

Notes on Ingres' *Odalisque en grisaille*

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Abstract

The Odalisque en Grisaille raises questions about its attribution to Ingres and moreover about the reasons why it was painted. Through analysis of Ingres' reflections on the importance of drawing over colour, this paper proposes a new hypothesis about the nature of the painting: that it could have been a studio exercise executed by the painter with his pupils in order to help them understand the value of monochrome.

Keywords: monochrome, nude, studio practice, chiaroscuro

An important section of Ingres' thoughts concerns the problem of what is most important in art. Ingres' position, which in this sense is strictly classical, is unambiguous in assigning supremacy to drawing, in accordance with the theories that already circulated in the Renaissance and which had led to the dispute between the supporters of the Florentine school of drawing and those of the Venetian school of colour. Ingres' reflections, however, do not constitute a specifically theoretical position but are presented more as a recommendation for studio practice to his students. This is especially the case when he states that drawing is what contributes in the largest proportion to the success of a picture, while what colour brings to a painting is minimal and to some extent superficial: *Dessiner ne veut pas dire simplement reproduire des contours, le dessin ne consiste pas simplement dans le trait: le dessin c'est encore l'expression, la forme intérieure, le plan, le modelé. Voyez ce qui reste après cela! Le dessin comprend les trois quarts et demi de ce qui constitue la peinture. Si j'avais à mettre une enseigne au-dessus de ma porte, j'écrirais: École de dessin, et je suis sûr que je ferais des peintres* (Ingres: 125).

The grisaille version of the *Grande Odalisque* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is particularly interesting in this context. The picture has had varied critical fortune and its authenticity has been questioned more than once. Currently the Metropolitan Museum exhibits the painting in its gallery as a work by Ingres and his studio and dates it to 1824-34. Precisely because of the unusual adoption of grisaille, the work has its own individual appeal and is even celebrated, for example, as 'ultra-modern' and as a model of conceptual art by contemporary artist Kerry James Marshall (2016). Obviously such anachronistic readings, though useful in engaging new generations of museum visitors, are separate from the historical and aesthetic understanding of Ingres' work in general. It should also be mentioned that, at the time of writing, the painting features on the cover of the forthcoming catalogue of an exhibition on 'Monochrome: Painting in Black and White' at the National Gallery in London, curated by Lelia Packer and Jennifer Sliwka.

The literature on the *Odalisque en grisaille* has often focused on the adoption of monochrome (more accurately in this instance a combination of cool grays and warm browns) which is unusual in the work of Ingres. It is well known that Ingres painted many versions of some of his subjects, and Camesasca (1968: 97) identifies other autograph replicas (some of the head alone) of the *Grande Odalisque*, which Ingres himself mentioned (Vigne 1995: 327), but the New York painting seems to be the only extant example of a grisaille copy painted by Ingres. A sensible answer to the question of why Ingres (or his studio assistants) painted the grisaille *Odalisque* is that the work could have been produced as an aid to an engraver in order to make commercially viable engravings (Montiège 2014, p. 40). It was not uncommon in fact for artists to produce monochrome paintings in order to have them copied in engravings, as for example van Dyck did with his series of portraits of men of the *Iconographie*.

In the case of Ingres' *Odalisque*, this is certainly a possible and coherent interpretation which, however, still raises questions on two issues: on the one hand, there is no evidence of an engraving of the work, and on the other hand the relatively large dimensions of the painting do not justify its use as a mere expedient to help the engraver (Marandel 1974: 96-7), given that Ingres was well able to paint in smaller dimensions, which would have been more economically reasonable. It is documented that Ingres painted one *grisaille*, a bust of Caesar, specifically as a model for an engraving by Adolphe Salmon (Ingres: 241), however the rediscovered painting with a portrait of Caesar is in fact in colour (Fiertag 1982). Instead of a large oil painting, Ingres could have painted a detailed watercolor drawing of the *Odalisque* (of the kind that he made of the *Virgil Reading the Aeneid to Augustus, Livia and Octavia*) to be handed over to the engraver. It is also documented that Ingres prepared drawings for engraving of ancient statues when he found himself in financial need in his youth, as the Apollo Lyceus engraved by Félix Massard for *Le Musée français*. In this instance, the painter is a good copyist, but it should be added that he shows extreme skill in the use of the *chiaroscuro* and in the individuality of shadows projected on the background (Betzer 2013).

Instead of a preparatory painting for an engraving, could we consider the *Odalisque en grisaille* as a studio exercise to show that colour is only the last act, but not the most important for the perfection of a picture? The fact that the authenticity of the painting has not been entirely confirmed does not go against this hypothesis, since Ingres could have completed it with the help of students precisely to have them exercise in mastering the *chiaroscuro* technique. With respect to the *Grande Odalisque*, some differences can be found in the setting of the *Odalisque en grisaille*: the most striking is the lack of a mattress and the presence, in the lower right corner, of what looks like an inset bath and the sketch of a fountain spout (Connolly 1972), similar to the one that can be seen in the background of the *Baigneuse Valpinçon*. The fan of peacock feathers is not depicted, but this could be a simplification rather than a variation, as it would had been counterintuitive to convert the vibrant colours of the feathers into monochrome.

