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## Green is the Most Difficult Colour

*Art is never chaste.*  
—Picasso

**T**HERE IS NO ABSTRACT ART. *You must always start with something.* He said this more than once and today, as I think of him on my seventy-sixth birthday, which also happens to be the opening of yet another retrospective of his work, I do so in terms of many *somethings*. I recall him in particulars, and it surprises me still, how being his model—his amusement—even if only for a few short months, marked me.

He also said: *If there was a single truth, you couldn't make a hundred paintings of the same subject.* A hundred women, one man. A hundred truths. No truth at all. And so you start with something. One woman, one man.



I had just turned sixteen when I was sent on my first errand to his studio. It was an unseasonably warm Parisian May, the parks verdant with spring, the flourishing trees home to the calls of sparrows, thrush and warblers, blackbirds and nightingales. My father, who had shifted his small art supply business from London to Paris after my mother died the preceding year, had asked me to make a special delivery. He would ordinarily have made this delivery himself, given how important the painter was and that it was the man's first purchase—a substantial one—from my father. But today my father had legal matters regarding my mother's estate to attend to and so asked me to go instead.

"He's a famous artist," he warned. "He could be good for business, so be on your best behaviour. And for God's sake, don't stare at him!" (My father warned me more than once that my direct way of looking at people would one day invite trouble.) "And"—at this point he paused, brushing his eyes up and down me with an embarrassed flicker—"be careful."

He cautioned me a lot in those days. Perhaps it was only his role now as dual parent, both mother and father, that made him so attentive to my behaviour, but perhaps he sensed my growing need for adventure. My headstrong character he already knew.



When the short, deeply tanned man opened the door, I couldn't help staring. He was wearing only black shorts which revealed his muscular body, strong shapely legs. He was compact in that tightly packed way that hints at tremendous energy. His chest was covered with salt-and-pepper curls. The top of his head was bald, the white hair on each side cropped short. His face reminded me of an African mask I had seen in one of my father's history books. The roundness of the face, the almost chiselled quality of the features, the cheek lines deeply gouged. The dark magus eyes prominent and intense.

He stood in the doorway, a serious jester, imposing yet oddly open. In his right hand he balanced a paintbrush between thumb and forefinger as if it were a cigarette. His small hands boasted neatly manicured nails and were not at all paint-stained.

He stared back. We were both bold, I fuelled by innocence, he by its opposite. I was tall for my age and fair, my adolescent awkwardness camouflaged by an unapologetic, unflagging curiosity. Even back then, I looked life in the eye. I must have been a surprise to him though, the blonde hair, the summery green dress, the bright cherry earrings (my favourites). He probably wondered how I could carry the heavy wooden box of paints up the stairs, and took it immediately from my hands. I must have looked in need of a rest for he invited me in and poured us each a glass of water. Then he began checking the paints one by one. He paused at some of them; when he said their names, they sounded like poetry. Alizarin crimson, cadmium yellow, cobalt blue, French ultramarine, rose madder genuine, dragon's blood, raw sienna, Winsor green.

"Green," he said as he unwrapped a tube of veridian, "is the most difficult colour. Many variations, hard to mix. It needs a little red to warm it up, bring out its possibilities. Take the colour of your dress, for instance. It has red in it." He pointed toward the corner. "Or look at that greenheart branch over there. Look at what a pale, yellowish green it is. Yes, that would not be an easy one."

Perhaps that's what he saw most clearly as I stood there in his studio for the first time: the challenge of green. He looked up suddenly and asked if I would sit for him.



I remember it well, that first sitting, more than I remember any of the others that followed.

There was no music so he created his own, danced at the centre of the room crowded with canvases and exotic debris. Outside, the world was the world, busy with its private and public wars. There, in that bright windowed space, there was only a small Spanish man with a self as big as Spain. A country of contrasts, intense lights and darks, sun and shadow, the comic and the tragic daily intertwined. I sat in my difficult green dress watching him preside with impish nonchalance over the cavernous room in whose every corner lurked unexpected riches: oddly shaped bottles, musical instruments, discarded metal, old tools. With the amused benevolence of a man who has just outwitted someone, he held up piece after piece of accumulated bounty for my inspection. A shard of glass. Such a spectacular red! A snail's shell. Such wonderful intricacy! An old pocket watch. A miracle, that such a little box could contain so much time.

The child in him seduced the child in me.



He worked fast, could finish a portrait in a day if he felt like it, but he did not finish my portrait, not for many weeks. He would keep adding to it, deleting from it, altering it in both large and small ways. In the meantime, he drew me over and over, made dozens of sketches, none of which seemed to satisfy him. I still wonder what happened to all these, for I never once saw him discard anything he created. I suspect now that the drawings were merely excuses to have me come to the studio whenever he wanted me there. Whenever he wanted me.

He had visitors on many afternoons, and he loved to put people on, especially those he suspected of riding on the coat-tails of his celebrity. Over-zealous journalists were always fair game. He had gone so far as to acquire a matador outfit, but that was only one of his disguises. Sometimes he appeared in a black cape, a white Stetson, or a lime terry robe with matching slippers. For one female magazine writer, he donned a horizontally striped undershirt and white boxers. My own favourite was the plastic nose with the attached horn-rimmed glasses. I saw him conduct an entire interview once wearing this partial mask. *It is not what the artist does that counts, but what he is*, I heard him say. An ingenuous remark, I now realize, but profound to me then. Much later I came to learn as I modelled for others, some almost as famous as he, that what the artist *is* infuses what he does.

