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Citation

Savage, Elizabeth (2024) *The Politics of Process Mezzotint: Jacob Christoff Le Blon's Reputation, 1700–89*. In: *Printing Colour 1700-1830 Histories, Techniques, Functions, and Receptions*. Proceedings of the British Academy, 263 . Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 141-153. ISBN 9780197267530

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The Politics of Process Mezzotint: Jacob Christoff Le Blon's Reputation, 1700–89

ELIZABETH SAVAGE*

Abstract

Jacob Christoff Le Blon invented translucent printing inks, which allowed for optical mixing, and a way to use them with three or more mezzotint plates to reproduce all 'natural colours'. His revolutionary approach to colour printing in the 1700s is widely celebrated and considered a precursor to today's CMYK colour system. But his career was a series of high-risk ventures, with each success followed by devastating failure and a fresh start, often abroad. His workshop's direct legacy ended just 40 years after his death, after his student Jacques-Fabien Gautier-Dagoty tried to destroy his reputation and his last student's students stopped producing trichromatic mezzotints. This essay assesses the reception of Le Blon's printing techniques from his research and experimentation until he invented his method of optically mixing colour separations in 1710 in Amsterdam, through his careers in London and Paris until his death in 1741. It ends with the production of the final material in the direct legacy of his workshops around 1790. It draws on Le Blon's writings, advertisements, and Gautier-Dagoty's public correspondence.

Key Words

Jacob Christoff Le Blon
Jacques-Fabien Gautier
Jacques-Fabien Gautier-Dagoty
Process printing
Trichromatic printing
Mezzotint
Mercure de France

The Politics of Process Mezzotint: Jacob Christoff Le Blon's Reputation, 1700–89

Elizabeth Savage *

It is a commonplace of print scholarship that Jacob Christoff Le Blon's (1667–1741) approach to colour printing revolutionised print technologies and daily life, from medical education to the art market. Recent scholarship has focused on Le Blon's prints and innovations. Printing inks were generally opaque, but he created translucent printing inks.¹ They allowed for optical mixing, or layering colours to create the effect of other colours. He also invented a way to separate a full-colour image into three layers with varying intensities of each primary (blue, yellow, red); prepare a mezzotint plate for each primary, ensuring appropriate tonal intensities across its surface; and superimpose impressions of three mezzotint plates, each inked in a translucent primary colour, in register to render 'Pictures and Figures with their natural Colours' (Figure 8.1).² While Le Blon used blue, red, yellow, sometimes supplemented by an extra plate in black (printed first or as a final key plate), and/or a plate in grey or white for highlights, today's CMYK colour system uses cyan, magenta, yellow, and a 'key' in black. Le Blon's method is conventionally called 'trichromatic' printing because it produces all hues from the three primaries; the occasional additional plates added details and highlights but did not modify the hues.

Le Blon's significance for the trajectory of intellectual property in the visual arts has been well explored, for example by Katie Scott in her study of the shift from art to industry in 18th-century France.³ Less attention has been paid to the business of Le Blon's trichromatic printing, or why his biographer in the first edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* summarised him as 'a clever artist, but careless in his life, and a bad man of business'.⁴ His career involved

a series of high-risk ventures that yielded great initial success followed by devastating failure, then a fresh start, often abroad. Horace Walpole (1717–97) recalled that ‘most of his projects ended in the air’.⁵ The engraver and antiquary George Vertue (1686–1756) was more blunt: ‘he had the most Artfull Toungue & management in deceit and delusion of any man’.⁶

After Le Blon’s death, his former protégé Jacques Fabien Gautier (1716–85; after 1756, Gautier-Dagoty) tried to claim credit for his ideas and destroy his reputation in a series of polemical letters in French periodicals. He provoked long-lasting international condemnation, including by Goethe decades after his death.⁷ Followers did not spring to Le Blon’s defence because he had so few; his main defenders were those with a financial interest in protecting his reputation, namely Antoine César Gautier de Montdorge (1701–68), a man of letters and financier for Louis XV, King of France (r. 1715–74).

