



Peter Paul Rubens, *The Four Rivers of Paradise*, 1615. Oil on canvas. 82 x 112 in. (209 x 284 cm). Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Gemäldegalerie.

Sedlmayr's Mother-of-Pearl: Further Notes on Rubens and Flesh Color

Shawon Kinew

For my friend Andreas Thielemann †

Midway through the 1964 essay “Notes on Flesh Color in Rubens,” appearing translated into English for the first time here, Hans Sedlmayr recalls an observation by Johann Joachim Winckelmann on their common subject, Peter Paul Rubens: “His flesh is like the redness of fingers held against the sun.”¹ Sedlmayr liked Winckelmann’s image. “Winckelmann aptly, indeed insightfully noted [this],” he writes.²

I can see why he liked it. It is a powerful, romantic image. It immediately conjures the idyll of summers past, a hand raised to the burning sun like Icarus, light caught and mediated through the prism of flesh. As the hand is considered, light simultaneously pierces the eyes as it streams between fingers, and is blocked by the palm, the meatiest part of the hand. And, at the boundaries of the fingers, where skin and the soft substance of the body are least dense, the sun sets flesh aflame—reddish, pinkish, a glowing coral. This is a sight as powerful as a backlit lover whose hair is transformed into a halo, ears made translucent. In one image, that conjured in Winckelmann’s writing, the childish contemplation of one’s body is evoked: this is how one comes to know oneself. In the other, it is how one comes to know in encounters with another body what is outside oneself.

Sedlmayr’s “Notes” attempts to uncover what he describes as the ontic and cosmic meanings of Rubens’ painting of the “pale flesh” of white bodies. Sedlmayr acknowledges white skin is not white, black skin is not black, nor is it *really* red or yellow—these are imprecise terms for a concept as ineffable as skin color in language. What he means here is

¹ “... sein Fleisch gleicht der Röthe der Finger, welche man gegen die Sonne hält...” Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “Abhandlung von der Fähigkeit der Empfindung des Schönen in der Kunst, und dem Unterrichte in derselben,” in *Kleine Schriften, Vorreden, Entwürfe*, ed. Walther Rehm (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002), 231. For the English, which appears in the *Selva* translation: Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “Essay on the Beautiful in Art” (1763), trans. Susan Powell, in *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*, ed. David Irwin (New York: Phaidon, 1972), 101. The writing of this essay benefitted from conversations with Gregory Bryda, Joseph Leo Koerner, Marci Kwon and Hanno Tiesbrummel, as well as the editors Rachel Silveri and Trevor Stark, whom I thank for their insights.

² Hans Sedlmayr, “Notes on Flesh Color in Rubens,” trans. Daniel Spaulding, in this issue.

that there is a poetry, a metaphoricity, to racialization. Running with this, Sedlmayr writes of the shimmering mother-of-pearl quality to Rubens' treatment of pale flesh, and what this phenomenon can tell us about its artist and by extension his world. It is startling what he comes up with.

The essay is a reminder of a chasm that runs through much of the discipline.³ Students often learn in an art history methods course, sometimes through inference, sometimes directly, that Anglophone art history was developed through the emigration of German Jewish scholars to the United States and England. For the study of early modern art, the work of Erwin Panofsky and Rudolf Wittkower are foundational; their authors would have continued writing in German had they not been the targets of genocide. Perhaps in the field of early modern art there is also an especial aversion to the open discussion of contemporary politics, a conservatism that lingers and constricts.⁴ Absences and presences come into focus in the English language reading of Sedlmayr. So, this is what we were missing.

Sedlmayr, the notorious Nazi art historian who lost his professorship at the University of Vienna following World War II, only to become a professor in Munich and in Salzburg, acknowledges the long life that Rubens' white skin as a painterly subject held with him: "I myself offered an interpretation in a lecture at the University of Vienna in the summer semester of 1940."⁵ It is hard to read such a reference by this man, filled with all the nostalgia for a summer past, to the Viennese summer of 1940, without feeling sick. In the 1930s Sedlmayr and Otto Pächt were innovative in their development of *Strukturanalyse*, forming the heart of the New Viennese School—but this was before Pächt lost his university position in Germany as National Socialists rose to power and he was forced to escape to Ireland and then England in 1936.⁶ In the years that Pächt was a refugee and surviving genocide, Sedlmayr was apparently giving his first lecture on the primacy of white flesh in Rubens. At that time this lecture must have been intended to cast Rubens as an artist worthy of his place in museums of the Third Reich. The return in 1964 to a subject from the height of Sedlmayr's tenure as a Nazi professor is by no means surprising. It is in line with the reactionary politics