His dealer once called him *incorrigible*. I remember that because I had no idea what it meant and had to look it up. I wondered if you could learn to be incorrigible. It seemed an eminently desirable trait.



*Everything. Passion.* Two powerful words. He said he never looked for a subject because everything was his subject. His whole life was his passion. *I paint just as I breathe.* He loved colour for its own sake. Harlequins, the beach, Cézanne's apples, children (as long as they didn't interrupt his work). Scorpions because they were his zodiac sign and therefore a positive omen. Birds, animals, Barcelona brothels. The vitality of the philodendron. Solitude but also the noise and dust of the bullfight. He even loved his own restlessness. And women, of course. Women, intricate as clocks, fascinating as flowers. What he liked was to test, tease, cajole, coerce—to prod emotion from them the way a schoolboy prods spasms from an earthworm. When he was fourteen, he completed a portrait of his aunt in one hour. He made Gertrude Stein sit over eighty times for hers.

He painted impulsively, intuitively, caressing, stroking, lashing out. He painted with his whole being, all the while embracing disorder. He considered disorder a fertile breeding ground for ideas. He believed that objects would attract more attention if not assigned a specific place, made me sit in different places in his studio each time I came. Once he even hung a picture crookedly so it would look out of place, force people into noticing it. *A picture lives only through him who looks at it.* OJO, he would write on envelopes, parcels, books. Eye. Pay heed. More than anything else, he taught me how to see.

There were things that bothered him, of course. Rain, haircuts, thin women, travelling by plane, religious ceremonies. And blindness, his greatest fear. He also resisted discussing aesthetics. I heard a story once about three young Germans who visited his studio and asked him to explain his theory of art. He pulled a revolver from his pocket and fired several shots into the air. The Germans fled, wordless.

*To displace. To put eyes between the legs, or sex organs on the face. To contradict. To show one eye full face and one in profile. My painting is a series of non sequiturs.* He held the oppositions in himself in a precarious and complex balance. He was a violent, funny man, one who loved the sun but preferred to paint at night.

He liked his women light so they could shine against his darkness. Women, like flowers, had their seasons. He enjoyed watching them open into full bloom, and then he picked the petals one by one, delicately pulled

off the leaves. Finally, he would break the stem, not always intentionally. He was as reckless in his relationships as he was in his art. *Academic training in beauty is a sham. Art is not the application of a canon of beauty but what the instinct and the brain can conceive beyond any canon. When we love a woman we don't start measuring her limbs. We love with our desires—although everything has been done to try and apply a canon even to love.* Cannon, he should have said, for there was violence in his love.



He liked opening boxes just to see what was in them, especially if they were gifts, wrapped and ribboned. He attacked them with the insatiable, excited curiosity of a child.

I gave him a box once, as a gift. I had acquired an unexpected streak of creativity in his company. It was near the end of our months together when I sensed I was being replaced, that his interest had shifted. I built him a suffering machine, a machine that suffered, for that is what he called women when he had had enough of them. I carefully took apart one of my old dolls—she had blonde curls and blue eyes that closed when she was laid flat—and reconstructed her. By the time I was finished, the doll had lost any semblance of her initial humanity. I had interchanged her legs and arms, cut her hair into a spiky bush, glued her eyes shut. She suffered, and obviously.

I hoped he would be angry when he opened the box, but he wasn't. He laughed, and drilled me with those masterful eyes. Made holes. Continued laughing. I couldn't bear the humiliation of his delight. And then, in one of his sudden shifts, he softened, and was a lover once again. Embraced me tenderly, patted my head as if I were a little girl, slipped his hand between my legs, soothing, caressing. Praised me for what he called my fierce precociousness.

I overheard him, not long after he had first met me, telling the art dealer Kahnweiler: "That hair, that skin. I will paint her. I will show her to herself." To which Kahnweiler said: "She will hate you for it." *With me, a picture is a sum of destructions. I make a picture, and proceed to destroy it. But in the end nothing is lost; the red I have removed from one part shows up in another.*

Sometimes when I sat there hour after hour watching him watching me I felt hedged in, confined by his vision. I was nothing more than a reflection in his eyes. If he closed them, I would cease to exist. And yet, I did not grow jaded. In my stillness there was invisible movement. Spiritual photosynthesis. He did not know it, but I was absorbing his power.

*I order things in accordance with my passions. What a sad thing for a painter who loves blondes but denies himself the pleasure of putting them in his picture because they don't go well with the basket of fruit! I put in my pictures everything I like. So much the worse for the things—they have to get along with one another.* His entire personal universe operated as if it were a painting into which he threw disparate elements just to see what they might do. People, places, objects in huge accidental configurations of disarray. To him, a pleasing emotionally incendiary chaos. To others, a disaster.

It wasn't long after the doll incident that he introduced me to his new mistress.

*We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.* The painting he did of me no longer exists. I know this because I destroyed it during my last afternoon at his studio. Slashed it to shreds with his sharpest canvas cutter. Hated him at that moment, as Kahnweiler had predicted I would. I still remember the clock parts entwined with snail shells in the background, my hardly recognizable face, one eye full-face, one in profile, and the green dress, the green not quite exact. And what I remember most clearly is the touch of red near the heart.