Despite the size of his workshops at their peak, Le Blon had only five students who made independent works using his method. Of them, only Gautier’s production of colour prints was substantial. He also took on only five students, his own sons. Of them, only one, Édouard Dagoty (1745–83), took on two students who went on to make independent work in this way: Carlo Lasinio (1757–1839), in collaboration with Giovanni Pietro Labrelis (18th century; dates unknown), who was not a printer but who copied paintings onto plates for Lasinio to print.⁸ Lasinio eventually tried simplifying the process by combining it with the manner of inking now known as *à la poupée*,⁹ but they largely stopped producing colour mezzotints in the 1790s. The direct legacy of Le Blon’s workshop therefore ended about 50 years after his death.

Instead of celebrating the printed images themselves, this study assesses Le Blon’s career and the reception of his printing techniques. It starts with their invention around 1710 in Amsterdam and

follows his careers in London and Paris until his death in 1741. It ends in 1756, when the *Mercure de France* stopped publishing Jacques Fabien Gautier's polemics against Le Blon and he had to leave Paris due to the outcry, after which he upgraded his surname to include his mother's family name: 'Gautier-Dagoty', sometimes formatted more aristocratically as 'Gautier-d'Agoty'.¹⁰ This study draws heavily on Le Blon's and Gautier's writings, advertisements, and business records.

Many versions of Le Blon's first names are attested, including translations into Dutch, English, French, and Latin, and his last is sometimes written 'Le Blond'. Following convention, this paper uses the earliest recorded variant, the version in his German baptism records.¹¹ Because its scope ends in 1756, when Gautier changed his last name, it refers to him as 'Gautier' rather than 'Gautier-Dagoty'.

Le Blon's colourful life, 1667–1741

In 1667, Jacob Christoff Le Blon was born into a Huguenot family in Frankfurt am Main.¹² His family was artistic, international, and well connected; his great-aunt was Maria Sybilla Merian (1647–1717). He moved to Rome around 1696 and presumably studied with the painter Carlo Maratta (1625–1713). There he met the Dutch engraver Bonaventura van Overbeek (1660–1705) and followed him to Amsterdam in 1702 to work as a miniature painter. He married Gerarda Vloet (1679–1716) in 1705; their first son Theodorus died in infancy in 1706.

In 1704, the publication of Isaac Newton's (1643–1726) *Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light* laid the groundwork for the field of physical optics by exploring diffraction (light waves bending around objects) and dispersion (separating white

light into a spectrum of colours). Le Blon's work on colour paints and inks was perhaps bolstered by increasing scientific interest in colours of light. Although he is often said to have based his colour printing process on Newton's three-colour theory of light, and he did engage with it to the point of positioning his practices in opposition to Newton's theories,¹³ his innovations were wholly independent. Newton divided the spectrum into seven colours to map onto the musical scale and focused on *additive* colour mixing, or combining different colours of light, which can yield white light. This might be familiar from RGB computer monitors and TV screens, which use red, green, and blue lights to create white light. Le Blon instead focused on three colours for *subtractive* colour mixing: combining differently coloured materials, like inks or paints, which can yield black material. This might be familiar from the CMYK colour system, for example in offset printing and photocopiers.

Le Blon's invention: Amsterdam, c. 1710–18

Le Blon experimented with colour mixing for paint from 1706–10, in close collaboration with the linguist and art collector Lambert ten Kate (1674–1731) and the painter and engraver Hendrik van Limborch (1681–1759). He presumably perfected his method in colour printing around 1710. His first documented colour prints were a *Mary Magdalene* on parchment, a *Sleeping Nymph* (now lost) after one of his own paintings, and a portrait of *Ernst Wilhelm von Salisch* (Figure 8.2).¹⁴ His method is first recorded in a letter he wrote to van Limborch on 3 January 1711: *'de heer Doeve ... hier heeft hooren met admiratie van mijne vinding spreeken, en daerop gesept heeft: Ik moet het dan gaan sien, want ik reeds meer daer van gehort'* (Mr Doeve ... has heard [people] speaking of my invention with admiration, and so said: 'I must go

