The Errera Sketchbook and the Landscape Drawing on Grounded Paper

Christopher S. Wood
Yale University

This paper is about a small, puzzling group of chiaroscuro landscape drawings from the time of Hetri met de Bles. “Chiaroscuro” is the term most often used to characterize drawings done with pen or brush on paper coated with an opaque colored ground, and then heightened with white gouache or body color. I will use the term “colored-ground” drawings in order to distinguish them from drawings on tinted paper and from drawings that generate chiaroscuro effects by other means, such as the use of large areas of chalk or wash as a ground for light effects.

The key Netherlandish landscape drawings on colored ground are found in the Errera sketchbook in Brussels. The Errera sketchbook is a bound volume of pen drawings of landscape compositions, trees, mountains, and towns- capes, clearly the product of a single Antwerp painting workshop in the second quarter of the sixteenth century.1

Most of the drawings in the sketchbook are on plain white paper. But about a dozen are done with pen or brush on colored grounds. A good example is p. 29, a horizontal view of trees in a landscape, brushed in gray wash on a light forest-green ground, with leaves in opaque white (Pl. 14).

Otto Benesch linked these sketchbook pages with two further drawings he found on the art market in Vienna: a group of trees now in the Albertina, in black ink and opaque white brushed on a green ground (Fig. 86); and a forest interior in the same technique, last noted in the L. V. Randall Collection in Montreal (Fig. 82). More on these drawings later.

Benesch said that the two drawings he discovered were “undeniably” by the master of the Errera sketchbook. This does not seem so obvious anymore. Benesch was in effect acknowledging the rarity of the technique of bright white-heightened foliage on dark-colored ground within the corpus of Netherlandish drawings. In fact, the closest comparisons in this period are foliage studies from southern Germany and Switzerland, drawings from the orbit of Albrecht Altdorfer, Wolf Huber, and Hans Leu. Benesch even called his artist the Netherlandish counterpart of Altdorfer and Huber. But even the German landscapes on colored ground are curiosities and poorly understood.

In this paper I want to address the following questions: what was the function of the colored-ground landscapes within the Errera sketchbook and generally within Flemish painting practice of the early sixteenth century? And what was the relationship, if any, of these drawings to the German landscapes and studies on colored ground?

Colored-Ground Drawings

Colored-ground drawings traditionally served slightly different purposes from drawings on plain paper.2 The colored ground permitted the draftsman to work out a scale of tonal values ranging from the dark tone of applied ink and wash, through the “middle tone” of the ground, and culminating in the opaque white heightening. The utility of this preexisting middle tone had been recognized since the four-
teenth century, indeed since the very origins of drawing. Cennino Cennini in his Handbooke described the preparation of carte tinte and the application of washes and heightening, promising that this method of drawing would “lead to the art of painting,” or the arte del colorire. The grounds were apparently made of bone, dust, chalk, gypsum, white lead, seashells, or eggshells.

Although Cennini explained how to prepare grounds in many different colors, all the surviving Trecento examples are green, or terra verde. Grounds of varying colors, often very beautiful colors, were used in fifteenth-century Tuscany. The colors of the grounds varied from shop to shop and even within shops, from violet, vermilion, bright pink, and salmon-pink, to yellow, ochre, blue, and the traditional greens. The technique was common in the workshops of Fra Angelico, Benozzo Gozzoli, Domenico Veneziano, Filippo Lippi, Filippino Lippi, Botticelli, Perugino, and Ghirlandaio. By mid-century, the technique had spread from Florence to the north, for example to the Bellini workshop, although in Venice colored grounds soon gave way to blue paper. The technique was also described and recommended by Leonardo in his Treatise on Painting: “To draw objects in relief, painters should stain the surface of the paper with a tint that is medium dark and then put on the darkest shadows, and finally the principal lights in little spots, which are those first lost to the eye at a short distance.”

What colored-ground drawings did best was capture tonal variations and nuances. Accordingly, they served two main functions. First, they were closely associated with paintings, in several possible ways. They were most often used to copy figures and motifs from paintings, in order to record and preserve tonal effects. They were used as project drawings — although not necessarily as cartoons, directly preliminary to execution, but rather as formal presentation drawings, perhaps to give an idea of the projected painting to a patron. (This seems to be the function of some highly finished fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century colored-ground drawings.) Later on, painters used colored ground when they wanted to convey information about the distribution of painterly tone to an artisan in another medium, for example, when a composition was to be transferred to glass, tapestry, and eventually prints (especially when engravings became highly painterly).

The second main function of the colored ground was for life drawing, especially for working out the modeling of the human figure or drapery. Direct studies of rocks or foliage were rarer, especially in the north.

There was in addition a third function for drawings on colored ground which had nothing to do with the painterly properties of the middle tone. It appears that the sheer appeal of the colors and textures of the grounds and the peculiar look of the pen or brush on the dark ground — especially the white heightening — provoked some artists to offer colored-ground drawings as independent works of art, often signed and dated. The Germans in particular made a specialty of this.

Colored ground was not normally used for recording purely linear compositions and motifs, in other words for preserving the overall structures of pictures or the iconographic details. There was little point in using the colored ground unless one were interested in working out problems of light and shade or capturing preexisting, already worked-out solutions. Coating paper with colored grounds was a time-consuming technique, and there was no reason to do it unless there were specific advantages to be gained. Thus I believe a draftsman would nearly always start out on colored ground with the intention of working it up, heightening it, with opaque white gouache. Moreover, a draftsman would not normally have used colored ground to copy a black-and-white drawing, but rather only to copy a painting or another colored-ground drawing. On the other hand, he might well have used black ink on plain paper to copy a colored-ground drawing — as we shall see below in the relationship between the Errera and the Berlin sketchbooks.

