, assumed but hidden. To walk around a cathedral is to have several experiences forced inevitably to attention on a massive scale: the structure and geometry of its building, the commerce of tourism, the current practice of the church in Europe, the deposits of religious belief. The presence of the cathedrals is compelling. But religious belief in itself is a subject nowadays off limits in proper conversation, which further accounts for the embarrassment of visitors to Lipsky's studio at the sight of these

gouaches. A direct revival of the rhetoric of religious art might indeed be embarrassing, and to film in slow motion actors dressed up and re-enacting a *Pietà* by Rogier van der Weyden, in the manner of a Bill Viola, is an affront both to the emotional sincerity of the original as much as to the maturity of fellow visitors to an art gallery. But in even the jolly directness of Lipsky's narrative medallions there is at the least a reminder of the religious building as a sanctuary, and almost certainly a reminder of that feeling of looking at things that have been seen in the same way for a long time, so that our staring echoes that of hundreds of years of predecessors. Cathedrals are not just places to remember the aspirations of an ancient society, and visitors to them are bound to re-play the activities of a common social belief that includes the spiritual.

Many of the first Modernist artists designed stained glass, but, unlike their famous encounter with African carving, the medium was never a trigger. Matisse looked at textiles and Persian miniatures as precedents for his own art, and not, apparently, at the Sainte Chapelle. The avant-garde in France shunned the church since the conservative movement of the 1870s, and even now very few French Gothic Revival churches are listed in tourist guidebooks, despite their prominence. But in Britain, both looking at and writing about Modern art from abroad came earlier than making something equivalent. As a critic rather than an artist, Roger Fry immediately grasped the potential of stained glass as a precedent for the new kind of art, since it seemed to have a direct visual impact through line and colour alone. He struggled, in a lecture given at the close of the first Post-Impressionist exhibition in London (and later published), to explain the manner in which an art could be forceful quite independently of whatever it represented.⁵ It could be 'a music of line and colour' while not being 'representation of actual things at all', for there are paintings that 'speak directly to the imagination through images created... for their fitness to appeal to an imaginative life'. Fry thought the attempt to depict light and shade had become 'a problem', and he went straight against the great example of profundity in subject matter, to point out (perfectly correctly, though ambiguously) that 'colour in Rembrandt, admirable though it is, does not make the same appeal to the imagination as colour in a stained-glass window'.

In addition, he thought that colour could be superior. This new art – something akin to Fauvism, since it worked through 'frank oppositions of colour' – was to Fry an entirely new language, lost since before the Renaissance, which, far from keeping everyday life at a distance, was now on the same plane as 'human inspiration and desire'. The value of Fry's extraordinary prophecy is well known, but his favoured art was not so much a revolution as a recovery of old principles, and he believed that Medieval stained glass had operated in the same way. This comparison was not elaborated, although it remained welcome. The principal exponent of Modernism in Britain in the next generation, Herbert Read, wrote early on in his career an appreciation of English stained glass, and saw the parallel

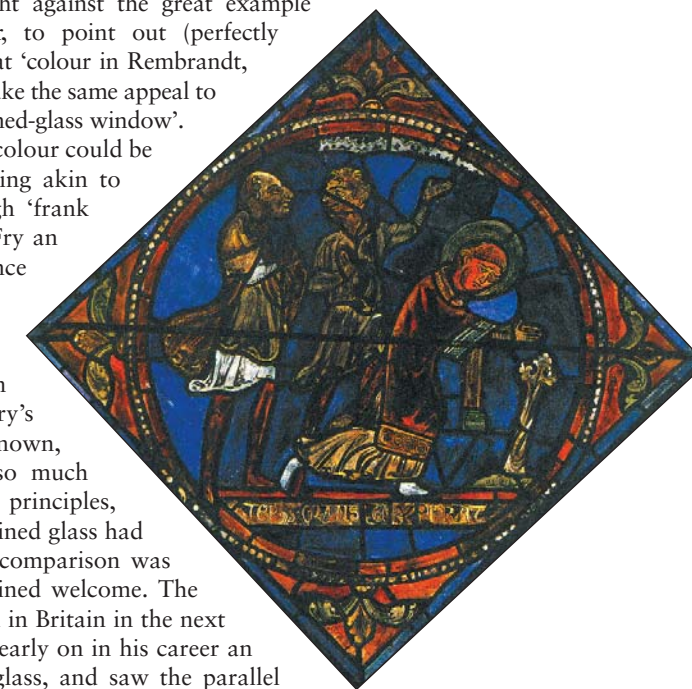


FIG. 5:
John Piper,
*The Martyrdom
of Saint Stephen*
(c.1929), panel
originally in
Salisbury
Cathedral,
now at Grateley,
Hampshire,
watercolour
81.3 x 81.3 cm.
Private collection.
From *John Piper*
(London: Tate
Gallery, 1983),
p. 49.