and see it, for I have already heard more [i.e., much] about it').¹⁵

Word travelled quickly. On 11 February 1711, the bibliophile Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach (1683–1734) and his brother Johann Friedrich (1687–1768) visited Le Blon as they were travelling from their hometown, Frankfurt am Main. Zacharias described the visit in his diary, which was published in 1753: when Le Blon showed them his *Mary Magdalene*, they were baffled and amazed by his '*befondere Erfindung die Kupfer wie Gemählde von Mignatur abzudrucken*' (special invention of printing the coppers like miniatures), and Le Blon told them of his ambitions: '*Herr le Blond machte noch ein groß Geheimniß daraus, und sagte, das wäre vor groffe Herren, die ihme die Erfindung, ehe er sie gemein machte, wohl bezahlen müßten*' (Le Blon made a big secret of it, and said that it would be before great lords, who would have to pay him well for the invention before he made it public).¹⁶ He must have dedicated himself, for Ten Kate wrote Van Limborch on 1 January 1712 that, '*Mons:r Le Blons gedagten met zijn drukwerk ... bezig zijn geweest*' (Mr Le Blon's thoughts have been busy with his printing).¹⁷ Le Blon's wife died in 1716, as did their second child Christodorus (1715–16). He sought patronage and investments locally and in Paris but found no backers.

Le Blon at the Picture Office in London, 1718–22

Le Blon moved to London around 1718, presumably at the suggestion of his supporter, the art collector Colonel John Guise (1682/3–1765), or perhaps Charles Montagu, 1st Earl of Halifax (1661–1715).¹⁸ On 5 February 1719, he was granted a 14-year royal patent for 'A New Method of Multiplying of Pictures and Draughts by a Natural Collieris with Impression'.¹⁹ By mid-1721, a business was founded; Guise was president of the board and Le Blon general manager.

Known by various names, it is conventionally called the Picture Office. It involved big money; 2,000 shares were issued at £15 each,²⁰ to achieve an initial investment of £30,000 (perhaps the equivalent of £4.7 million today).²¹ Johan van Gool, a biographer of artists of the Dutch Republic in the 17th century, who was in London in 1727, reported that demand was so high that shares were selling for up to £25 each.²²

The workshop engaged many employees and churned out prints of publicity-friendly subjects, including a Sudarium of St. Veronica; an anatomical preparation (that is, specimens that were dissected and then preserved) of a human penis and testicles (see Figure 22.4); a portrait of George I, King of Great Britain and Ireland (r. 1714–27) after a painting by court painter Godfrey Kneller (1646–1723);²³ and prints after famous paintings by Italian masters, such as Raphael, Titian, and Domenichino,²⁴ and Flemish masters, including Anthony van Dyck.²⁵ Within months, by 1722, Le Blon had produced 5,000 impressions for the Picture Office.²⁶ Many were priced accessibly at 5–15 shillings (£40–£120 today), but some attracted elite consumers and patrons; George I had a room dedicated to them.²⁷

By this point, roughly a year after it was founded, the Picture Office would not have been a happy place in which to work. Production costs already heavily outweighed sales. As the business started to sink, staff were pressured by Guises's 'swears & Bullies'.²⁸ Even in 1722, the project had lost the shareholders so much money, so quickly, that Le Blon was forced out as general manager. His replacement was occasionally referred to as 'Guine' or 'Guino'—perhaps Jean Prodhomme (1686–1726)²⁹—who brought in a more efficient production process that caused the quality, and sales, to plummet. Serious financial mismanagement led to a large, six-hour shareholder meeting in 1723, at which Le Blon repeatedly rebutted accusations as lies: '*Je declare que cela est faux*' (I declare that this is false).³⁰ It was revealed that only 490 shares

had been sold—at £15 each, they raised £7,350 (roughly £1,182,000 today)—and print sales had brought in only £600 (roughly £96,500 today). The decision was taken to cease operations.³¹ Even if all of Le Blon’s existing prints were sold, the company would still have been deeply in the red. His other invention, for trichromatic weaving to reproduce paintings, had led the Picture Office to invest £950 (roughly £153,000 today); its reward was two pieces, just ‘the weaving of a picture of a child’s head and a piece of silk’, worth about £30 (roughly £4,800 today).³² The Picture Office declared itself bankrupt in 1726. Unsold prints and remaining money were dispersed among the shareholders through the next year. While Le Blon could not be held responsible for the Picture Office’s failures after he was forced out, the printing and weaving arms were based around his methods and ideas.

