

Color-Spots, Form, and Space

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Francis Cunningham

The term color-spot is not in general use among painters or laymen. It refers specifically to a method of painting based on your own looking--what you see from your station-point. The technique was developed in the early decades of the twentieth century by Charles Hawthorne (1872-1930) and taught at his school on Cape Cod. It was developed further and also taught by his former student and principal assistant, Edwin Dickinson (1891-1978).¹

A color-spot is a piece of opaque color. It is an area, large or small, of color-value that has been observed and abstracted from the appearance of nature.² One can specify a great deal more about a color-spot than red, yellow, blue, light, dark, bright, or neutral, when that color-spot is placed adjacent to another with no distracting white of the canvas or underpainted color in between. Then one can make a comparison between the two spots and ask specific questions: is it lighter than its neighbor, or darker? Is it warmer or cooler, brighter and more intense or more neutral? Most important of all for the painter is the question, by how much? The answers to these and similar questions are provided concretely by comparing the color-spots on your canvas with the appearance of nature.

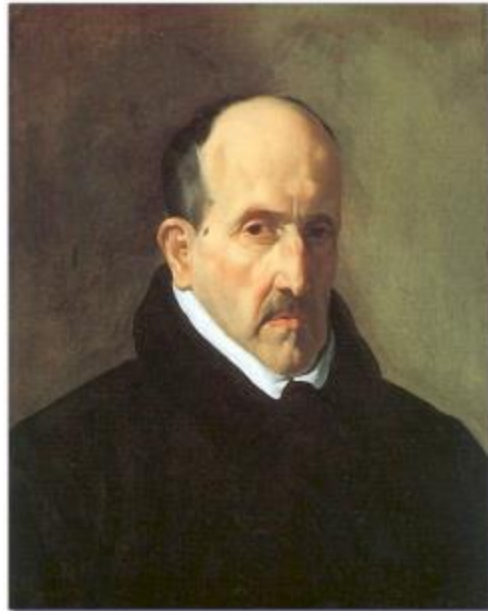
There are color-spot passages in master painting: the light side of Velasquez's head of the poet Luis De Gongora y Argote (1622) is a fine example. So is the light side of Thomas Eakin's head of Letitia Jordan Bacon (1888) in the Brooklyn Museum. If a painter has given over to the eye and applied the paint directly and opaquely in discrete notes of color-value, one may find an example of color-spot painting. But when such instances occur in earlier painting, the passages are no more than that: a color-spot area in an otherwise conceptually controlled canvas. The shadow side of the Velasquez head, the cloak, and background are painted in virtually uniform and monochromatic, thinly painted tones characteristic of Baroque painting conventions. Much of the same simplification and generalization of tones also will be found in Eakin's portraiture, along with the occasional color-spot passage. With Dickinson, by comparison, one will find the entire canvas organized by means of color-spots.

Direct and Indirect Painting

Painting in the material sense consists of putting down color on a flat surface. How is this to be done? When representation has been involved, painting techniques traditionally have made use of an indirect approach to achieve the desired result. Separating the painting process into different aspects, which may be dealt with one at a time, has been and continues to be very useful. In general, first the artist draws, establishing the design of the picture. The forms then may be modeled and made to appear three-dimensional in a monochrome or grisaille. Last of all, color is applied, either directly or by means of repeated glazes and scumbles.

There are many variants. One may set up the neutral tones by underpainting in terre verte (green earth) or by using a red bole ground, as the Neapolitans did. In some techniques, one allows the paint to dry between layers, and in others one works *we-in-wet*. One may construct a painting by roughing in color, usually of a neutral tone, with brush and palette knife, using only rudimentary drawing, building up color over time to the desired final result.

Painters as diverse as Titian and Eakins have worked all or parts of a painting in such a fashion.



Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazques, Luis de Gongora y Argote, 1622. 19 x 16 in. (50.3 x 40.5 cm) Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Maria Antoinette Evans Fund.