³ The English language study of the New Vienna School and of National Socialism in art history is indebted to the scholarship of Evonne Levy and Christopher S. Wood. In the preparation of this essay, I made frequent use of the following: Christopher S. Wood, *The Vienna School Reader* (New York: Zone Books, 2000), especially his Introduction to the volume; Evonne Levy, *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Evonne Levy, "Ernst Kris, *The Legend of the Artist* (1934), and *Mein Kampf*," *Oxford Art Journal* 36 (2013), 207–229; Evonne Levy, *Baroque and the Political Language of Formalism* (Basel: Schwabe, 2015), especially "Sedlmayr's Austrian Baroque: *Ganzheit* to *Reichsstil*," 302–349; Christopher S. Wood, *A History of Art History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁴ This is a central focus in Levy, *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque*, 2004.

⁵ It is not clear to me whether a record of the 1940 lecture exists. My ability to conduct archival research and access libraries during the preparation of this text was hindered by the current COVID-19 pandemic.

⁶ Joseph Leo Koerner analyzes both Sedlmayr and Pächt in "Albrecht Dürer's *Pleasures of the World* and the Limits of Festival," in *Das Fest*, ed. Walter Haug (Munich: Fink, 1989), 193–198.

of his post-war practice of art history, of which 1948's *Verlust der Mitte* is the most famous. There is, then, seemingly little to mourn in only specialists knowing Sedlmayr's work.

In the 1964 "Notes," Sedlmayr locates Rubens' white bodies at the center of a cosmos and tends to this whiteness with the fervor of someone who believes "the centre cannot hold."⁷ The especial beauty of Rubens' rendering of white skin is treated by Sedlmayr as if the artist's handling of paint somehow undergirds the superiority of white skin, laying bear a racist *Kunstwollen*. For Sedlmayr, an apt metaphor for Rubens' painted white bodies is "mother-of-pearl," evoked four times in the essay. Sedlmayr's language operates, at times, subtly, its images seep into the imagination, taking root like a parasite who feeds on its host. Rubens, who embodies Wölfflin's *malerisch*, Rubens whose corpulent bodies are then synonymous with the baroque, finds himself back in the arena of a contentious linguistic and stylistic debate. Both Panofsky and Otto Kurz rejected the etymology of the baroque in the *perle baroque*, "the misshapen pearl," in part for the derogatory connotation the term came to embody.⁸ This could hardly have escaped Sedlmayr. But one might imagine Sedlmayr insisting he speaks not of misshapen pearls, but of mother-of-pearl. This linguistic distinction is meant to be slippery.

Both Winckelmann and Sedlmayr deal in powerful images, metaphors that animate the work of art in the imagination of the reader. Winckelmann contrasts Rubens to the Cinquecento painters Titian and Correggio who preceded him. Next to Rubens' idealizing color of the seventeenth century, the *colore* of Titian and Correggio is more like truth and life—the difference between "real porcelain" and "transparent glass."⁹ Perhaps it is no surprise that Winckelmann, who loved his ancient marble sculptures white, evokes in his writing another exalted translucent white material of his time, porcelain. Fetish of the East, porcelain enchanted the European continent in Winckelmann's time. It became a commodity whose appropriations transformed a global economy. As readers we are invited back to Winckelmann's time to ponder the aesthetic experience of porcelain, which is set aglow when its

⁷ "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold..." This line from W.B. Yeats' "Second Coming" appears as the epigraph to the English translation of *Verlust der Mitte*, Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis: The Lost Center*, trans. Brian Battershaw (London: Hollis & Carter, 1957).

⁸ Erwin Panofsky's "What is Baroque?" dates to 1934, the year of his emigration. "...that lecture on the Baroque was delivered... at a time when the word 'Baroque' was still employed as a term of opprobrium in the Anglo-Saxon countries..." Erwin Panofsky as cited in Irvin Lavin, "Introduction," in *Three Essays on Style*, ed. Irving Lavin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 204n12. "The other derivation of the term from Latin *veruca* and Spanish *barueca*, meaning, originally, a wart and by extension a pearl of irregular shape, is most improbable for logical and purely linguistic reasons." Erwin Panofsky, "What is Baroque?" in *Three Essays on Style*, 19. See also Otto Kurz, "Barocco: storia di una parola," *Lettere italiane* 12 (1960), 419–424. Both texts by Panofsky and Kurz are indebted to Benedetto Croce, *Storia della età barocca in Italia* (Bari: Laterza, 1929), 20–25.