Coloritto, 1725

The year before the bankruptcy, in 1725, Le Blon published his book *Coloritto; or, the Harmony of Colouring in Painting: Reduced to Mechanical Practice, under Easy Precepts, and Infallible Rules; Together with some Colour’d Figures, In order to render the said Precepts and Rules intelligible, not only to Painters, but even to all Lovers of Painting*, in English with French-facing translation (*L’Harmonie du Coloris*). As the publisher was not named, he presumably published it himself. The manual is not about colour printing, as is sometimes assumed, but is instead on how to mix paints to depict human skin using only the three primaries, black, and white. The illustrations are not Le Blon’s signature trichromatic mezzotints, but are in black, or black with a second plate with purple-red ink, and sometimes with colours added by hand (Figure 8.3).

Listless in London and The Hague, 1725–35

Le Blon's serial attempts to re-establish his career after 1725 failed spectacularly, sometimes for spectacular reasons. For example, a collaboration on a series of anatomical preparations with Nathanael Saint André (c. 1680–1776), anatomist and physician to George I, was scuppered by a woman claiming to have birthed rabbits.³³

In 1727, Le Blon was granted a royal privilege for 'The Art of Weaving Tapestry in the Loom ... which, for its Beauty, Durability and Cheapness Far Excels any Tapestry Ever Yet Made' (the Picture Office had previously invested in this project). Again, this attracted investors, incurred significant start-up costs (including purpose-built premises and looms) over a number of years, led to underwhelming results, and caused financial devastation.³⁴ Only one sample was created, a *Head of Christ* after Raphael (Figure 8.4). Faced with mounting lawsuits and counterclaims, the enterprise ended in 1734.

In 1735, Le Blon evaded a court summons for debt by moving to The Hague. He again found sponsors willing to invest, and armed with 100 guilders, he moved to Paris to create a start-up for full-colour tapestries.³⁵

Paris, 1735–41

In late 1735 or early 1736, when Le Blon was 68, he moved to Paris, had a daughter Marguerite (born 1736 or early 1737) with his new partner Catherine Poulle (d. 1741), and

secured new backers for his printing—not weaving—business. Endorsed by Montdorge, he was granted a 20-year royal privilege on 12 November 1737, subject to confirmation after a committee assessed his working method. He established a workshop in his apartment and took on four trainees: the printmakers Jean Robert (*c.* 1720–82), Pierre François Tardieu (1711–74), and Jacques Fabien Gautier—who quit after six weeks in protest about his pay to create his own trichromatic mezzotint workshop³⁶—and the Irish painter Nicholas Blakey (1713–58). In 1738, once Montdorge had invested heavily and offered legal support and Le Blon had sold half his privilege to Claude François Le Marchand des Descatillons (*fl.* 1738–42) for 4,000 Louis d’or (roughly £51,000 today),³⁷ Le Blon could afford to start the business.³⁸ In August, he published his first two prints and, for the first time in the history of colour printing, sets of their colour separations (see Figure 8.1a–e, which shows such separations). In October, he demonstrated his manner of printing to a committee, as had been required, and Montdorge’s account of their visit ensured his privilege was confirmed.³⁹ Le Blon’s next venture was in 1740, when he set up a lucrative subscription for an anatomical atlas. It attracted 31 subscribers, but he and his wife died in May 1741, before the first instalment was completed. They left everything to their 4 or 5-year-old daughter Marguerite. In 1742, Robert completed Le Blon’s final colour mezzotint, the first and only issue related to the subscription: an anatomical plate of a young male’s bowels.

Gautier vs Le Blon’s estate, 1742

Even in death, Le Blon’s ‘great imagination and golden dreams’, as Van Gool later wrote, led to disaster.⁴⁰ Gautier applied for Le Blon’s royal privilege immediately after Le Blon’s death,

on the basis that he could make continued use of this secret art.⁴¹ He was quickly granted a 30-year privilege for three-plate printing, in September 1741. This was the first step of what would become an international furore.