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To set all of this method aside and paint the model in sunlight on the beach in Provincetown, not drawing first but laying on paint with a putty or palette knife, taking not what you had been taught for flesh tones, but what you saw, not making an academic or impressionist or pointillist or any other kind of schematic painting--this was revolutionary. This was Hawthorne, as reported by his students.³

There had been direct painting before Hawthorne, work done directly from nature without preliminaries. One thinks of Courbet and Manet. The color-spot technique is different in being oriented not to the objects depicted but to their appearance. One sees this difference most clearly in a comparison with Dickinson. With Manet you always know what you are looking at: a boy blowing a bubble, a bowl of raspberries, the Kearsarge off Le Havre. With Dickinson it is the unexpectedness of looking; often you do not know what you are looking at. In his canvases you move in and out of recognition, both in the landscape premier coup completed in one session and in paintings on which he worked for up to ten years. To my knowledge, never in the history of art has there been a painter who has given such prominence to perception; to accepting and examining the unordered chaos of sight and the unnamable color we actually see.

It helps to recall that Courbet, Manet, and their nineteenth-century fellow painters in Europe and America came out of a superb academic training. So did Hawthorne and Dickinson, as Dickinson's academic early drawings attest. This training was object-oriented, centered on how to draw the human figure and how to compose groups of figures. One might also note that there are many quotations and returns to the past in Courbet and Manet, as there are with their academic colleagues.

Color-spot painting sets aside all of this training and knowledge for one specific purpose: to train the eye to see, by means of paint on the canvas. Setting aside knowledge is a crucial step in freeing the eye, but color-spot painting is not antithetical to any of the methods or techniques of indirect painting. Nor is it incompatible with anatomy, perspective, geometry, form theory, or any of the conceptual concerns of painting. It is a specific discipline and technique by which one detaches oneself from preconceptions about the appearance of nature. This accomplished, color-spot painting takes its place as one of the artist's tools in making a work of art. It should be considered a visual tool, not a style of painting.

The Color-Spot Technique

Place yourself as a student in the Edwin Dickinson class. Assume you have a 16" x 20" canvas; the model is posing in a set-up made unusual by taborets (studio boxes on which the palette rests), overturned stools, and drapery so that the model and set-up are interwoven (as contrasted with the model being isolated against a plain background). Using your finder and making its aperture conform to the proportions of your canvas, you select a composition at nearly a life-size scale, with about 50% of your canvas given to the figure and remaining area made up of drapery, parts of boxes and stools, and the space of the room behind.⁴ You take parts of objects and parts of the figure for the sake of contrast in shape and color and in order to work with the appearance of nature on a near life-size scale. When scale is reduced, too many half-tones are given up; when scale is over life-size, you are forced to invent. What you are after is training your eye so that it can work, one-to-one, with the shapes of color-value before you in nature.

The world is three-dimensional, but the surface of your canvas is flat, and you will have to abstract shapes of color-value from this three-dimensional world that can be placed flat upon your canvas. What you see through the finder, with this in mind, will be enormously surprising for you won't discover lines around the shapes--lines that separate eye from cheekbone, hair from skin, head from background. But you will see, if you look through the finder with innocence and lack of expectation, star-shapes, curving shapes, figure sevens, and other unnamable shapes of light and dark color-value, bounded by hard edges and soft edges. These shapes are measurable, made up of arcs, angles, and proportional widths for heights. Taking into account relative scale, these measurements are transferable in their flat, two-dimensional properties directly onto your canvas.

When you squint at nature, you will find that what you see reduces to three or four big areas of color-value. These are color-spots. These large areas often will run across the borders of the objects that compose them, encompassing the objects within a larger visual pattern. For example, the shadow side of an arm or leg may appear closer in color-value to the neighboring background than to its own light side. Open your eyes a little and you will see that in these large areas there are other areas of lighter or darker color-value--more color-spots--and you will soon discover that you had better continue to use the squint as a tool: now with your eyes open in order to take in the color, now squinting. You squint because if you make these secondary areas too light or too dark, which you will if you peer at them with your eyes wide open, you will destroy the great unity of the initial color-spots.