The Errera Sketchbook

The Errera sketchbook has always been understood as a unified sheaf of workshop material, almost certainly from Antwerp in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. But scholars have disagreed about the number and identity of the hands involved.

Benesch attributed the sketchbook to the Master of the Female Half-LENGTHS on the basis
of similarities to landscape backgrounds in his paintings. He also linked the sketchbook to a pair of drawings in the Louvre (on ungrounded paper), one of them bearing the name Hans Vereycke on its mount. Hans Vereycke was a Bruges master mentioned by van Mander. Hulin de Loo identified him with Jan van Eeckele, who died in Bruges in 1561. Benesch then brought into the circle the two unattached landscape drawings on grounded paper that he found on the market, attributing the whole group to Hans Vereycke, alias the Master of the Female Half-Lengths.

The first publication of the sketchbook, by P. Bautier in 1912, stressed chiefly the kinship with Patinir. Most scholars have indeed agreed that the sketchbook belongs to Antwerp and not Bruges. Among the other artists proposed as authors of the Errera sketchbook have been Cornelis Massys, Matthijs Cock, the young Lucas van Valekenborch, and most recently Peeter Balens. There have also been a couple of thorough attempts to divide the sketchbook among separate hands. H.G. Franz saw an older hand close to the Louvre “Vereycke” drawings; a second hand of the 1540s or later, closer to Cornelis Massys and the Brunswick Monogrammist; and possibly a third hand. Burton L. Dunbar distinguished Master A of the 1520s or 1530s, from the circle of Quentin Massys; Master B of the 1530s, close to Patinir and the Louvre drawings, possibly Matthijs Cock; and Master C from the 1540s. Somewhat surprisingly, both Franz and Dunbar split up even the subset of sketchbook drawings on colored ground. This shows perhaps how the older connoisseurship relied more heavily on style than on function or technique.

The sketchbook pages are linked to a good number of contemporary Antwerp paintings, with more or less specificity. The older literature tended to assume that the drawings were preparatory studies for future paintings, rather than copies after completed paintings. This is perhaps because if the drawing is assumed to stand in a direct preliminary relationship to a painting, then it can be readily attributed to the master of that painting.

Today it is more generally believed that most workshop drawings of this type are not direct preparatory drawings, but rather copies of compositions and motifs from existing paintings; or else copies of other drawings which themselves record prior paintings. Some of the Errera pages copy woodcut book illustrations. Workshops evidently kept albums or sheaves of such drawings as a kind of pool or stock of pictorial ideas. The collection of drawings was part of the capital of the shop. The drawings were endlessly replicated and handed on from artist to artist. Eventually the motifs and compositions turned up in new paintings. This makes it impossible to use resemblances with paintings as a basis for the attribution of the drawings.

At the 1975 Bruegel exhibition in Berlin, the Errera sketchbook was shown together with the only comparable integral stock of shop drawings, the so-called Berlin sketchbook. In the catalogue, Hans Mielke argued persuasively for a single author for each sketchbook. The Berlin sketchbook is linked to paintings by Herri met de Bles and in particular to the Princeton Read to Calvary. But the Berlin sketchbook drawings, along with a further, loose drawing in Berlin, are posterior to the painting, not projects for it. Luc Serck has carefully established a comparable relationship between Bles and the Errera sketchbook.

The Colored-Ground Drawings in the Errera Sketchbook

Why would the Errera sketchbook draftsman have used colored ground? None of the discussions of the sketchbook treats the drawings on colored ground differently from the drawings on plain paper, except that of Benesch, who linked them with the two loose drawings he discovered in Vienna.

For several pages the answer is obvious: foliage. Page 29 (Pl. i4) is a low-horizoned, close-quarters view of a screen of trees. The trees are fluidly brushed in gray wash and then brilliantly heightened with white gouache. Page 156 is certainly by the same hand (Fig. 83). It is a vertical composition with a castle, a cluster of rural buildings, trees in the foreground, and some small figures in the middle ground, presumably a Procession of the Magi. In this case, the medium is black pen with some gray wash; the rock and castle are heightened with white as well as the two trees in the foreground. The ground is a matte blue.

For Benesch, the heightened foliage in these drawings was “doubtless drawn from nature.”
The trees were "afterwards combined in an imaginary composition, which was executed in pen on the remaining space of the paper."[22] This is extremely unlikely. Very few early sixteenth-century drawings were executed out of doors.[23] But outdoor execution was an article of faith for Benesch and crucial to his understanding of the whole "Hans Vereycke" group (more on this in the discussion of the two loose landscape drawings below).

Page 156 is almost certainly related to a painting. Callatay proposed a direct connection between p. 156 and parts of a Road to Calvary by Cornelis Massys, but not very compellingly.[24] It is not too alarming if we cannot match up all the compositions with existing paintings. Most paintings of the period have perished. And in any case copies like these can be hard to recognize even if the painting exists. The drawings might seize upon a small part of a painting and tear it out of context, or even take a fragment of an existing composition and, in a mixed process of copying and improvisation, transform it into a new composition. So p. 156 serves much the same purpose as most other sheets in the sketchbook — except that the draftsman put a little extra work into the foreground foliage.

Even p. 29 may be based on a painted composition. But if so, all sense of depth and narrativity has been removed, giving the drawing the feel of an independent improvisation. Perhaps the trees here were freely invented. Indeed, it is conceivable that more than one of these stock drawings in the Errera sketchbook — perhaps especially those on colored ground — got converted at the moment of their fabrication into independent exercises. In effect, they move one step away from the prior models and one step closer to a new painting. Foliage stud-
ies would have been most vulnerable to such a process, since precise painterly effects in foliage are harder to hand down intact from drawing to drawing; harder than compositional schemas, which were the chief commodities in such sketchbooks. Each step in the transmission process of a foliage motif would involve corners cut or a little improvisation.