⁹ "In der Colorit des Nackenden sind Correggio und Titiano die Meister unter allen: denn ihr Fleisch ist Wahrheit und Leben: Rubens, welcher in der Zeichnung nicht Idealisch ist, ist es hier; sein Fleisch gleicht der Röthe der Finger, welche man gegen die Sonne hält, und seine Colorit ist gegen jene, wie das ächte Porcellan gegen eine durchsichtige Glascomposition." Winckelmann, *Kleine Schriften, Vorreden, Entwürfe*, 231.

milky white substance is held to the sun. Though Sedlmayr does not cite Winckelmann's line about porcelain, this fantasy of a glowing pure white substance endures in Sedlmayr's love poem to illuminated white flesh. It shapes how he sees Rubens.

Sedlmayr goes further than Winckelmann. He tries to render in words the capaciousness of Rubens' palette, which formed bodies like shimmering mother-of-pearl, an iridescence set into motion with light. Unlike porcelain that becomes translucent with light, nacre's layers radiate pinks, greens and blues, all the while remaining white (if one is committed to seeing nacre as white). This to Sedlmayr is appropriate for Rubens' white bodies, which, in his formulation, are "pantochromatic," the origin and locus of all colors. Sedlmayr's interpretive lens is found in the German physiologist and painter, Carl Gustav Carus, whom he cites early in the essay: "... nature distinguishes only the lower creatures with decisive, burning colors; the highest creature, man—or rather the white man; the man of the day—only possesses the fine tone of his external covering..."¹⁰ This hierarchy of colors can be charted, which Sedlmayr does as he substantiates his argument around two graphs described (but never produced) in sections 4 and 11. Both Carus and Sedlmayr place the "man of the day," the heavenly mother-of-pearl subject, the white man, in highest esteem. Pale flesh—"white" as Sedlmayr often puts in quotation marks—is "universal" in its pantochromatic ontology, and therefore constitutes the nucleus of this heliocentrism. Browns are middle colors, secondary, forming a second circle. These colors include brown flesh tones. They are base like the brown of the earth, of earthly creatures who have brown fur. The outer circle, a third sphere, is reserved for "the colors of magnificence"—the red, blue, yellow, and so on of magnificent draperies and some birds. Second place quickly begins to feel like first loser here.

For a moment, I considered how Sedlmayr might have liked me to approach the color charts he describes, images of his own volition. The first is a dual axis graph with a circle running around its core, and the second is a series of three concentric circles described in the preceding paragraph. Both resemble impressionistically the target sights of a gun. In true Sedlmayrian fashion, they are probably best not approached by an iconologist, who might dip into Dante and look for their echoes in the quotidian and arcane symbolism that populated Sedlmayr's world, his office, his closet. Impressed by the pretensions of their form, I waited for their creator, Sedlmayr, to emerge from the circles, lines, Xs, and Os. They display a predilection for the round, for order, for the bureaucratic administration of figures passed for facts, for a neat hierarchy that radiates outward, the periphery cushioning the interior goo. Like any artwork governed by ideology alone, there is a circular logic to his figures: the charts will draw the same conclusion regardless of the evidence. Like their author, these graphs feign objectivity. They are a parody of the scientific or rigorous study of art. They constitute a worldview that says art *can* be measured, and that measurement should be conducted in mysterious ways. Meyer Schapiro famously wrote of Sedlmayr's methods already in 1936, "This is palmistry or numerology, not science."¹¹ Thirty years later, we see little changed.

¹⁰ Carl Gustav Carus as cited in Sedlmayr, "Notes on Flesh Color in Rubens."

¹¹ Meyer Schapiro, "The New Viennese School," review of *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen, II*, edited by Otto Pächt, *The Art Bulletin* 18 (1936), 259. Reprinted in Wood, *The Vienna School Reader*, 459.

When the art historian mistakes his own pallid hand as a light source or the rightful universal tool of measurement, it blocks the sun.

When one looks at the Rubens paintings with which Sedlmayr is primarily concerned, one might surmise that color cannot be parsed from bodies, recalling the feebleness of some Renaissance *paragoni*. In its heyday, in a treatise of 1549, *Disegno*, Anton Francesco Doni stages the competition of the arts as a debate between Art and Nature. Art argues that sculpture is the superior art because there could be no color if there was not first a body (*corpo*) to receive it.¹² In *The Four Rivers of Paradise* of 1615 in Vienna (referred to as *The Four Continents* in Sedlmayr's text as it was then known), it seems as fruitless an exercise as Doni's to separate mother-of-pearl color from misshapen pearl bodies. In Rubens, bodies are color, color is form. Color begets color. The cold skin of the white-blond putti rhyme with the scales of the green-gray crocodile of the Nile, infant tiger cubs acquire their stripes as they feed from their mother, attribute of Tigris.¹³ These explosions of color embody, as Svetlana Alpers has written, the "ecstatic notion of creating art" of the protean Rubens.¹⁴