You are looking for the few large, simple, and controlling color-spots before you begin to paint. We called these "premise spots," for they establish the governing premise notes of your painting. You will carry out your painting in reference to them. Dickinson said that he would plan a premier coup (a painting completed in one session) with up to thirty color-spots before beginning to paint, but that takes practice.⁵

You will approach these color-spots with a few simple facts in mind: the paint must go on thick enough to cover the white of the canvas, but not so thick that you can't get back into it. This allows you to judge your color-values without interference from the white of the canvas. You will continually be looking back and forth between nature and the color that you are mixing with your palette knives on your palette. You will place the color-spots adjacent to each other without the white of the canvas in-between so that you can see and judge their relationship to each other. You will aim to hit the mark with your color-spots, and not go back (or go back as little as possible) thereby dragging one color-value into another, destroying the integrity of the spot. Each piece of paint represents a judgment, which should be made under the press of high excitement. If you miss, scrape the note off with a palette knife and get it right. If it is a premier coup and you are down to the last half-hour and it isn't right, scrape down what is less than your best and get it right. Make something to hang in the Metropolitan Museum. Make something beautiful.

With time and practice, you will come to see hundreds of color-spots in the modeling of a leg, or a vase, where at first you saw only two, or three, or four. But you will by then know how to squint and relate these half-tones to the few great color-spots that control not just the individual areas, but the entire painting.

You can see what a visual and painterly approach this is--different from older, traditional methods of drawing and coloring-in, but also different from covering the canvas with large areas of general tone in the first few minutes of work, whether you let the paint dry before continuing or whether you go on working, wet-in-wet. Color-spot painting brings into play from the start a degree of visual precision not found in other techniques.

In the Dickinson class, we devoted about five minutes to setting up a painting. The first three were given over to looking and planning, finder in hand. Then with a half-dozen lines we swiftly drew, dividing the surface of the canvas and establishing the posture of the principal shapes.⁶ These initial lines, geometric in character and drawn from the appearance of nature, allowed for no small thoughts and no detail. We made these lines strike the edges of the canvas, which we regarded as the first four lines of the composition, thereby dividing the canvas into major areas. This initial drawing served as a scaffold for the work to come, and might be accomplished with the side of the tip of your little finger in neutral paint. We continued throughout the painting drawing with shapes of color-value--color-spots--designs within designs emerging as the painting developed. In the color-spot technique, drawing and painting are thought of as one and the same, not as stages in the work process, separate from one another.

How interesting the pieces of paint and how right they feel when you "hit the notes," for these notes have been truly seen. Now you will discover that color-spots on your flat canvas evoke a visual, tactile enjoyment and communicate sensations of form, space, and light. Unsought, the three-dimensional world has appeared. This is your reward, and it has happened out of your own looking and detachment from any preconceptions about the objects you are looking at or how they should be painted. The experience is exhilarating. In addition, you will find rhythms and movements that you never would have dreamed of if you had started with a wire outline around everything and a preconceived idea of their color. Your color will appear strange, refined, unexpected, and beautiful.

Both Dickinson and Hawthorne advised their students to look at nature as if it were already a painting. This takes training. You must look at the chaotic three-dimensional world with a built-in plumb line and finder, seeing it with complete detachment, as flat shapes of color-value while simultaneously responding emotionally to the form, space and visual content of

what you are looking at. No aspect of painting is excluded in the color-spot process. If desired, conceptual elements such as perspective and form theory may enter into the process.