Le Blon had frequently advertised his work in the French national media, including *Mercur de France*, and Gautier announced in the December 1741 issue that he now held Le Blon's privilege. He also included a list of 21 prints ready for sale, and provided an actual sample of his colour printing (Figure 8.5), which was inserted into each copy of the journal.⁴² Some of the prints he listed were from his time working for Le Blon, but he must also have invested heavily in new start-up costs; as Sarah Lowengard has argued, he also 'prepared a campaign in anticipation—perhaps even before entering that workshop'.⁴³ Le Blon's representatives—Marguerite's guardian, the notary Clement Pierre Desmines (dates unknown); Descatillon, who owned half the privilege; and presumably Montdorge—immediately clawed back their rights, and Gautier's privilege was revoked on 2 January 1742.⁴⁴

Gautier then fought dirty, secretly purchasing Le Blon's workshop materials—all of his plates, tools, and prints, as well as the royal privilege—via an intermediary named Nicolas Deprez (dates unknown) on 12 May 1742.⁴⁵ Ownership of the royal privilege could no longer be contested. Gautier quickly expanded into Le Blon's specialities—anatomies (but directly from dissected cadavers, not preparations) and reproductions of paintings—and started to sell them. He also asserted his rights for what he promoted on the second title page, dated 1745 (Figure 8.6), to his *Myologie complete en couleur et grandeur naturelle* as 'le nouvel Art' in letters to major publications.

Gautier vs Robert, 1748

In November 1748, Robert wrote in *Mercure de France* that he was Le Blon's student and had a royal privilege for a colour-printed *Crucifixion* that followed Le Blon's method.⁴⁶ The next month, Gautier printed a response that he had 'seen with astonishment' that Robert claimed to have a royal privilege covering 'the new Art', as 'this printer does not possess any privilege in his name'.⁴⁷ He continued by accusing Robert of having copied Gautier's manner of using four plates—not Le Blon's three—by mimicking Gautier's work.

This seems to have prompted Gautier to undertake a smear campaign to discredit Le Blon and a parallel marketing campaign to establish his credentials, mainly in the *Mercure de France*. Six months later, Gautier wrote in the *Mercure* that his investors had provided an astronomical 40,000 livres tournois (a real cost of roughly £300,000 or labour cost of £3.7 million today)⁴⁸ for him to undertake 300 dissections and engrave 184 copper plates for 46 images in one series.⁴⁹ The next month, he had the *Mercure* include a colour-printed palette (Figure 8.7) that one-upped Le Blon's in *Coloritto* (see Figure 8.3) to explain his four-colour method.

Gautier's false claims, 1749–56

Gautier regularly changed his angles of attack and did not shy away from the absurd and easily disproved. He published them in high-profile periodicals, his own books and series of prints, and in correspondence submitted to the proceedings of scholarly scientific societies. His claims, of which only a representative few from the *Mercure de France* are discussed below, mainly fell into three themes.

Independence from Le Blon

One pillar of Gautier's polemics was that he did not learn Le Blon's method from Le Blon but invented it himself. For example, in 1749 and 1753, he repeated verbatim the same aims and answers to perceived insults that '*qu'on ose encore aujourd'hui m'accuser d'être élève de le Blond, & que sous le même Titre de l'Art de Peindre en Gravure, on veut confondre mon Système avec le sien, que je mette ces deux Système en parallèle*' (that one still dares today to accuse me of being a student of Le Blon, and that under the same title of the art of painting through printing, that one wants to confuse my system with his, that I will put these two systems in parallel).⁵⁰ He was, however, employed under Le Blon in Paris for six weeks, and he wrote that he was in the workshop when the Van Dyck portrait was prepared.⁵¹

Technically, Le Blon's privilege was for printing with three plates, although Gautier was aware that he sometimes used four and more. Montdorge recorded that Gautier himself prepared the fourth plate (white), mainly for lacework, for Le Blon's 1738 portrait of *Cardinal André-Hercule de Fleury*;⁵² it seems no coincidence, then, that Gautier later wrote that he used such a fourth, white plate for lacework.⁵³ Gautier's claim of originality centres on an additional plate for black. Le Blon started doing this after Gautier left his employ and was replaced by Robert, so perhaps Gautier was not aware of it. However, given the detailed descriptions in his polemics, it seems a safe assumption that Gautier was deeply familiar with Le Blon's (and later Robert's) work, including their earlier use of an additional plate for black.

Independence from Newton's (and Le Blon's) colour theory

Gautier often claimed that Le Blon's ideas were derivative of Newton's and his were not. But Le Blon could not have built on Newton's work even if he had wanted to. It is important to recall that Newton's *Opticks* explored additive mixing, or how white light could be divided into seven hues and recombined, and Le Blon explored subtractive mixing, or how hues could be achieved by mixing physical materials (like paints or printing inks) in the three primaries.

