

1987 MONDRIAN LECTURE

SHADES OF MEANING – ON THE POSSIBILITY OF COLOR CULTURES

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SIMON SCHAMA

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The Mondrian Lecture was given by the English cultural historian Simon Schama, who works in America, in the Stadsschouwburg in Eindhoven on 19 December. He is known for his recently published book *The Embarrassment of Riches*, a monumental work on art and culture in the Northern Netherlands in the 17th century, which was quite controversial.

Is there such a thing as a cultural history of color? Schama considered this to be a difficult question, as the historical discipline likes to see itself as being colorless, intellectually transparent and objective. Popular historical literature colors history as it likes, and according to the academics this is not a good thing. Schama is not one of these strict historians. On the contrary, he even described himself as being shamelessly subjective.

However, for him the subject of color in art history was also a recalcitrant problem. Of all the elements that compose a painting, color is the least open to any systematic cultural analysis. For example, iconology, the scientific method for interpreting the representation of an art work is based on meanings which lie outside the painting and are related to other historical sources. A formal quality, such as drawing techniques, can also be examined with the help of historical sources on the theory of proportions or perspectives.

However, color is part of the aesthetics of the painted surface, a product of two possible impulses – the naturalist and aesthetic impulses. Neither of these appears to lend itself to historical research. On the one hand, the knowledge of optical perception and the translated illusion of the art of painting appear to be too universal to be influenced by something like taste. On the other hand, the arbitrary aesthetics of color of individual artists are too personal for it to be possible to say anything that is generally applicable about culturally determined choices. Color is an unexplored area in the history of art and culture.

Schama recognized the problems of the historical cultural research into color, but was not put off by them. In this Mondrian Lecture he presented his historical cultural vision of the use of

color in art and architecture. He asked whether there are any color cultures to be identified in western art. If so, are they local systems with their own associations and significances? How did they start, do they still exist, or have they been lost? And if there is a more systematic basis than merely the aim to please the senses, what are the criteria which determine the choice of color?