Edwin Dickinson, Self-Portrait, 1949. Oil on canvas, 23 x 20 1/8 in. National Academy of Design, New York.
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If you look at Dickinson's paintings and drawings you will see all of this exemplified and you will see how visual and detached from preconception his looking is. Take Dickinson's 1949 self-portrait at the National Academy of Design and with a sheet of cardboard block off everything except a thin strip at the right leaving exposed about one-eighth of the width of the painting.⁷ You will see, not the ceiling and wall, with an ellipse and a perspective drawing of a square on the wall, but a dark shape of shadow at the top and an unnamable yellow-gray soft shape beneath--the wall proper--full of delicate, airy color. Continue moving the cardboard vertically across the reproduction and then do the same on the horizontal. Every time you stop you will see a new composition, harmonious and unexpected. You will see, not the painter's smock and his head, but an abstracted architecture of shapes and color-value. Squint at the reproduction and you will see the big, controlling color-spots. Look within them and you will find a miracle of half-tones, unexpected notes, and here and there bravura paint-handling. This exercise will help you see the nature. You yourself may come to look at nature differently.

Very few of us learn to go past the identifying of objects to discover what is there for the eye to see. Dickinson's paintings literally open up a world.

The organization of the entire painted surface by means of color-spots will also be found in Dickinson's invented paintings. If you place a piece of cardboard on a reproduction of *Ruin at Daphne* (make sure it is a large reproduction) and duplicate the self-portrait exercise, you will see unexpected designs within designs and a compositional complexity not found in object-oriented painting. That is because in Dickinson's painting, the shapes have been

thought of as shapes and the color-values as color-values. Whether painted from nature or from invention, the component areas of the surface of the canvas have been seen as concrete shapes of color-value--color-spots--in visual relationship to each other. In Dickinson's painting these shapes have a compositional life of their own, independent of the objects depicted.

Form and Space

Color-spots create sensation of three-dimensional form and space in a way not possible in earlier painting. That is because, rather than creating these sensations through a simplified and conventional schema, color-spots bring into play the entire range of paintings color-value possibilities. By contrast, form theory, developed in the Florentine fifteenth century and still in practice today, simplifies the rendering of form into a relatively few values: it is where these values are placed that counts.⁸ Color is secondary to modeling. Drawing is the principal agent for creating form. Observed color is not part of the process. Clarity of form is the object.

In Western art, the devices for creating space have been schematic. Perspective simplifies the appearance of nature by assuming verticals to be vertical, the horizon line to be horizontal and vanishing points to be kept far apart, thereby avoiding distortion of the objects rendered. The perspective grid, crucial to European painting, is a formal, intellectually controlled means of measure. Overlapping and changes of scale, value, and hue also are used schematically to make space intelligible. The use of color for the creation of space has been conventional, such as the graying, lightening, and softening of colors as they recede into distance.

Color-spot painting does not deny the validity of any of these forms-giving or spatial devices, but it is independent of them all. Color-spot painting creates sensations of form and space by doing something none of these other means accomplish: it duplicates relationships the eye sees in nature, one-to-one.

The human eye is extraordinary. It can perceive across a valley three miles distant the difference between the cool green of a stand of white ash trees and the warmer yellow-greens of a stand of maples. The ability of the human eye to discern such distinctions of tone, to discriminate so finely the differences in color-value in objects such as the human body a few feet from you, or across the valley, is precisely what color-spot painting takes up. The entire vocabulary of painting is enriched in this technique, whether the artist seeks form and space or something else.

In nature these color-spots lie on the form of the model you are painting and articulate the anatomy, just as they lie on the planes you see in space. The painter Sheridan Lord said he gave clues every three feet into the space of his picture. When Lord painted a continuous surface such as a field, these clues appear as subtly discrete pieces of color-value on the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. It takes time viewing a painting to see these notes, but the reward is an exploration of space. Lord's Long Island landscapes communicate space with extraordinary power.

It takes time, also, for the eye to take in the color-spots in a painting of the human figure. It takes time to see the designs within designs, to move around the planes of the body, going behind their flat depiction to sense the three-dimensional reality of what is hidden from sight. The color-spots will define the planes of the body's forms, suggesting the

unseen, communicating anatomy, light, and movement. Whether painter or viewer, one explores these forms with the same diligence one explores space.