If it is true that there is no point in using the colored ground unless you are going to work it up with heightening, in order to capture or produce tonal effects, then some Errera pages pose real puzzles. On p. 157, the draftsman used a medium bright ground — greener and less smooth than the ground on p. 156 — as a base for another vertical landscape (Fig. 84). In this case there is lots of sensitive foliage in pen and ink, but no white heightening at all. Dunbar called this artist his Master C and considered him the least distinguished of the three hands in the sketchbook. I do not believe that this is an unfinished colored-ground drawing — in other words, that the draftsman was intending to work this up with opaque white but never got around to it. Instead, there is evidence elsewhere in the sketchbook that the artist was just using the green ground as if it were a plain ground. On p. 113 he drew a chapel which is also found on two other pages in the sketchbook attributed by Dunbar to Master B. Evidently, the draftsman of the unheightened colored-ground landscapes just liked the look of the underlying, unnatural color.

Dunbar considered Master C a slightly later artist, working in the 1540s. Under this hypothesis, I suppose, Master C got access to the stock of drawings and simply availed himself of unused, already-prepared pages, without any clear sense of why he was using them. There were in fact several of these unused colored grounds, often on the reverse sides of completed drawings. Page 88 is a plain, solid, rather thick green ground without a single trace of drawing. On the other side, p. 87, is a low-horizon rural scene on a pale, mint green ground (Fig. 85). (Since there is no effort to exploit the peculiar characteristics of the colored ground, this too may have once been an unused page.25) The unused colored grounds are a puzzle. Why would the draftsman of p. 87, if he himself prepared the sheet (or had it prepared for him), have drawn only on the pale side and not on the thick ground? Again it suggests that the sheaf of pages was at some point left incomplete and that a later draftsman came along and filled in some of the pages. There are two other pages in the sketchbook with virtually unused opaque grounds (pp. 99 and 160). And there are only a very few cases of thick opaque grounds that were used: p. 156 (Fig. 83, the vertical landscape with the castle); p. 70, a thick pea green ground with the faintest traces of a village, a cliff, a tree, a human figure; and p. 108, some head studies on a pale but thick green ground. Page 70 looks like a half-hearted attempt by someone who did not really know how to make use of the colored ground. This suggests that he simply came across the sheet of paper and did not prepare it himself.

At least some pages definitely were later experiments. The heads on p. 108, for instance, were not drawn in the sixteenth century at all. An inscription says: “Têtes de Dillens. P.E.,” that is, in the opinion of “P.E.,” or Paul Errera, the former owner of the sketchbook, the heads were by Adolphe Dillens, a nineteenth-century Belgian artist who once owned the sketchbook. Evidently Dillens could not resist trying his hand on the unused ground. It is possible that he was only recapitulating the reaction of one or more sixteenth-century artists when they encountered unused pages like p. 70. There are also faint and decidedly amateurish traces of figures on p. 99.

One weak landscape without heightening on a very pale blue ground (p. 123), however, was copied by the master of the Berlin sketchbook.
This means that not all the pale-ground drawings that fail to exploit the colored ground were later, incompetent experiments.

What all this suggests is simply that the sketchbook is a fairly random collection of material bound together by the legatee of a workshop some years after it had closed. It is not a formal model book assembled by the master himself. That is why some of the pages are left unused and others disfigured by crude or incompetent drawings (perhaps the scribblings of minor characters hanging about the shop, apprentices or beginners; or perhaps the very loosest, most casual jottings of an otherwise competent master). The only real post-workshop additions, then, would be the heads on p. 108 by Dillens.

The Two Loose Landscape Drawings on Colored Ground

The only two Netherlandish colored-ground landscapes not in the sketchbook are the two drawings published by Benesch: the tree study in the Albertina and the forest interior last seen in the Randall Collection in Montreal.

The Albertina drawing, brushed in black ink and white heightening on a green ground, shows a line of trees along a low horizon (Fig. 86). The second drawing, acquired by Benesch for Dr. Arthur Feldmann of Brno, was supposedly done in the same technique (Fig. 82). According to Benesch, it was inscribed with the name of Patinir. Here, too, the draftsman is mostly interested in the optical phenomenon of bright leaves standing out against a darker mass of foliage. There is little attempt to work out spatial relations or compositional structures. In the old photograph, the drawing appears somewhat similar in format and point of view to Errera p. 29 (Pl. 14) and at 11.3 x 17.5 cm is only a little smaller in size. In 1968 the drawing was reportedly in the collection of L. V. Randall in Montreal.

These drawings — like Errera p. 29 — seem so detached from ordinary paintings that Benesch felt sure they were direct studies from nature. An inscription in an old hand on the Albertina drawing reads "von hugo egenen haus," which Benesch interpreted to mean, romantically but not entirely implausibly, "the view from Hugo’s house." Still, I do not think it is completely obvious that the Albertina and Randall drawings were done from life. And again, I think it most unlikely that any of the Errera drawings was done from life. The Albertina and Randall sheets are very possibly by the same master, although it is hard to tell since we know one of them only from old reproductions. In both cases the ground appears to have been applied in a similar fashion, in coarse, random brushstrokes. The drawing on Errera p. 29, meanwhile, is by a different master.
German Landscape Drawings on Colored Ground

To sort out the functional problem even further, it may help to look at the comparable German drawings on colored ground. German workshops used grounded paper quite a lot in the fifteenth century. But the medium became very important in the 1490s and in the first decade of the sixteenth century. Presumably at some point there was influence from Italy, although this connection is not well understood. Dürer used colored grounds for several early silverpoint studies of heads and figures. Later he used colored ground for preparatory studies, both details and entire compositions, for example for the Ober St. Veit altarpiece in 1504-05 or the Heller altarpiece in 1508. (For the Brotherhood of the Rosary altarpiece in Venice, appropriately, Dürer made studies on blue paper, the paper commonly used in Venice.) Dürer also used a green ground for certain unusually fine and finished, perhaps even independent, drawings, such as the Reclining Nude of 1501 or the Green Passion of 1504.