Along the edges of *The Four Rivers*, in the right arm of the white naiad of Euphrates and the muscled arm of a white Tigris, we see most clearly the effect of the redness of pink fingers held against the sun. The rest of the white bodies, river gods and three of four of the accompanying naiads, glisten with white highlights and a vague flickering of Rubens' quintessential red and blue brushwork. The flesh of the white naiads is, admittedly, likened by Rubens to pearls: the color of their flesh echoed in the pearls of their earrings and diadems. Muscles and bulges resemble the surfaces of mottled pearls. At the center of the composition, in the embrace of a white Nile, a Black nymph looks over her shoulder, a ruby atop her head catching the light. She wears pearls too. Elizabeth McGrath has argued that the naiad's Blackness serves iconographic purposes—to signify the mysterious "Ethiopian" origins of the river, unknown to the ancients and contemporaries that constituted Rubens' world.¹⁵ Even Sedlmayr must pause on the Black nymph at the center of *The Four Rivers*. Of her glowing dark flesh and the strand of multicolored pearls around her neck, he realizes his "observation does not apply only to the 'light' flesh tones. Neither does it imply an ethical denigration of dark flesh tones. In the picture of the *Four Continents* in Vienna, the entire spectrum of flesh color is beautifully and equally developed from the brightest iridescent peach to the deepest

¹² "Chi prima fosse, o il disegno, o la scoltura; la quale scoltura secondo me, è cavo & rilievo, dal quale nasce tutti i d'intorni, tutte l'ombre, & tutti i lumi, & senza il rilievo non essendo certa anche non puo essere il colore se prima non ha qualche corpo che lo riceva." Anton Francesco Doni, *Disegno* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito di Ferrarii, 1549), 7v.

¹³ I am following Elizabeth McGrath's identification of the painting's subject in Elizabeth McGrath, "The Streams of Oceanus: Rubens, Homer and the Boundary of the ancient World," in *Ars naturam adiuvans: Festschrift für Matthias Winner*, ed. Victoria von Flemming and Sebastian Schütze (Mainz: von Zabern, 1996), 467; Elizabeth McGrath, "Goltzius, Rubens and the Beauties of Night," in *Black is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas*, ed. Esther Schreuder and Elmer Kolfin (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008), 60–63; Elizabeth McGrath, "Black Bodies and Dionysiac Revels: Rubens' Bacchic Ethiopians," in *Rubens and the Human Body*, ed. Cordula van Wyhe (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), 291–316.

¹⁴ Svetlana Alpers, *The Making of Rubens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 141.

¹⁵ McGrath, "Goltzius, Rubens and the Beauties of Night," 63.

brown-black.”¹⁶ But it is hard to forget that this essay begins with Carus’ separation of the “white man” from the “lower creatures” who are, in his formulation, inflected with browns.

At times in his career, Rubens used Blackness as a conceit or shied away from painting Black skin entirely. In Rubens’ *Venus in Front of the Mirror*, which places a blonde, white Venus next to a Black servant, Victor Stoichita sees an emblem of chiaroscuro, the play of light and shadow, the construction of a white Self and a Black Other.¹⁷ In the Munich *Death of Seneca*, Rubens casts an ancient statue of black marble then thought to be of Seneca as the protagonist. In the process, Rubens transformed what was once hard and black into soft, white flesh, the skin color he believed appropriate to the Roman philosopher. Rubens had developed a formula for depicting white flesh—the juxtaposition of blue and red—to achieve what he called the *diaphanitas* of a living body, the translucent skin, veins and viscera pulsating red and blue just beneath the surface.¹⁸ As Rubens conceived it, life escapes the static torso of Seneca first, blood draining first from his head, leaving his lips a pale blue. His ruddy, vascular legs course with life, teeming with deeper blues and reds. It is now thought by many that the black marble of the ancient statue was meant to represent the Black skin of an African fisherman. It was Rubens then who unwittingly made this figure white.