In just one letter in *Mercure de France* of 1749, Gautier mentioned Newton three times, noting in one instance, '*il lui fut facile de faire entendre qu'il réussiroit en suivant le Système de Newton*' (it was easy for him [Le Blon] to make clear that he would succeed by following Newton's system).⁵⁴ He continued his anti-Newtonian campaign with the combatively entitled *Chroa-génésie ou Génération des couleurs, contre le système de Newton* (Chromo-genesis or generation of colours, against Newton's system), which claimed on the title page to have been read to the Academy of Sciences in Paris.⁵⁵ In 1752, he even self-published an article—in his own scientific journal—that aimed to 'destroy Newton's system and establish another', his own.⁵⁶ His colour theory was tied up in ideas about the sun's rays pushing the motion of the planets, for example, and causing volcanoes. Its world maps are a landmark of the early use of colour printing for cartography, but his ideas did not meet acclaim.

Gautier did not relent, despite the time he must have spent dissecting human cadavers, arranging them into anatomical preparations, and colour-printing them. In 1756, he reiterated that an anonymous critic had attacked '*mon talent de graver & imprimer des tableaux avec mon système Physique des couleurs contre Newton*' (my talent to engrave and print paintings with my physical colour system, as opposed to [that of] Newton),⁵⁷ and expounded in detail why Le

Blon ‘*suiivoit aveuglément le système de Newton*’ (blindly followed Newton’s system) while making an ‘*erreur capable de plonger non-seulement le Blond, mais tous les sectateurs de ce Philosophe dans les plus grandes fautes*’ (an error capable of plunging not only Le Blon, but all of this philosopher’s followers, into the most serious faults).⁵⁸ Perhaps he would not have accepted that what he considered Le Blon’s fundamental error, that ‘*la réunion des couleurs matérielles, disoit-il, fissent le noir, comme la réunion des couleurs solaires faisoit le blanc*’ (the union of material colours, he said, creates black, as the union of the colours of light create white), was actually correct.⁵⁹

Independence from Le Blon’s method

Third, Gautier also lied about the number of plates he used to assert the independence of his ‘invention’. For example, he claimed that his way of introducing a fourth plate in black (which was printed first) was superior to and entirely distinct from Le Blon’s use of three plates.⁶⁰ However, Le Blon did use fourth and sometimes fifth plates, including for black. In her study of his career, Sarah Lowengard brushed aside the boast: ‘There is little information to tie this claim to his production techniques.’⁶¹

In his book *Observations sur la peinture et sur les tableaux anciens et modernes* (1753), Gautier credited himself on the title page as ‘*Inventeur de l’Art de faire les Tableaux sous Presse*’ (Inventor of the Art of Making Paintings in a Printing Press) (Figure 8.8). A typical (and often quoted) passage in this polemic is ‘*je veux ajouter ici de seconds preuves, que le Blond n’a jamais pratiqué mon Système des quatre Couleurs, & que je ne suis pas son Elève*’ (I want to add here a second proof, that Le Blon never practiced my four-colour system, and that I was not

his student).⁶² It is followed by many pages of so-called ‘proofs against Le Blon and his students in three colours’ which rehash the old claims.⁶³ In 1756, he continued: ‘*Il n’y a donc que moi seul qui peux dire avoir inventé la vraie théorie de l’impression des tableaux, ayant fixé le nombre de celles qu’il falloit pour réussir. Le Blond ne peut se qualifier de ce titre*’ (Therefore no one but I can claim to have invented the true theory of printing paintings, having fixed the number of them [colours = plates] that it requires to succeed. Le Blond cannot qualify for this title).⁶⁴

Outcries beyond *Mercure de France*, 1756

The backlash was swift and strong. Montdorge’s six-page, fact-based rebuttal was published in the same issue of the *Mercure de France* as Gautier’s first polemic against Le Blon, the 15-page letter of 1749. Perhaps the editors were not sympathetic to Gautier; the issue was laid out so that Montdorge’s letter started on the same page that Gautier’s ended.⁶⁵ The year 1756 seems to have been a point.