Around 1500 some artists got interested in the possibility of making finished drawings on colored ground that they would sign, date, and, presumably, make public in some fashion. They were perhaps inspired by the strange experiments of the Bavarian painter Mair von Landschut, who in the late 1490s sought to publish his colored-ground drawings in the form of engravings printed on tinted paper and then heightened with white and yellow. The earliest dated colored-ground drawing is the Couple with Death and Amor of 1502 by Bernhard Strigel in Berlin. These underappreciated innovations were followed by several remarkable drawings by Lucas Cranach, Albrecht Altdorfer, and Wolf Huber between 1502 and 1506. The German chiaroscuro woodcut invented by Cranach and Jost de Negker was an attempt to replicate the colored-ground drawing.

In Germany, then, the colored ground drawing broke out of the workshop. Partly because the ground masked the physical support of the drawing and partly because its triple tonality of ground, black pen, and opaque white heightening simulated some of the effects of painting, the colored-ground drawing stood more easily on its own than the ordinary pen drawing. The colored-ground drawing became a collector's item and a proving ground for historical and mythological subject matter. Altdorfer and Baldung made independent colored-ground drawings throughout the 1510s. The medium became especially popular among Swiss artists, such as Urs Graf, Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, and Tobias Stimmer, and among followers of Altdorfer and Huber, such as Augustin Hirschvogel and Hans Lautensack. All this happened at the very moment the technique was falling out of use in Italy.

The Germans also used colored ground throughout this period as a medium for landscape and foliage studies. The German tendency to push drawings toward independence complicates the interpretation of these landscape studies. Drawings that ostensibly preserve motifs from paintings, or rehearse tonal effects, tended to get “finished” by means of stylization, framing devices, and even dating.

An interesting and not untypical case is a landscape drawing in Budapest attributed by Winzinger to Wolf Huber (Fig. 87). The sheet was executed in white and gray on a red-brown ground. The date 1517 is written feebly at the extreme upper margin. For the following reasons I think it is a decapitated 1519. The tree in the drawing is very closely related to a passage in Huber’s painting Christ Taking Leave of His Mother in Vienna, dated 1519. Winzinger considered the drawing a direct preliminary study for the painting. Yet I doubt that Huber would make a dashing foliage study of this sort on colored ground and then carefully copy it in a painting. I believe he improvised the top layers of his foliage in paintings, as most good painters did. In this case we have a fortuitous insight into how he worked: the paint layer in the sky of the panel is so thin that Huber’s underdrawing is plainly visible. The underdrawing is only very loosely related to the final form of the tree— that is why it looms out from behind the tree into the sky. I think it equally unlikely that Huber would have made a copy of part of his own painting onto grounded paper. He was too confident, inventive, and impatient an artist to have bothered cribbing from himself in a drawing. He would have simply invented a new tree. The only conclusion is that the Budapest drawing is a copy after Huber’s painting by another, lesser artist, possibly someone in the master’s immediate orbit.
What is striking is that the second artist took the bit of tree from Huber and added a mountain, a castle, a church steeple, and a house with a watermill. He effectively transposed the tree into a new space and a new composition independent from the original painting. Probably something similar happened in many of the Errera sketchbook pages.

Another strange drawing in Budapest, unpublished until now, shows several ghostly trees in pure gouache, both white and green (Fig. 88). In this case, the ground is black and thinly applied like a wash. The romantic twisted trunks suggest a fanciful invention rather than a study from life. It is marked Hans Vereyccke on the passepartout by someone who knew Benesch's...
hypotheses, maybe by Benesch himself. I hope
not, since I think the drawing must be Ger-
man, not Netherlandish. None of the Errer-
group landscapes on colored ground has liquid,
flowing, ghostly foliage like this drawing. It is
true that some of the Errer pages — particu-
larly the pen and ink landscapes on unprepared
paper — have wavy tree trunks. But Nether-
landish heightened foliage is generally done
with small white blobs, not streaks. The Nether-
landish draftsmen use heightening only for the
leaves. The Germans use heightening also for
branches and even tree trunks, which is what
gives the studies their fantastic look. Moreover,
the black ground is a uniquely German device.

In sum, German draftsmen in this period
were much more likely than Netherlandish
draftsmen to round off their foliage studies, give
them a touch of polish or flair, even date or sign
them. And this was particularly true on colored
ground. Every young German artist must have
known the brilliant, dashing, sometimes fan-
tastic heightened drawings on colored ground
by Cranach, Altdorfer, Huber. Many draftsmen
strove to assert strong authorial voices, no mat-
ter how mediocre they actually were. There are
German drawings from the 1510s or 1520s
where even individual trees become subject
matter, for example, a Tree Study in Nuremberg
(Fig. 89), in black ink and yellow and white
heightening on a red-brown ground, proba-
bly by Hans Leu, the Swiss follower of Dürer,
Baldung, and, indirectly, Altdorfer.40 Drawings
like this have little to do with the close, faith-
ful transcription of observed natural phenom-
enon. Instead, the light-on-dark technique
becomes a pictorial effect in its own right,
exploited for its eerie or märchenhaft look.

Netherlandish Drawings on Colored
Ground

What was happening meanwhile in the
Netherlands? Fifteenth-century Flemish
painters apparently did not use colored grounds
in their workshops. There are almost no sur-
viving examples. The large Jacob and Rachel at
Christ Church, Oxford, attributed to Hugo van
der Goes, is done in pen and black wash with
white heightening on gray ground and mea-
sures 33.5 x 57 cm. Max Friedländer called it
a “highly worked cartoon.”41 Jochen Sander
considered the lines in metalpoint and brush
the work of Hugo himself and the wash an ear-
ly sixteenth-century addition. Sander said the
drawing was a project for a panel painting,
rather than for a tapestry or ephemeral paint-
ing, as had been suggested.42 It must have
remained in Hugo’s shop, because it seems to
have served as a model for a pupil’s drawing.43

A pair of drawings in the Louvre on col-
ored ground have long been considered pre-
liminary studies for paintings by Bosch. Filed
Kok argued, however, that they are so different
in manner from Bosch’s underdrawings that
they must be later copies.44

One group of artists that did use colored
grounds or colored paper for preparatory stud-
ies was the miniaturists. Several surviving sheets
are associated with manuscript illumination, for
example a drawing in Berlin with studies of
several heads, brush and white heightening on
gray ground, attributed to the Master of Mary
of Burgundy in the 1470s or 1480s.45 The use
of the dark ground makes sense since miniatu-
rists worked upward from dark to light.

Another customary use for the colored
ground was in projects for glass painting. A good
example is a project for a roundel in Edinburgh,
a Judgment of Paris on gray ground attributed
to Jan Gossaert.46 The idea was to convey pre-
cise information about light-and-dark values
in someone else in another shop who would
be responsible for executing the actual work.
In fact, a high proportion of the surviving
Netherlandish drawings in this technique tend
to get associated by cataloguers with glass pain-
ting. One possible explanation for the use of the
technique for glass designs was advanced by
Ellen Konowitz in an article on Dirk Vellert’s
drawings for glass.47 Konowitz argued that
workshops kept standard, finished drawings on
colored ground in the shop, and that tracings
were taken from them to make glass paintings.
This might also explain why the survival rate
of the colored-ground drawings from the glass-
making process is higher.48

A good number of the surviving Nether-
landish drawings on colored ground date from the
1520s. Many are associated with Antwerp. These
are the drawings that most resemble the con-
temporary German examples. A Herod and
Salome in Paris, on a green ground, is possibly
attributable to the Antwerp master Jan de
Beer.49 A Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata at
Oxford, with trees and heightened foliage, has also been connected to Jan de Beer (Fig. 90). Another Antwerp master, Jan Wellens de Cock, is linked with a Temptation of Saint Anthony in Paris, with bright foliage on a bluish-gray ground. And there are many more drawings like these.

Did the Antwerp painters take up the colored ground independently, or were they emulating the Germans? Plenty of German drawings must have found their way west. One transmission is actually documented. In the journal of his trip to the Netherlands, Albrecht Dürer noted that on May 19 or 20, 1521, he gave as a gift to Joachim Patinir 4 Christophel auff grau papir verhocht, or “four Saint Christophers, heightened on gray paper.” It seems most likely that the phrase describes a single sheet of paper with four figure studies on it. But a drawing of Saint Christopher in London, on a gray ground, fits the description neatly (Fig. 91). Perhaps Dürer gave Patinir four separate sheets like this one. Another sheet with nine studies of Saint Christopher, although not on colored ground, may be related to the Patinir gift. The Saint Christopher on the top left of this sheet bears some resemblance to a drawing by Patinir in the Louvre (not on colored ground, however).

Could Dürer’s visit have inspired the Antwerp painters to take up the technique? It is not such a far-fetched idea. Lucas van Leyden produced a group of chalk portraits in 1521 that were very likely inspired by drawings Dürer had done on his Netherlandish trip. But in the case of the colored-ground drawings Dürer cannot bear all the responsibility. Netherlandish shops had multiple contacts with German art and artists. And the German chiaroscuro woodcuts would have served as models for drawing practice as much as drawings themselves. Jan Gossaert, at least, seems to have had plenty of contact with German drawings. A fine Chatsworth drawing of Adam and Eve on a gray ground, dated to the mid-1510s, suggests as much. Finally, an extraordinary composition attributed to Cornelis Engelbrechtsz, Saïome with the Head of the Baptist, may date from as early as 1490.

One thing the Germans could have taught the Netherlanders was the appeal and value of
the independent drawing. Again, Germans were more likely to sign, date, and preserve their drawings. This fact alone may explain why there are so many surviving drawings on colored ground from the first decades of the century by German artists, and so few by Netherlandish artists.

After 1530 we encounter occasional finished drawings on colored ground that can only be understood as independent, presentable, semi-formal works of art, for example a River Landscape in Darmstadt by Jan Wélens de Cock, or the grandiose Ruins of the Forge of Vulcan by Maarten van Heemskerck, in the British Museum, signed and dated 1538. If we are to believe Karel van Mander, the light-on-dark foliage study was alive and well around 1600. Van Mander recommended the technique in his didactic poem on painting. In chapter 2, stanzas 10-12, he talks about “heightening” and “deepening” on paper colored either like ashes or pale blue. He warns the draftsman not to let the heightenings and deepenings touch, but rather to leave the ground color between the two free. He also confirms that chiaroscuro woodcuts were crucial in bringing the virtues of the technique to the attention of the Dutch: “good prints with a ground color and effective heightening have opened the eyes of many” (goede prenten met grondtint en effectieve hoogtens hebben menige geest de ogen geopend), although he then mentions Parmigianino as a model rather than the Germans.

Later, in chapter 8, on landscape, stanza 37, van Mander specifically connects the technique to foliage: “On colored paper with ink washes bring forth the gracefully moving leaves, either after nature or after a beautiful manner,” i.e., other works (al moet men op vele manieren gestadig proberen — naar de natuur of naar aangename kunstwerken — op gekleurd papier met inkt wassend in zwierende bewegingen bladeren aan te brengen). He then remarks that “leaves, like hair, wind, and draperies, are not to be taught, but are things of fantasy” (want bladeren, haar, lucht en textiel: dat is een en al geest, en [alleen] de geest leert het voortbrengen).

But where are all the drawings by Netherlandish artists around 1600 on colored ground? We know hardly any. Van Mander himself drew a Diana and Actaeon on a bright pink ground, probably a finished collector’s piece. There are also some examples by major artists of the period, such as Golzius, of drawings with bright opaque foliage against a darker ground. In such cases, the basic virtues of the middle tone were still being exploited. But the device of the total colored ground was on the whole obsolete in the Netherlands by this time. Even in Germany the colored ground had become a museum piece.

The Relationship of Colored-Ground Drawing to Painting Practice

At this point, I want to propose a relationship between the drawing of foliage on colored ground and the practice of alla prima painting, that is, the working out of tonal values on the outermost surface of the painting with opaque pigments. Before 1600, the grounds of oil paintings were basically light in tone. The traditional oil painting method exemplified by Jan van Eyck and still recommended by van Mander was to build up from the light ground to dark surface tones through a layering of translucent glazes. Netherlandish painters were least likely to follow this procedure in the foliage areas. Here it proved efficient to lay down a dark layer of paint and then heighten it on the surface with white or yellow points and streaks.

It is often held that German painters in this period, in their impetuous and flamboyant way, could not bother to wait for translucent glazes to dry, and so practiced alla prima painting all the time, not only in the foliage areas. This is a caricature, but it contains a lot of truth. I would argue that the German foliage study, with its thick, abundant application of white gouache, and generally the colored-ground drawing in Germany, was related to this practice of alla prima painting. The colored-ground procedure of building foliage upward from dark to light to bright is the same procedure followed in alla prima painting — as it is generally in tempera painting or miniature painting, any painting, that is, except for the true, old, labor-intensive oil glaze technique preserved in the Netherlands.

The argument is that the heightened drawing on colored ground served not merely as a model for the light-and-dark values of the eventual painting, as an analogy of the future painting — as it did, for example, in the Tus-
can workshops of the Quattrocento, or for Leonardo da Vinci or for Dürrer. In that case, the light-and-dark values in the drawing would later be translated into the much more complex technique of oil painting. The heightened drawing on colored ground for Altdorfer or Huber was, rather, a dress rehearsal for the act of painting. The painter planned to apply white or bright yellow paint to the outermost surface of his painting in much the same manner that he was applying white gouache to his drawing. Improvising foliage effects on the outermost surface of the painting was not necessarily an easy trick. A dark ground meant less reliance on elaborate underdrawing. An important document in this matter, I believe, is the lost Carrying of the Cross by Dürrer, a monochrome painting that survives in three copies. It is supposedly Dürrer’s last painting. The Latin inscription says that this was virtuoso surface painting; “Dürrer painted this panel of ash-gray color impromptu, without any drawing after real figures” — that is to say, without any preparatory drawings (Albertus Duer super tabula hac coloris cineriiii fortuito et altr uillam a veris imaginibus delineationem faciebat). The whole point and appeal of this remarkable painting was its improvisational character. It was the ultimate independent drawing on colored ground.

Netherlandish painters, so long as they were faithful to the old, Eyckian tradition, were supposedly much less likely than the Germans to paint in the alla prima manner. But by the latter fifteenth century even the best painters were cheating, so to speak, by applying blobs of bright paint to their trees. This can be seen in many paintings by Geertgen tot Sint Jans and Hieronymus Bosch, both northern Netherlandish. Their contemporary Gerard David in Bruges, more respectful of the old Flemish tradition, did not apply dots of white pigment indiscriminately. He used the technique of pyramidal layering of light-on-dark with great refinement, carefully differentiating in the famous Forest Interior altarpiece wings in the Mauritshuis, for example, between one leaf and the next, one species of tree and the next. Hugo van der Goes had shown the same care in his Adam and Eve in Vienna.

The reason for using the light-on-dark technique for foliage is simply that light-on-dark creates an effective and attractive illusion of actual foliage. Paler, brighter, or younger leaves standing out against a darker mass is a feature anyone can observe in trees in spring or summer, which is when nearly all outdoor scenes are set, unless the iconography specifically calls for a winter scene. And the technique of piling bright leaves on top of the dark makes the leaves stand out so they can be counted. The impression of having painted every leaf, of a realism so thorough that the beholder can single out every leaf, was surely a major selling point of the Netherlandish landscape.

Joachim Patinir and Herri met de Bles also used the alla prima technique for foliage. But by comparison with their predecessors Hugo, David, or even Quentin Massys, Patinir and Herri met de Bles were much less interested in differentiating tree from tree. All their trees look pretty much alike. Some of the best examples are in the Road to Calvary at Princeton, where the foliage (in Friedlander’s phrase) has Herri’s typical “delicate shimmer, like hoarfrost.”

Conclusion

All this suggests the following conclusions about the Errera and non-Errera landscapes on colored ground.