Rubens’ red and blue diaphaneity had been formulated for white skin, meaning that any representation of Black subjects posed a painterly challenge for the artist, a rethinking of his technique. McGrath points to the red ruby of the Black naiad as both a signifier of this nymph’s higher status in the retinue as she is the partner to the Nile, the most ancient of the rivers, and as a pictorial device used to illuminate her face. In the play of the light-filled ruby and the glow of the naiad’s face, we see Rubens relishing in the painting of Black skin. Here, Black skin was not the existential challenge it posed to Sedlmayr, but rather a technical one, a process David Bindman has discussed in relation to the *Four Studies of a Black Man* at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.¹⁹

Sedlmayr avoids the matter of blood, one that was central to Rubens and one salient in the art historian’s own epoch. In approximating Rubens’ white bodies to mother-of-pearl, the art historian stays at the surface. He never accesses the layers of muscle, veins, and blood pulsating beneath the skin of Rubens’ figures. He never reaches Rubens’ own metaphor of

¹⁶ Sedlmayr, “Notes on Flesh Color in Rubens.”

¹⁷ Victor I. Stoichita, *Darker Shades: The Racial Other in Early Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2019), 25–28.

¹⁸ Andreas Thielemann, “Rubens’ Traktat *De Imitatione statuarum*,” in *Imitatio als Transformation: Theorie und Praxis der Antikennachahmung in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Petersberg: Michael Imhof, 2012), 95–150, 113.

¹⁹ David Bindman, “Introduction,” in *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Volume III: From the “Age of Discovery” to the Age of Abolition, Part 2: Europe and the World Beyond*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), <https://www-aaeportal-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/?id=-17636> (accessed June 10, 2020).

blood and red paint, the animating substances of his paintings and bodies.²⁰ Blood was, of course, how race was measured at the time of Sedlmayr's first lecture on the subject in 1940. The Nuremberg Laws had clarified that a person's visible whiteness was not stringent enough in identifying racial purity. Race was regulated by blood, and then by law.²¹ Genocide would be enacted around blood—to destroy the bloodlines of some and to protect the purity of others. A lecture on Rubens' glorious treatment of white skin in 1940 Vienna was given in a precise context, one, I can only surmise, that was a panegyric to the Aryan, then the "man of the day." Apparently by 1964, Sedlmayr felt enough time had passed to revive this subject. Sedlmayr was able to insist in this new context that the study of the centrality of the white man was a purely formal subject devoid of politics. It is a superficial study.

There is much to be critiqued in Sedlmayr—a white supremacist ideology above all, and how concepts of the universal and objectivity are used to uphold it. But formalism, metaphors, and imagistic writing should not themselves be considered suspect. The issue is that Sedlmayr's images—pale mother-of-pearl bodies and celestial graphs, which appeal powerfully to the mind's eye and are achieved through language alone—originate prescriptively from his ideology. The answer to Sedlmayr's problem is found in Rubens, whose paintings are so slippery that they are made anew with each generation. Rubens has already been the site of readings of race, gender and sexuality. He will find his way increasingly into contemporary discourses of critical race studies that analyze the construction of whiteness, where Sedlmayr's essay will be read. In time, Rubens will be decolonized.

Art history likes thesis and antithesis. Like the red and the blue, the baroque Rubens is typically set off by the cool classicizing Poussin, two artistic poles of the same century. In my first year of graduate school, an experiment was conducted—what if the incoming cohort read only Erwin Panofsky in their methods seminar? At the onset, I considered myself one of the lucky ones. My colleagues who worked on art outside of the canon Panofsky wrote about were openminded about this decision made about our training. A few weeks into the semester, an Islamicist updated his favorite quotation on Facebook to 'Et in Arcadia ego.' A couple of weeks after that, by the time we reached *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, things had taken a turn. When one of us fainted in class, a Rubens scholar rushed to her aid, insisting she be the one to take our classmate to the hospital. Jammed into a circle in little plastic desks, we scanned each other's faces looking for alternative ways out—how to escape this reading list.

Now, I wish someone had taken my hand and pointed to this body of work like some stony sepulcher capable of speech. This someone might have said to me in my initiation as an art historian, "This is the wound." They could have explained to me then that white supremacy is at the core of the discipline (its long history was why we were reading Panofsky after all), and that its eradication was then the work of all those who follow. I might not have misunderstood so much scholarship as a retreat from the world. At the crossroads between

²⁰ For the meanings of blood in Rubens' painting, see Marisa Mandabach, "Blood, Rocks, and Clouds: Matter and Artistry in Rubens's Antwerp Mythological Paintings" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2016), 71–86.

²¹ A notable exception to the use of the past tense are the US blood quantum laws, which (attempt to) provide a legal definition for a person's "race" through blood in order to be recognized as an "American Indian."

past and future, I now let it speak to me, one survivor of genocide to another. *Et in Arcadia ego*.



Nicolas Poussin, *Et in Arcadia ego*, 1637–1638. Oil on canvas, 34.25 × 47.25 in. (85 x 121 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris.