

Manifestations and Functions of Grey in 19th-Century Art (Paris, 14-15 Dec 26)

Paris, INHA, Dec 14-15, 2026

Deadline: Jun 15, 2026

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"17 varieties of grey and beyond". Manifestations and Functions of Grey in 19th-Century Art

In a lecture delivered at the Fondation de l'Hermitage in Lausanne in 2019, paleographer, archivist and specialist in colour symbolism Michel Pastoureau confessed that he had "never written about grey" and had "not discussed much about grey", even though there is "a lot to be said": "for a painter," he asserted, "it is the richest of all colours, because it makes all the others come to life." [1]. Indeed, grey has long been considered the most overlooked colour in the chromatic spectrum, both in the history of colours and in colour studies. In ancient times, a few equivalents were known such as "ravus," a yellowish grey, "murinus," first used to describe mice and rats before designating the so-called "mouse-grey," and "cineerus" – literally "ash-coloured." This semantic instability certainly attests to the wide variety of grey shades, but above all underscores the resistance of grey to any attempt at characterization. As highlighted by the recent symposium, "Le gris à l'œuvre. Figures, topiques et poétiques du gris, des camaïeux anciens aux zones grises contemporaines," grey is "aporetic." It is a "limit-colour," "a set of nuances located in hollows, at the edge of colour." [2] Its very status as a "colour" raises some questions: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe reduced it to a "non-colour," [3] that is sometimes taken for gray-brown or brown. Grey is significantly absent from Goethe's chromatic wheel as, according to him, it results from the addition of three "pure" colours, namely blue, red and yellow. In a similar vein, German painter Philipp Otto Runge saw in grey "the cessation of all individuality." [4]. Grey and its wide range of shades thus remain inherently ambiguous, arising not only from the mixture of white and black but also from the blending of colours such as the complementary pair red and green. This chromatic richness was thus reinvested by 19th-century artists - Turner, Delacroix, Whistler, and the Hungarian painter József Rippl-Rónai among them- who delved into its plastic potentialities.

Beyond the aforementioned symposium, a few studies have focused specifically on the manifestations and functions of grey in art. Alongside works on grisaille and its variants, the 2016 volume *Die Farbe Grau* [5] offers a better understanding of the issues surrounding grey and the reflexivity of this ambivalent and mysterious colour. The aim of this symposium is not to conduct a transchronological survey of meanings of grey. Instead, it seeks to examine the unprecedented significance that grey acquired during the "long" nineteenth century, at a time when the so-called "chromatic turn," as coined by Charlotte Ribeyrol, was transforming the entire humanities at the time. From the 1800s onwards, a renewed interest in grey has appeared among Romantic artists, as Gert Theile [8] notably demonstrated. Describing *The Sultan of Morocco and His Entourage*, a painting by Eugène Delacroix first displayed at the 1845 Salon, Charles Baudelaire, after praising

the painter's colourist qualities, focused specifically on grey in this work. The reception of Flemish painting also contributed to this renewed interest in grisaille, that still calls for further studies. The phenomenon is particularly visible in England, where the works of Jan van Eyck were greatly admired, especially by Pre-Raphaelite painters.

Likewise, the renewed attention paid to illuminated manuscripts and books of hours throughout Europe fuelled this attraction to medieval and Renaissance grisailles. Moreover, the development of new media contributed to change the perception of grey during that period. From the eighteenth century onwards, the success of mezzotint engraving in England relied on its ability to render an extensive range of grey tones. Less than a century later, the invention of photography transformed artists' and viewers' relationships with grey: The Whistler Archives at the University of Glasgow still preserve the extensive photography collection from the artist's studio; deeply influenced by this medium, his tonal paintings of the Thames were certainly shaped by the development of photography, while his work itself influenced pictorialist photographers.

Industrial transformations also contributed to darken both rural and urban landscapes, paving the way for a new appreciation of the colour grey. In his diary entry dated 3 January 1903, French art lover and collector Harry Kessler sheds light on Claude Monet's relationship with grey, linking it first to London, a city in which Monet was deeply struck by the presence of smog, that greyish haze which was itself a product of the Industrial Revolution [\[9\]](#).

Bringing together a wide range of methodological approaches (literary studies, art history, conservation and restoration, museum studies, ecocritical art history, cultural studies) and adopting a global perspective, this conference aims to explore the issues and questions raised by the (non)-colour grey in nineteenth-century artistic productions.

Paper proposals are invited to engage with one or several of the following themes, without being restricted to this list. Particular attention will be given to work that brings different media into dialogue, especially through the lens of material studies.

- Environmental issues and ecocritical art history: renewed approaches to landscape, both rural and urban.
- The role of new media and technologies: the emergence of photography, printmaking, the rise of the illustrated press, etc.
- Revival: the rediscovery of grisailles miniatures and books of hours, renewed interest in Flemish painting.
- The role of sculptural models: new debates around the paragone and intermediality issues
- Synaesthesia and dialogue between the arts: literature, painting, music.

The proposal title and abstract (maximum 500 words), accompanied by a short biographical note, must be sent to joy.cador@sciencespo.fr and valette.laura@gmail.com by 15 June 2026. This is an in-person event that will take place in Paris.

Presentations may be given in either English or French, may be accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation, and must not exceed 20 minutes.