1. Attribution. The foliage in the sketchbook is close to both Patinir and Herri met de Bles. But the colored-ground pages provide no special clues to the attribution of the sketchbook. The Randall drawing (Fig. 82) superficially resembles Errera p. 29 (Pl. 14), but is actually closer — as far as can be told from the old photo — to the Albertina drawing (Fig. 86). This latter sheet is of rather high quality, better than the sketchbook, but still unattributable.

2. Function. The Albertina and Randall drawings are either drawn from life or free improvisations. Errera p. 29 may be something of an improvisation. The other colored-ground pages in the sketchbook are copies of paintings or drawings. Not all the Errera drawings are necessarily faithful copies of their models. The example of the foliage study after Wolf Huber (Fig. 87) shows that artists in this period sometimes copied foliage motifs from paintings and then used them as the basis for their own exercises. In particular, the custom of elaborating a colored-ground drawing with white heightening would sometimes drive the artist beyond mere copying, until he was essentially using the
drawing as a free exercise or as a rehearsal for the future painting of foliage. It does seem strange that in the Errera sketchbook the colored ground was sometimes used to copy mere compositions, and not to work out tonal values. Evidently the grounded paper in this shop was not used as efficiently as it might have been.

Finally, 3. The possible relationship to the Germans. Contact with German artists and German drawings or chiaroscuro woodcuts may have promoted the use of colored grounds in Netherlandish workshops, especially after 1515 or 1520. The colored ground allowed Netherlandish painters to experiment with light-on-dark renderings of foliage much in the way they had already been doing for well over a generation in their oil paintings. One idea that the Netherlanders may have learned from the Germans was the value of the independent, finished drawing on colored ground. They might have learned this in part from drawings given as gifts, like the drawings given by Dürer to Netherlandish artists. We often find in this period that the colored ground was reserved for special, presentable drawings meant to be preserved. This raises the possibility that the beautiful Albettina tree study, with its mysterious inscription, was intended as such a gift.
NOTES

1. Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Cabinet des Dessins (4630), 13.5 x 21 cm; 84 folios, sides numbered 1-164, with four sides left unnumbered. Drawings in the Errera sketchbook are usually designated by the page number, not the folio. The sketchbook is named after Paul Errera, its last private owner.


15. In most cases the collections were dispersed or lost. The Errera sketchbook survived because someone bound it together, probably soon after 1570 (an etching by Boul on p. 21 provides the date).

16. Two recent authors who are fully aware of this difficulty are Dietrich Schubert, Die Gemälde des Branschweiger Monogrammisten: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der niederländischen Malerei des 16. Jahrhunderts, Cologne, 1979, pp. 28-34, who argues that Cornelis Massys was influenced by the drawings in the Errera album, which, following Benesch, he connects with the Master of the Female Half-Lengths (although he rejects the identification with Hans Vereycke); and Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, "Joos van Lievre," in Otto van Simson and Machias Winner, eds., Pieter Bruegel und seine Welt, Berlin, 1979, pp. 17-28, who shows that the Errera drawings — whether by Massys or not — were part of the background of the Small Landscapes. (For the Small Landscapes, see Holm Bevers' essay in this volume).


18. Mielke made this argument for fol. 1-75 of the Berlin sketchbook, that is, the landscapes; see Mielke, in Pieter Bruegel der Ältere als Zeichner: Herkunft und Nachfolge, exh. cat., Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, 1975, nos. 180, 181.


20. For the three Berlin drawings linked with the Princeton painting, see Figs. 43-45 above. It was Mielke who placed the drawings after the painting, an opinion shared by Holm Bevers. Norman Muller and Maryan Ainsworth have recently questioned this view on the basis of underdrawings. The issue obviously has wide implications for the interpretation of Netherlandish drawings.

21. Luc Sercu, "Henri Bles et la peinture du paysage dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux avant Bruegel," Ph.D. diss., Université Catholique de Louvain, 1990, pp. 1279-89. Sercu shows links between the sketchbooks and paintings by many other masters besides Bles. He believes that the Errera is prior to the Berlin sketchbook, that both date from the 1530s or 1540s, and that the attributions to Cornelis Massys and Matthijs Cock are plausible but unproven.


25. It seems strange that a sheet of paper would be prepared with a thick ground on one side and a very thin, wash-like ground on the other. The verso of a colored-ground page is usually just left unprepared. The pale ground of p. 87 did not appear to me on close inspection to be merely pigment from the other side that had soaked through, thus rendering it more of a tinted paper than a prepared ground. Admittedly, however, many of the pages with pale grounds are the versos of pages with thick colored grounds, for example pp. 155, 159, 163. There are also other pale green sheets in the sketchbook that are not the versos of thick grounds, for example pp. 82, 83, 123.


28. Koch, Joachim Patinir, p. 66 n. 3. The Albertina drawing was shown in the exhibition De Vate Eyck à Bruegel at the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris, 1935, as no. 204 (Patinir), with reference to a sale in Lucerne in 1934. The entry mentions a second, similar drawing in the Feldmann Collection. However, the next entry (no. 205) describes the Feldmann drawing itself, except that it is now said to belong to L. Rosenholtz of Bern. Evidently Feldmann sold it immediately and the authors of the catalogue were not aware that they were referring under no. 204 to their own no. 205. Benesch, when he published the drawings in 1938 and then again in 1943, does not say where the drawing went after Feldmann (although the caption in the 1938 publication gives Bern as the location). When he mentioned the drawings a third time, in "Die grossen flämischen Meister als Zeichner," Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien, 53 (1957), p. 14, he put it in the Rosenthal Collection. Rosenholtz became Randahl when he emigrated to Montreal. It is not clear whether Koch in 1968 knew for sure that the drawing was still with Randahl, or whether he was relying on the earlier reports. The drawing was not among the Randahl drawings sold at Sotheby’s, London, on May 10, 1961 or July 6, 1967. To my knowledge, no author since Benesch has claimed to have seen the drawing.