Le Mercure de France stopped publishing letters from Gautier, Robert, Montdorge, and their anonymous correspondent in 1756, having given Montdorge the last word. In the same year, Montdorge published proof in his reprint of Le Blon’s *Coloritto*, expanded with his account that Le Blon had not only used four plates beginning with black, but had also demonstrated this to the royal committee to confirm his privilege; he asserted this in an article of the same year.⁶⁶ The book is pointedly entitled *L’Art d’imprimer les tableaux, traité d’après les Ecrits, les Opérations et les Instructions verbales, de J. C. Le Blon* (The Art of Printing Pictures: Treated after the Writing, the Operations, and the Verbal Instructions of J. C. Le Blon). In it, he pithily

demolished Gautier's claims: '*il y a tant de distance entre les morceaux qu'ont imprimés ces Elèves & les morceaux que l'Inventeur apporta d'Angleterre*' (there is so much distance between the pieces his students printed and the pieces that the inventor brought from England) and included another palette, partially printed in colours (Figure 8.9).⁶⁷ The next year, in 1757, Montdorge offered Le Blon's reputation the ultimate defence: he described a black-first four-colour method as Le Blon's in his entry on 'printing in colour, in imitation of painting' in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*.⁶⁸

Gautier reinvents himself, from 1756

Corinne Le Bitouzé suggested that the attacks on Gautier were so fierce that they provoked him to return from Paris to his hometown, Marseille, 1756–64. That is when he reinvented himself by taking on his mother's family name, Dagoty (or d'Agoty), to create an aristocratic-sounding flourish: Gautier-Dagoty.⁶⁹

He was undeterred, continuing to assert his claims. He 'inundated' scholarly societies in France and abroad, as Le Bitouzé put it, after having been elected to the prestigious Académie de Dijon in 1753.⁷⁰ He also included them in his own books, not least an anatomical series from 1759 (Figure 8.10) in which he asserted his 'invention' of his 'new art' in more detail: *Exposition anatomique de la structure du corps humain, en vingt planches imprimées avec leur couleur naturelle, pour servir de supplément à celles qu'on a déjà données au public, selon le nouvel art, dont M. Gautier, pensionnaire du roi, est inventeur* (Anatomical exposition on the structure of the human body, in twenty plates printed in their natural colour, to serve as a supplement to those that have already been given to the public, according to the new art, of which M.

Gautier is the inventor).

Le Blon's three-generation legacy

Perhaps given their financial interest in protecting Le Blon's reputation and patent, his largest posthumous defenders were his investors. Why did none of his students leap to his defence, except for Robert, who needed to defend the prints he completed and sold after Le Blon's death, and perhaps the anonymous letter-writer? Le Blon had few students. Once they left his employ, they made few independent works in his technique, possibly because it was patented and privileged. The brothers Jan (1699–1773) and Jacob l'Admiral (1700–70) worked for Le Blon in London in the Picture Office, then moved to Paris. They produced one colour mezzotint, of Louis XV, which is untraced; Jan produced seven anatomical colour prints; and Jacob changed careers.⁷¹ After working for Le Blon in Paris, Tardieu produced one anatomical print in Le Blon's method. Robert produced a number of devotional colour prints. The only other student to carry on Le Blon's legacy was Gautier.

In the six weeks Gautier worked for Le Blon in 1738, he learned Le Blon's secrets and then quit in protest over his pay.⁷² He created hundreds of his own colour mezzotints over the next three decades. He trained his five sons in his method, and they also produced many prints, but of varying quality. He died in 1785, around the same time as all of his sons. His son Édouard's students included Carlo Lasinio, who carried on using mezzotint colour separations until *c.* 1790.⁷³ Le Blon likely produced about 70 prints in his revolutionary colours, of which about 50 survive in at least one impression.⁷⁴ His direct legacy, of those trained in his workshop or by his trainees, lasted only about 50 years.

Endnotes

* I thank Sarah Lowengard, Andrea Meyer Ludowisy, and Margaret Morgan Grasselli for supporting this chapter. For a detailed summary of Le Blon's life and work, see Ad Stijnman (compiler), *Jacob Christoff Le Blon and Trichromatic Printing*, edited by Simon J. Turner, The New Hollstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450–1700, 2 pts (Ouderkerk aan den IJssel, Sound & Vision Publishers, in co-operation with the Rijksmuseum, 2020). I thank him for his comments.