FIG. 6:
John Piper,
photograph of
font at Cowlam,
Yorkshire
(1936-37).
From *John Piper
in the 1930s,
Abstraction on
the Beach*
(London: Dulwich
Picture Gallery
& Merrell, 2003),
p. 137.

at Grateley in Hampshire (FIG. 5).⁸ Illustrating the martyrdom of St Stephen, the glass had originally been in Salisbury Cathedral, but was moved to this out-of-the-way church and installed in an easily accessible window. Piper's copy was full size, and it is likely that he followed the method of tracing and colouring recommended by a guidebook of 1930 published by the Surrey Archaeological Society.⁹ His drawing was accurate in recording the colour of the weathered glass, making evident its signs of age. In the mid-1930s Piper came to believe that pure colour and design had been, and might become again, a universal language. This was his motivation for moving into a Mondrian-like art of pure colour, and he made plain at the time that his point of departure had been English stained glass. His partner and future wife Myfanwy Evans wrote unambiguously in 1935 that 'Early glass painting... is responsible for Piper's painting, and the display of colour behind and within which there is a constant movement of light and shade'.¹⁰

There is a comparison between London in 1935 and New York in 2000. Lipsky looked at stained glass in the midst of a lifetime of abstract painting, clarifying and tuning its colour to approach that of her own pictures, but nevertheless working in a tradition that had begun in the 1930s. John Piper was one of those at that beginning of abstract art, and had turned to it after his study of stained glass. Their positions were inverted: to study glass after a practice of abstraction, and to study abstraction after stained glass, but in either case this was an understanding both of pure colour and of the implications of a once popular art.

Piper pitched his association of Modern art with an almost lost religious art in terms of their both being a code:

between encouraging the interest in this and in Modern art – the need to avoid the 'distrust or misunderstanding... towards art which is in any sense new' since '... the same attitude is roused by any art which is remote enough'.⁶ He also tried to link old and new arts:

stained glass, which dominates all other arts in this matter of colour, would seem to be particularly fitted for those experiments in abstract design and harmony which have been distinctive of a certain phase of modern art.

It was not until the 1930s that a serious movement of abstract artists in London emerged, as was also the case in America. Once again artists confronted the fundamental problem of understanding the nature of pure colour observed in painting, which appears to be inaccessible to language. But one of these newly abstract artists, John Piper, had already devoted some time to studying Medieval glass in Britain.⁷ He had begun his career in the arts, as he said, as 'a good amateur archaeologist and topographer', which was how he had come to make as one of his first paintings a watercolour copy of a 13th-century stained glass medallion in the church

Neither art nor religion is an individual quality, except in the most petty sense. Each is unworthy of the name unless it is a code, and a recognisable code, within which an individual can function.¹¹

He never suggested anything like a secret religious content – although he soon found religion was a necessity for himself – except insofar as it was a model for a universal and popular access. Similarly, he never saw specific associations with individual colours, nor sought to find hidden figures in abstraction, keeping to himself what can now be seen as his occasional points of departure in life sketching, the golden section and the shapes of musical instruments. There was also an underlying political reference: he was not sure why he could not paint a landscape – 'I put it down sometimes to machines, sometimes to wireless, sometimes to Hitler'.¹² Since they co-opted all meaning, these associations made figurative art impossible for him in the pre-war period. 'There may be a material revolution involving a temporary suppression of such art (Fascism, Communism) before any building-up process can become really useful. Let it in the meantime be useless, and to that extent ideal'.

If the artist in the 1930s had to work independently of a corrupted system of representation, then Piper thought that he or she should work in the short term within the rules of an abstract art, submitting to its system while still being able to make variations within limits. This must not become a cultivated, intellectual kind of art, but should work as a language of its own that could be universally appreciated – 'above all lucid and popular, not in the least "highbrow"' – even though it could not be translated into anything else.¹³ It is clear that for Piper the models of such an art, not just in appearance but in status, were the earliest decorative arts he was finding in local churches, stained glass for colour and primitive sculpture for design. He believed the Saxon fonts he photographed in remote churches were examples of formal design, whether in their patterns or strange figures, and were 'full of meaning for the present day', in 'the work of sculptors like Brancusi, Arp and Moore' (FIG. 6). The value of stained glass for Piper is demonstrated in his own studio photograph of about 1935. He arranged three of his copies of stained glass panels and a reproduction of another, with illustrations of some moderns (Léger, Héliou, Lipchitz, Kandinsky and others), alongside his abstract paintings, drawings and parts of his relief constructions, all of them crowded into a camera view of a corner of his house (FIG. 7). This is a statement-photograph, as if to say: 'the old stained glass, and my new paintings, are equivalents.'