Where to View the Painting

Color-spot painting may present, initially, problems for the viewer. First, there is not a smooth and continuous surface, as in a Raphael or an Ingres, but instead, you see pieces of paint, which will blend in the eye at a distance from the painting to create the sense of a continuous surface. We are used to pieces of paint creating a sense of light or movement, but not, I believe, form and space. The color-spot is like a visual computer byte. Each color-spot contains specific information about how light for how dark, how warm for how cool, and so on. We are not used to moving back from the canvas and seeing fingers and toes precisely rendered in this way, and seeing everything in a painting including linear drawing, in terms of the visual relationships of color-spots. In color-spot painting, the quality of line must be read at a distance, for you will see on close examination that lines are made up of minute color-spots. This we do not expect or find in classical painting.

The most perplexing problem for the viewer is knowing where to stand to look at the painting or drawing. If you give any painting or drawing sufficient time, it will tell you where and how it wants to be seen. We are accustomed to a single most advantageous position, usually quite close up; we are not used to looking at the drawing from across the room or a painting from sixty feet away. With color-spot painting, you must stand back and view it from different angles and distances. Unlike classical painting of the past, you are not locked into a single station point or an ideal place to view the picture. You must move around if you are going to experience sensations of form and space, now moving up, now moving back, now viewing the picture obliquely from one angle and one distance, and now from another. Ideally, the painting should be placed away from the wall so that you can experience it in a continuum of space that is behind and in front of it--a space that includes yourself as you move about. With color-spot painting, these changes of position stimulate the eye to perceive sensations of form and space. These changes of position on your part duplicate the way we experience form and space in life. One takes in the painting as one takes in an object or a view in life--through movement.

I have found that a life-size nude or still life objects can be seen from a distance of one hundred feet or more, a distance at which the actual forms themselves would be unreadable. (See illustration, *Man Walking*.) That is because, when form theory is put into practice, in conjunction with color spots, whatever confuses the form in nature is left out. In the painting, form has been built with color-spots taken from sight but screened in accordance with form theory. This means not only is form experienced more powerfully than it would be in nature, but, depending on the artist, more than in earlier methods of painting not making use of observed color-spots. Florentine painting itself cannot be read from such a distance, nor can seventeenth-century painting or nineteenth-century painting, done directly from life. The reason is that none of them, with the exception of minor passages, call into play the visual stimulus of color-spots and their one-to-one relationship to observed nature.

Similarly, the space in a small premier coup landscape can be read from across the room or further--sixty feet away. A tonal drawing may be held in the hand or read from across the room because, having established the principal tonal relationships, the eye will read the relative values as representing form and spatial position in the drawing as they do in nature.

Conclusion

Color-spot painting may come into play as a means for any end, including painting in which there are no identifiable objects. There is no such thing as a color-spot style or "look," as with Impressionism or Cubism. The painters who have studied with Hawthorne, Dickinson, or their students have used the technique in a great variety of ways for various and differing purposes. That color-spots can create sensations of form and space has been presented here as a fact to be noted, and made use of.

Form and space, together with light and movement, are conditions of our existence. They have been questioned in the twentieth century. As Robert Motherwell put it: "If the abstraction, the violence, the humanity was valid in Abstract Expressionism, then it cut the ground from every other kind of painting."⁹ Why isn't representation, which creates the illusion of form and space, simply a reversion to a kind of painting our civilization has moved beyond? In the age of the atom, why look to perspective, anatomy, form theory, or any of the concerns of the past?

The answer may be as simple as the fact that drawing, painting and sculpture are peculiarly suited to the ordinariness of human existence. There are human values accessible to representation that are beyond the reach of any other art form. The shades of emotion expressed in the human body are one manifestation, the enjoyment of walking through painted space is another, the values attached to light and to humble still life objects, yet another. No doubt, this is why so much of the world's art has been involved with representation, in one form or another. The revival of such values through the objective experience of looking may be a signal.