The presence of these variations, common to all the replicas by Ingres of his own previous compositions (for example the *Odalisque with the slave*, the *Oedipus*, *Angelica*, *Paolo and Francesca* and the *Valpinçon Bather*), could confirm that, at least in part, the master played a role in painting the Met picture. While some believe that it was a preliminary monochrome study (Marandel 1974), it is more likely that it was painted as a replica with variations (Camesasca 1968: 95). Additionally, what strongly supports the attribution to the painter himself is the fact that he kept the *grisaille* painting until his death and it then remained with his wife (Condon, Cohn and Morgan 193: 96), a sign that in one way or the other it had some sort of personal link, even if it was not entirely by Ingres. The supremacy of drawing in art has been eloquently stated by Ingres, when he says that *le dessin comprend tout, excepté la teinte* (Ingres: 125) and that drawing must be the main activity for an artist: *L'expression en peinture exige une très-grande science du dessin; car l'expression ne peut être bonne si elle n'a été formulée avec une justesse absolue. Ne la saisir qu'à peu près, c'est la manquer; c'est ne représenter (jue des gens faux qui s'étudieraient à contrefaire des sentiments qu'ils n'éprouvent pas. On ne peut parvenir à cette extrême précision que par le plus sûr talent dans le dessin. Aussi les peintres d'expression, parmi les modernes, ont-ils été les plus grands dessinateurs. Voyez Raphaël!* (Ingres: 127).

It must be noted that the work of Raphael is one of the inspirations not only for the turban but also for the pose of the head of the *Grande Odalisque*, with its strong *contrapposto* in relation to the shoulders and a marked shadow on its left side, which are very likely derived from Raphael's portrait of Bindo Altoviti, which Ingres had copied. In Raphael's portrait of the wealthy banker, the treatment of the youthful beauty of the sitter is combined with the intimacy of the pose, which invites a close dialogue with him (Brown and Van Minnem 2005). Ingres seems to have imitated the alluring device of leaving part of the face in strong shadow in order to intensify the gaze of the odalisque and to enhance the invitation to enter her voluptuous world. If we consider that the painting was commissioned as a pendant to Ingres' now lost *Dormeuse de Naples*, it is striking to compare the attitude of the odalisque, with her direct and active gaze, to the more traditionally passive depiction of the *Dormeuse*, whose closed eyes impeded any connection with the viewer and reduced her to a more conventional and voyeuristic object of desire. The versions of the *Grande Odalisque* are also very poignant as examples of the anatomical distortion often adopted by Ingres, which caused much criticism during his life and appealed instead to the avant-garde. In particular it can be said that the construction of the body, with high waist and sloping shoulders, has more to do with the early XIX century fashion than with the classical beauty of a Greek statue (Koda 2010, pp. 104-105).

Clinical studies, moreover, seem to confirm the criticism that the painter exaggerated the size of the pelvis of the figure in relation to the head, as if it had more vertebrae than normal, possibly in order to enhance its sexual magnetism (Maigne, Chatellier, Norlöf 2004: 344).

The appeal of the *Grisaille Odalisque* lies both in its sensuous subject and in its monochrome execution. Nudes in monochrome are not uncommon in the Neoclassical period, but they usually have a decorative function as trompe-l'œil bas-reliefs or statues, in accordance with the aesthetic preference for statuary. Decorative monochrome figuration on a grand scale can be found in some Neoclassical *papiers-peints* such as the *Psyche* series produced by Dufour after designs by Merry-Joseph Blondel and Louis Lafitte. In this case the decoration is not intended to imitate statuary, however the effect of the papier peint is more akin to fresco, due to the woodblock printing process. The *Odalisque en grisaille* stands apart from these other Neoclassical examples for the fineness of its execution, without visible brushstrokes and as a perfected work of art, in the tradition of the Renaissance grisaille paintings like the frescoes in the Chioostro dello Scalzo in Florence by Andrea Del Sarto, an artist whom Ingres highly appreciated: *Les fresques d'Andréa del Sarto à Florence sont bien décidément, suivant moi, ce qu'on peut voir de plus complet dans la peinture d'histoire après les œuvres de Raphaël* (Ingres 135).

It is unlikely that Ingres prepared the grisaille with the intention of painting over it with *velature*, as this traditional method does not seem to have been adopted by Ingres, who in his sketches shows that his method is often to work *alla prima*, that is preparing the various mixtures of pigments in advance and using the different hues from the outset. This is visible, for example, in the painted sketches of the *Martyre de saint Symphorien* and in other preparatory paintings for bigger works. In conclusion, the Met odalisque could well be a monochrome study for an engraving. However, it is not unlikely, considering Ingres' ideas on drawing and colour, that the use of grisaille for a replica of one of his most successful paintings was conceived as a pedagogical exercise on the importance of *chiaroscuro* over colour in his atelier.

Fig. 1. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Workshop, *Odalisque en Grisaille* (ca. 1824-34), oil on canvas, 32 3/4 x 43 in. (83.2 x 109.2 cm), New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (image under the public domain; source: www.metmuseum.org).



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