FIG. 7:
John Piper,
photograph
c.1935 of his
studio with
abstract paintings
and copies of
stained glass.
From *John Piper,
A Painter's
Camera* (London:
Tate Gallery,
1987), p. 13.



FIG. 8:
Pat Lipsky, group
of paintings titled
Red River Valley
at Elizabeth
Harris Gallery,
New York, 2004.

The equivalence turned out to last only briefly, perhaps for eighteen months over 1935–36. Piper returned to landscape painting, and then, in his fifties, to begin a spectacular career as a designer of stained glass himself. The link with religious associations found in his rather oblique writing looks like the emergence of an answer to the mystery of painted colour: its power can be readily felt, but what is it actually about? One key is in Piper's notion of a 'code'. He hinted in his writing at the survival of visual allegory within abstract art, and played with its potential to symbolise. He seemed to have felt that this could be read into painting, allowing for a newly effective language to be rediscovered, after temporary political and mechanical blocks were removed. However, the reception of his paintings and his own development suggest that there was no such universal communication for this art. His abstract painting now trails these peculiar universalist associations, acting like labels that connect them with European history in 1935.

These two case studies reveal a leakage from the all-enclosed world of abstract art into another, more extrovert and humanly ticklish kind of art, which might disclose something of the nature of colour in such a pure state. The solution lies in words, and from the beginning of Modernism there has been a forceful wish to associate colour with more direct human thought. This is not the tradition of colour-emotions that had been at the centre of earlier writing about understanding colour, notably Goethe's confusing but revelatory publications of 1791 and later. Modern understanding discovered a link that is more powerful and specific than an overall emotional reaction of a certain kind. One of the first descriptions of the effect of Modern colouring specifically distanced it from the 'voluptuousness and

harmony' of essentially lifeless objects in 'old paintings', and pitched its location in terms of conversation, the power of speech, and of 'something like love'.¹⁴ This was the description by Hugo von Hofmannstahl in 1906–07 of looking at an exhibition of paintings by Van Gogh. The pictures were no abstractions, but Hofmannstahl recorded through his narrator the effect of colour acting independently of any connection with representation:

And now I could, from picture to picture, feel a something, could feel the mingling, the merging of formation, how the innermost life broke forth into colour and how the colours lived one for the sake of the others, and how one, mysteriously powerful, carried all the others; and in all this could sense a heart, the soul of the man who had created it, who with this vision did himself answer the spasms of his own most dreadful doubt.

Colour is seen to act here as its own agent, within a personal space created between people, in the area in which minds react against each other. In Hofmannstahl's narrative, the experience of van Gogh's colour has the effect of transforming his hero's power of conversation, so that against all likelihood he is able to win over his clients at some unattractive business meeting. This story is used to place the new activity of liberated colour within the field of force that acts in direct human relations. Van Gogh's colour lifts off from his subjects. Hofmannstahl reports that his fictional hero finds this effect even in looking at nature, so that on seeing the greys and browns in the sea as an approaching ship cuts its way forward 'the colours of things... have power over me'.

With abstract painting, this floating colour that comes into a dialogue with the viewer initiates a contact that develops into a process. First is the creation of a pictorial space, in a way that has been described by many appreciative critics of Matisse, notably Pierre Schneider and



FIG. 9 (opposite):
Jan van Eyck,
The Annunciation,
(c.1434–36),
oil on canvas
transferred
from panel,
90.2 x 34.1 cm.
Andrew W.
Mellon Collection
1937.1.39,
© Board of
Trustees, National
Gallery of Art,
Washington.

Patrick Heron.¹⁵ The potential of such a space to contain life was encouraged in the paintings Lipsky made soon after her encounters with stained glass, a series of nine with the same abstract design, each titled *Red River Valley* and exhibited in 2004.¹⁶ The vertical shapes of these pictures read subliminally as figures or faces, especially since in these and other works by her there is an odd number of vertical planks, so that one at the centre takes on some sort of compelling individuality. This sustains a prolonged stare only because the colour itself, through overall choice of tint and material, has the quality of 'lift'. But unlike Piper's abstract paintings of the 1930s, there is no underlying wish for allegory. Lipsky's pictures are not related to personal beliefs (which remain unknown and irrelevant), and continue a practice evolved over many years.

In fact, the deadpan resistance to allegory of any kind is an essential part of the experience of this series by Lipsky, but dialogue is nevertheless active on both sides: in the address the viewer gives to the central vertical image and its laterals, whether as reflection of the self or as though towards another person. When exhibited, the *Red River Valley* series was placed around the gallery as a group of nine paintings of almost identical design, but with different permutations of four varied shades of red and blue, and black and white (FIG. 8). Whatever the notional figures in these may be, when seen as a group the pictures interchanged identity, as if a conversation alternated between speakers, each one not quite an inversion of the other, but all involved in the same discussion. The viewer glanced from one to another, each recognisably on the same topic, but further advanced along an endless interrogation. The paintings spoke to each other, around the visitor or maybe including him or her. To look at these paintings together is like staring up at the colour patterns in cathedral windows. The paintings are coloured parts of the gallery wall, solemn, architectural, and in a range of colour already shared with stained glass. In the cathedrals the dialogue occurs between the images in the windows with their strange language, and through them to the source of light or daylight sky beyond.

In the way that the windows communicate back with the visitor they are like the coloured irises of the eyes that radiate light from a face. The light in the cathedral buildings comes as if from a figure turned inside out, where everything concave becomes convex. The congregation lies inside the church like one body beside another, and the visitor wanders in the nave as a disputant circles the figure he or she talks to, in this case in the space determined by the more powerful respondent. Originally, the cathedral building was theologically identified with the Virgin Mary, a relation between figure and building illustrated in some of the first naturalistic paintings. She was depicted as such in Jan Van Eyck's *The Virgin in the Church* (c.1425, Berlin), where she stands on a huge scale holding the infant Christ in the nave of a Gothic cathedral. The Virgin was seen also as the church itself, and the church as the bride of Christ. An *Annunciation* to the Virgin was portrayed by Van Eyck (c.1434, Washington) as enacted within a church, with the holy spirit shining through a window. This now arcane symbolism, remembered through the historical writing of Erwin Panofsky, signifies the beginning of art gallery painting (FIG. 9).¹⁷ The oldest painting in the great public collections is lodged within Panofsky's observation that for Jan van Eyck 'all meaning has assumed the shape of reality; or, to put it the other way, all reality is saturated with meaning'. This reciprocity links effective representation with doctrinal subject, and appears as the motivation behind early Flemish painting and its naturalism. It was said to be the means that enabled the great innovator Van Eyck to paint in such a way, even though the symbolism was disguised so that few could understand it. This symbolic vision gave a point and seriousness to the attempt to make an art of illusion. The

eyes of the abstract artist see liveliness in the glass. In the case of Lipsky, as with us as visitors, the church is a survival from the past, a skeleton only made alive by the colours and wit of the windows. A sense of contact between bodies of differing status, the artist and the image, survives into her studio practice, and the manufacture of each painting in part re-enacts in its gradual accumulation of touches the sight of colours seen from a nave.

This body to body contact within abstract colour paintings opens up a reflection of the viewer's mind. The observation of cathedral windows is an analogy to this experience, where the eyes are met by distant eyes brimful of everyday stories, taking place within a structure of colour. When face to face with paintings such as *Blue Border* (2002), a contact is made, and a new space created in an imaginary volume, like the vectored medium in which conversation takes place (SEE FIG. 4). The viewer feels giddy, and tumbles into this space without handholds but with just those exact reds and greyish colours, and with just that memory of touch and structure. In practice the picture accumulated slowly, the vertical design came first and then the colour added. The painting was studied on a small scale, and on the large canvas Lipsky finalised the horizontal divisions only after the first layer of colouring was begun, raising or lowering it slightly as the tides from above and below approached. A half-finished painting looks like a map where the political borders are not quite certain, but where as soon as one is settled, the others more easily fall into place. There is a play of gestalt forces and of colour association, and the map may stand for territories or terminations or distributions or anything given or taken or agreed or stated, and it is these activities that reward our interest. Each colour is repainted many times, slightly transparently. The divisions and borders have a small but distinct width, retaining a hesitancy, and the turn of the canvas of *Blue Border* reveals unexpectedly a bluish ground and feathered layers of colour. The eye can easily hold the pattern of seven vertical planks, leaving the blue borders of the title as a separate edge. The coloured surfaces are a deposit of successive judgments, and body forward a re-enactment of those decisions. There is a sensuality in this touch, and an entrance to a new world. This world has its rules, of which the syncopated structure of the paintings is a grammar. To lose one's mind within this code is to approach the naked structure of mental relations that govern behaviour between individuals, noted by von Hofmannstahl in the power of conversation within the rules of dialogue. If the observed structure is sufficiently complex, as balanced here in all the variables of layered colour, then the mind constructs an opposing image. The painting is an image with no source, but is a parallel to the experience of staring at stained glass windows, and repeats the moment of creativity that was perceived in this overlap of vision and meaning.

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