

Perspective

actualité en histoire de l'art

Darkness, no. 2023–1

Issue coordinated with Kavita Singh (Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of Arts & Aesthetics)



Seu-Nainsukh, *The Powers of Darkness*, Indian miniature, Pahari school, 18th century, gouache on paper, 21 × 31.5 cm. Lucknow, State Museum. © akg-images / Jean-Louis Nou.

As a discipline based on the study of the visible, art history has necessarily to engage with what is illuminated and can be seen. But the opposition of light and shade, in its physical as well as in its symbolic dimensions, also structures human thought. Many myths of creation begin with the emergence of light; banishing darkness is the first step for the development of life and society. Subsequent developments in philosophy and the human sciences—the Enlightenment comes to mind in particular—continue to make the division between light and dark a framework of thought of decisive importance. Thus, consciously or in spite of ourselves, from our origin myths to contemporary positivism, from biblical narratives to the constitution of human sciences as academic disciplines, we are the heirs of a polarisation between darkness and light. Brightness becomes a virtue: clarity, lucidity, brilliance, carry a positive charge while their opposites are associated with negative qualities of obscurity and even evil.

For its 2023 – 1 issue, coordinated with the Indian art historian Kavita Singh, the journal *Perspective* turns towards darkness as a theme to question our largely habitual and reflexive association of light with knowledge, positivity, clarity, and, on the other hand, of darkness with non-knowledge, negativity, obscurity. It invites reflections on the discipline of art history through the prism of shadows. The theme of “darkness in art history” can be elaborated along three axes:

1. We ask: can we, first of all, think of darkness as an entity to be experienced within the visual field? The dark spaces seen by flickering light, in the cave or shrine, is a place where something is secreted. There are the dark corners where unshowable terrors unfold. There are the presences in front of which the eyes must be kept tightly shut. Can we write a history of darkness in art, a grappling with what cannot be shown? And is there also an aesthetics of non-seeing or un-seeing as a heuristic experience, that can be explored? This question is essential, as perception cannot be reduced to visibility, despite the exorbitant—and necessarily reductive—role that has been accorded to it. To what extent have we been, and are we still, in fact, blinded by the light? Indeed, by focusing particularly—by habit, rather than by necessity—on the life of forms, that is to say, on what the visual arts bring to the sight of the societies from which they derive, the discipline has perhaps lost sight of precisely those shadowy zones and the invisible that artists have often sought to grasp.

2. The notion of obscurity can, moreover, allow us to reflect on the blind and dark spots in the history of art. What is it that the discipline is unwilling or unable to see, both from a plastic and a methodological point of view? What does it leave in the shadows, and what has been so invisible to it that not even a Dark Age has been invented to contain it, leaving it entirely obscure? These questions, inviting us to look into art history's own academic unconscious, encourage us to probe and detect the blind spots it creates where it cannot, or will not, look (*L'Inconscient académique*, ed. F. Clément, M. Roca I Escoda, Fr. Schultheis, M. Berdaz, 2006).

3. Finally, the theme of darkness invites us to confront the question of skin colour—dark skins, black skins. Through the months of the pandemic in India, the oximeter became a vital piece of equipment needed in every home. These devices, that read blood oxygen levels by sending out pulses of light and measuring the amount absorbed and the amount returned, could not give accurate readings on dark bodies. In an earlier era, film emulsions too were unable to register contrast on black skin. These technologies of “vision” are calibrated to a “normal” that is white. What of art history's own oximeter readings? How has it seen and registered and contended with or left in the shadows the presence and darkness of people? In *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (2007), Darby English questions the way “black art” is entirely constituted by its “difference”: is blackness thus condemned to represent only blackness? What interpretive frameworks do we use to read race in the arts of the present and the past? How do we deal with the question of obscure dialectics and semantic shifts between colours, tones and moral predicates?

Inviting explorations along these lines, this issue of *Perspective* wishes to ask what it means to look at darkness in art history, but also at the darkness of art history itself. These axes can be approached from a variety of vantage points, provided that the analysis is situated within a historiographical perspective addressing the creation and reception of art from the origins to the present day. For this reason, specific case studies bearing on iconographic analyses will not be accepted unless they raise broader critical questions.

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Published by the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) since 2006, *Perspective* is a biannual journal which aims to bring out the diversity of current research in art history through a constantly evolving approach that is explicitly aware of itself and its own historicity and articulations. It bears witness to the historiographical debates within the field, while remaining in continuous relation with the images and works of art themselves, updating their interpretations, and thus fostering global, intra- and interdisciplinary reflection. The journal publishes scholarly texts which offer innovative perspectives on a given theme. These may be situated within a wide range, yet without ever losing sight of their larger objective: going beyond any given case study in order to interrogate the discipline, its methods, history and limitations, while relating these questions to topical issues from art history and neighboring disciplines that speak to each of us as citizens.

Perspective invites contributors to update their historiographical material and the theoretical questionings from which they draw their work, to think from and around the starting point of a precise question, an assessment that will be considered an epistemological tool rather than a goal in itself. Each article thus calls for a new approach creating links with the great societal and intellectual debates of our time. *Perspective* is conceived as a disciplinary crossroads aiming to encourage dialogue between art history and other fields of research, the humanities in particular, and put into action the “law of the good neighbor” developed by Aby Warburg.

All geographical areas, periods, and media are welcome.

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Editors: Marine Kisiel (INHA) and Matthieu L glise (INHA)

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To the [board composition](#).

Please send your submissions (an abstract of 2,000 to 3,000 characters / 350 to 500 words, a provisional title, a short bibliography on the subject, and a biography of a few lines) to the editorial office (revue-perspective@inha.fr) before **December 13th, 2021**.

Proposals will be examined by the issue’s editorial board regardless of language (articles accepted for publication will be translated by *Perspective*). The authors of the pre-selected proposals will be informed of the board’s decision by **February 2022**.

The complete articles (25,000 or 45,000 characters/ 4,500 or 7,500 words depending on the project) must be submitted by June 1st, 2022. These will be definitively accepted after the journal’s anonymous peer-review process.

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