Organizing Committee

- Joy Cador, Junior Curator at the Institut national du patrimoine, PhD Candidate in Art History (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne / Sorbonne Université).
- Laura Valette, PhD, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Laboratoire HiCSA

Scientific committee

- Elliot Adam, Associate Professor in Art History, Université de Lille.
- Peter Geimer, Director of DFK - Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art in Paris.
- Sarah Gould, Associate Professor in Art History, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.
- François-René Martin, Professor in Art History, École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris.
- Charlotte Ribeyrol, Professor in 19th century British Literature, Sorbonne Université.
- Pierre Wat, Professor in Art History, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

Partners :

- École doctorale d'histoire de l'art ED 441, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.
- Laboratoire HiCSA (Histoire culturelle et sociale de l'art), Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.
- Unité de recherche VALE - Voix anglophones : littérature et esthétique, Sorbonne Université.

Bibliography

- David BATCHELOR, *The Luminous and the Grey* (London: Reaktion, 2014).
- Magdalena BUSHART, Gregor WEDEKIND (ed.), *Die Farbe Grau* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).
- Hubert DAMISCH, *Théorie du nuage. Pour une histoire de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).
- Georges DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Sentir le grisou* (Paris: éditions de Minuit, 2014).
- Peter GEIMER, *Les Couleurs du passé* (Paris: Éditions Macula, 2023).
- Frances GUERIN, *The Truth is Always Grey: a History of Modernist Painting* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
- Séverine LEPAPE (ed.), *Gravure en clair-obscur. Cranach, Raphaël, Rubens*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Liénart, Louvre éditions, 2018).
- Annie MOLLARD-DESFOUR, *Le Gris* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2015).
- Lelia PACKER, Jennifer SLIWKA (ed.), *Monochrome: painting in black and white*, exhibition catalogue (London: National Gallery Company, 2017).
- Michel PASTOUREAU, "Noir, gris, blanc. Trois couleurs en mutation à la fin du Moyen âge," in Marion BOUDON-MACHUEL, Maurice BROCK et Pascale CHARRON (ed.), *Aux limites de la couleur : monochromie & polychromie dans les arts (1300 – 1650)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).
- Michel PASTOUREAU, « Gris, couleur de l'ombre », paper delivered at Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne, in October 2019 : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CURP0dFyjYo>
- Charlotte RIBEYROL (ed.), *The Colours of the past in Victorian England* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).
- Charlotte RIBEYROL, Matthew WINTERBOTTOM, Madeline HEWISTON (dir.), *Colour revolution : Victorian art, fashion & design*, exhibition catalogue (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2023).
- Alessandra RONETTI, « Chromomentalisme » : psychologies de la couleur et cultures visuelles en France au passage du siècle (1870-1914), PhD Dissertation, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Scuola normale superiore, Pise, 2019.
- Kamini VELLODI, Aron VINEGAR (ed.), *Grey on Grey: At the Threshold of Philosophy and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).
- Alice Muriel WILLIAMSON, *A Woman in Grey* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1898).
- « Le gris à l'œuvre. Figures, topiques et poétiques du gris, des camaïeux anciens aux zones grises contemporaines », symposium, 19-20 November 2025, Paris, EHESS.

[1] « pas souvent [avoir] parlé du gris », alors même qu'il y aurait « beaucoup à dire » : « pour un peintre », affirma-t-il, « c'est la plus riche de toutes les couleurs, car elle fait parler toutes les autres ». Michel PAS-

TOUREAU, « Gris, couleur de l'ombre », paper delivered, 17 October 2019, Lausanne, Fondation de l'Hermitage : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUrP0dFyjYo>

[2] « Le gris à l'œuvre. Figures, topiques et poétiques du gris, des camaïeux anciens aux zones grises contemporaines », symposium, 19-20 November 2025, Paris, EHESS. See the Call for Papers :

<https://www.fabula.org/actualites/128524/le-gris-a-l-oeuvre-figures-topiques-et-poetiques-du-gris.html>

[3] Johann Wolfgang von GOETHE, « Versuch, die Elemente der Farbenlehre zu entdecken », in Johann Wolfgang

von GOETHE, *Zur Farbenlehre* (Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 2003), vol. 2, 83.

[4] Philipp Otto RUNGE, Letter to Goethe, 3 July 1806, in Philipp Otto RUNGE, *Hinterlassene Schriften*, (Hamburg:

Perthes, 1840), vol. 1, 97.

[5] Magdalena BUSHART, Gregor WEDEKIND (ed.), *Die Farbe Grau* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

[6] See Charlotte Ribeyrol's works and the outcomes of the European Research Council CHROMOTOPE, especially Charlotte RIBEYROL, Matthew WINTERBOTTOM, Madeline HEWISTSON (ed.), *Colour Revolution : Victorian Art, Fashion & Design*, exhibition catalogue., Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 2023.

[7] Frances GUERIN, *The Truth is Always Grey: A History of Modernist Painting* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[8] See Gert THEILE, « Grauzone des Realen : Annäherung an eine romantische Farbnuance », in Walter PAPE (ed.), *Die Farben der Romantik. Physik und Physiologie, Kunst und Literatur* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), 191.

[9] COMTE HARRY KESSLER, *Journal. Regards sur l'art et les artistes contemporains, 1889-1937*, edited by Ursel Berger, Julia Drost, Alexandre Kostka, Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, Dominique Lobstein et Philippe Thiébaud, translated by Jean Torrent (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Centre allemand d'histoire de l'art DFK Paris, Institut national d'histoire de l'art. Available online : <https://books.openedition.org/editionsmsh/10918?lang=fr>

Reference:

CFP: Manifestations and Functions of Grey in 19th-Century Art (Paris, 14-15 Dec 26). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 19, 2026 (accessed Apr 20, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52260>>.