When drawing, painting, and sculpture attempt to deal solely with the subatomic or the cosmic, they stand on thin ice. In the expression of subjective states of being, it does not take much to cross the line into the merely symbolic or the merely decorative.

The nude, landscape, and still life today will not look like what was done earlier in this century or in the past. They cannot. The people making drawings, paintings, and sculpture today are living in a different age. But the bodies we have, our minds, emotions, and our human spirit we share with everyone who has ever lived and is to come. We are three-dimensional. We walk and move through space. We possess bones and muscles, and we express our thoughts and feelings through the use of our bodies. Are these universals of the human condition no longer valid subjects for painting? Motherwell was writing in the heat of battle.

This has been a century of flatness, but at the end of it, the battle is over. Abstract painting has opened new areas of expression. Representation in art has been far from the mainstream, but artists continue to look. What we are looking at is a changing world with possibilities opening and tools, old and new. If the current reawakening of representation has the breath of life, it will be an advance in exploration of body, mind, and technique into areas yet to be discovered through paintings yet to be made. Color-spot painting should become a part of this.



Francis Cunningham, *Man Walking*, 1999. Oil on canvas. 72 x 36 in. Collection of the artist.
[Click image for full image view](#)

¹ I am greatly indebted to Mary Ellen Abell for background material on Hawthorne and Dickinson. Her Ph.D. Dissertation, "Edwin Dickinson: His Work, Teaching, and Critical Reception," will be submitted in the spring of 2000 at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

² The word abstraction comes from the Latin "ab traho," meaning to draw from, as in to draw from the appearance of an object the arcs and angles that constitute its shape. In Dickinson's painting and teaching this strict definition applies, both to drawing and to color-value.

³ Mrs. Charles W. Hawthorne compiled Hawthorne on Painting, (New York: Dover Publications, 1960). First published in 1938, the book has remained in print.

⁴ A finder consists of two L's of light cardboard held together by two paper clips. Each L is approximately 1 1/2" wide by 8" long and the L should be cut precisely on the right angle. You make the aperture proportional, how high for how wide, to the dimensions of your canvas. The extraordinary number of possibilities and the emotional impact of your selection only can be discovered through using the finder.

⁵ What distinguishes a premier coup by Dickinson from a sketch, a study, or simply a painting left off after one session is the intent to make a completed work of art of the highest order in a single session of painting, and not go back. Whether for Dickinson or his students this meant intense concentration, beginning with selection of the motif. Failures were scraped off and the canvas used again. Much was learned. A significant proportion of Dickinson's work is *premier coup*.

⁶ Everything has posture: a human being, a tree, a cloud. The plumb-line, which is gravity-the world vertical-measures posture; angular degrees off the world-vertical to the left or to the right, and by how much; whether a knee is to the left or to the right of the pit of the neck, and by how much; and much else. A plumb-line can be made with a section of thread about 20" long and a nail heavy enough to pull the thread taut by gravity. In the Dickinson class we were training our eyes, so that whenever the plumb was used, a linear strike or notation was made first by eye

and only then was it tested against the plumb. In this way, you built the plumb-line into your eye. As reported by Dickinson, Matisse said it took him three years to build the plumb-line into his eye.

⁷ The Dickinson catalogue from his posthumous exhibition at the National Academy of Design in 1982 is available at the academy's bookstore and contains excellent reproductions.

⁸ Form theory is expressly concerned with determining three-dimensions. It is discussed and illustrated by Robert Beverly Hale in *Drawings Lessons from the Great Masters* (New York: Watson-Guipil Publications, 1964). In form theory, a single source of light determines, through light and shade, the front and side of a cube or the circular mass of a sphere. All forms, including those of the human body, are expressed in geometric terms.

⁹ As quoted by Hilton Kramer in a New York Times article, which appeared after Motherwell's death.