29. A pair of sheets with nude figures, in pen and wash with white heightening on brown ground, dated 1513, may be important documents: Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (51.09, 51.10). They appear to be copies of Florentine workshop drawings. Franz Winzing considered them copies of original studies by Wolf Huber. Indeed, the Florentine manner, perhaps even in Italy, around the turn of the century; see Franz Winzing, Wolf Huber: Das Gesamtbuch, Munich, 1979, nos. 163, 164.

30. For example, the Lust-Playng Angel in Berlin (KdZ. 3877), dated 1497; Walter L. Strauss, The Complete Drawings of Albrecht Dürer, New York, 1974, no. 1497/1.

31. Ibid., nos. 1505/18-21.

32. Ibid., nos. 1508/1-19.

33. Ibid., no. 1501/6; Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina (8072).

34. Ibid., nos. 150/4/24, 26, 28, 31, 33, 36, 38, 40-41, 44, 46; Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina (3085-3095). I see the series as a unique luxury version of a woodcut or engraved Passion, rather than as projects for relief prints, paintings, or woodcuts.

35. Staattische Museen zu Berlin — Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett (KdZ. 4256).

36. See the examples in Mielke, Albrecht Altdorfer, nos. 2, 5, 7, 10, 216, 217, and for Mair von Landshut, nos. 209-211; also Wood, Albrecht Altdorfer, pp. 76-80.

37. Winzingers, Wolf Huber, no. 45; Wood, Albrecht Altdorfer, p. 113 and n. 129, fig. 77.

38. Winzingers, Wolf Huber, no. 277.

39. Two closely related foliage studies on colored ground were also given by Winzinger to Huber: a sheet in Berlin, (KdZ. 500) dated 1519, black ink with white and gray heightening on brown ground, with a black border, 11 x 15 cm; Winzinger, Wolf Huber, no. 65; and another sheet in Budapest (25), also dated 1519, on a gray-ocher ground, 21.7 x 16.2 cm, Winzinger, Wolf Huber, no. 63. Some passages in this Budapest drawing are exactly congruent with passages in the Berlin study. I believe neither is by Huber and that they both follow a lost model, whether painting or drawing; see Wood, Albrecht Altdorfer, p. 113 and fig. 76.

40. Mielke, Albrecht Altdorfer, no. 198.

41. Friedländer, Early Netherlandish Painting, IV, p. 37.


43. There is also a Creuficion en gris ground attributed to Hugo v. Wydtrod; Leo van Puyvelde, Flemish Drawings at Windsor Castle, New York, 1942, no. 1.


45. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin — Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett (KdZ. 12512).


48. William W. Robinson and Martha Woff, "The Function of Drawings in the Netherlands in the Sixteenth Century," in The Age of Bruegel, p. 34, state that colored ground was used for cartoons for glaziers until about 1520 and then replaced by drawings in pen or pen and wash. Some drawings for tapestries used dark ground as a background for foliage. See the three large, highly finished drawings in the Louvre (1474-1475) in pen, brown wash, and white heightening on beige paper; Lugt, Inventaire général, nos. 175-177. Maryan Ainsworth, "Bensart van Orley as a Designer of Tapestry," Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1982, pp. 89-90 and nn. 17, 48, 69, says that they are possibly presentation drawings.

49. Paris, Musée du Louvre (18.874); Lugt, Inventaire général, no. 78.


51. Paris, Musée du Louvre (18.866); Lugt, Inventaire général, no. 80.


55. Paris, Musée du Louvre (18.976); Lugt, Intensité générale, no. 151.


57. Chatsworth (935), 34.8 x 23.9 cm; Michael Jaffé, Old Master Drawings from Chatsworth, London, 1993, no. 169.

58. Private collection; The Age of Bruegel, p. 135, fig. 1.

59. Ibi, no. 33.

60. London, British Museum, (1949-4-11-93)), 39.5 x 43.5 cm; Kunst voor de behuizing, exh. cat., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 1986, II, no. 105.

See also four chiaroscuro paintings on canvas, School of Antwerp of the 1520s (possibly Jan de Beer), in Berlin and Nuremberg: Diane Wolfthal, The Beginnings of Netherlandish Canvas Painting: 1400-1530, Cambridge, 1989, nos. 59-62. These strange objects each measure about 20 x 40 cm. They are drawn in brown tempera with white highlights, as inaturing colored-ground drawing technique. It is not clear whether they are finished works of art or projects for future works.


62. Kunsthalle Bremen (170), 31.5 x 41.9 cm; The Age of Bruegel, no. 82.

63. For example, Goltzius' Tree Study at Oxford, with yellow leaves against the dark trunk; The Age of Bruegel, no. 62.

64. German and Swiss artists, to be sure, never lose sight of the heroic age of Dürrer, and as a result there are examples of colored-ground drawings all the way into the seventeenth century. Note also Adam Elsheimer's Landscape with Cattle, with heightened foliage on a brown ground, in John Rowlands, German Drawings from a Private Collection, London, 1984, no. 70. Claude Lorrain may have learned the technique from Elsheimer; see, for example, the Tree Study in the Ashmolean, Parker, Catalogue, no. 418, in chalk with white heightening, although not strictly on a prepared ground.


67. The inscription has also been interpreted to mean "without underdrawing."