¹ For technical analyses of Le Blon's oeuvre, see Chapter 9 in this volume, Dionysia Christoforou, Manon van der Mullen, and Victor Gonzalez, 'From Colour Theory to Colour Practice: Printmakers in Pursuit of the Ideal Pigments in 18th-Century Europe'.

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³ Katie Scott, *Becoming Property: Art, Theory, and Law in Early Modern France* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2018).

⁴ Lionel Cust, 'Le Blon, Jacques Christophe', in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 32, edited by Sidney Lee (London, Smith, Elder, & Co., and New York, NY, Macmillan and Co., 1892), pp. 331–2.

⁵ Horace Walpole, *A Catalogue of Engravers, Who have been born or resided in England; Digested By Mr. Horace Walpole From the MSS. of Mr. George Vertue*, vol. 4 (Strawberry Hill [London], Strawberry-Hill Press, 1763), p. 121.

⁶ George Vertue, 'Vertue's Note Books A.f., B.4, and Another', in Katharine Ada Esdaile, Giles Stephen Holland Fox-Strangways, and Henry Mendelssohn Hake (comps), *Vertue Note Books, Volume III* (Oxford, Walpole Society for Frederick Hall at the University Press, 1934), p. 99. Transcribed in Stijnman (comp.), *Jacob Christoff Le Blon and Trichromatic Printing*, pt 1, p. cxxv.

⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre*, vol. 2 (Tübingen, J. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1810), p. 539.

⁸ On their careers, see Chapter 11 in this volume, Alice Nicolliello, 'Colour Printing in Late 18th-Century Italy: Édouard and Louis Dagoty, 1770–1800', pp. 179–80, under 'Édouard's Followers in Florence: Lasinio and Labrelis, 1783–97'.

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¹⁰ Corinne Le Bitouzé, 'Une Entreprise familiale', in Florian Rodari (ed.), *Anatomie de la couleur. L'Invention de l'estampe en couleurs* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France and Musée Olympique Lausanne, 1996), p. 10.

¹¹ Otto M. Lilien, *Jacob Christoph Le Blon, 1667–1741: Inventor of Three and Four Color Printing* (Stuttgart, Anton Hiersemann, 1985), p. 1, figure 1.

¹² Cust, ‘Le Blon’, pp. 331–2. For an extensive biography and account of technical innovations, see Stijnman, *Jacob Christoff Le Blon*, pp. xxv–ciii, ‘Introduction’. Many primary sources cited here are transcribed in Stijnman, *Jacob Christoff Le Blon*, ‘Appendices’, pp. cxxiv–cxlii.

¹³ For details, see Christoforou, van der Mullen, and Gonzalez, ‘Colour Theory’, pp. 155–6, under ‘The Protagonists’.

¹⁴ Johan van Gool, *De nieuwe schouburg der Nederlantsche kunstschilders en schilderessen: waer in de levensen kunstbedryven der tans levende en reets overleedene schilders*, vol. 1 (Den Haag, Gedrukt voor den autheur, 1750), p. 345.

¹⁵ Hessel Miedema, *Denkbeeldig schoon. Lambert ten Kates opvattingen over beeldende kunst. Tekstuutgaven met commentaar*, vol. 1 (Leiden, Primavera Pers, 2006), p. 184.

¹⁶ Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, *Merkwürdige Reisen durch Niedersachsen, Holland und Engelland*, vol. 3, edited by Johann Georg Schelhorn (Frankfurt, Leipzig, Ulm, Memmingen, Johann Friedrich Gaums, 1753), pp. 534–5. For a transcription of the manuscript source, see Stijnman, *Jacob Christoff Le Blon*, vol. I, Appendix 2, pp. cxxvi–cxxvii.

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¹⁸ Robert M. Burch, *Colour Printing and Colour Printers* (London, Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1910), p. 53.

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²³ For digitised impressions (here and following), see London, British Museum, 1918,0713.73, 1928,0310.101, and 1875,0710.1482, respectively.

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²⁵ See London, British Museum, 1841.0612.466.

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- ³⁰ Burch, *Colour Printing*, p. 54.
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- ⁴⁶ [Jean Robert], ‘Estampe nouvelle’, *Mercure de France* (November 1748): 163.
- ⁴⁷ Jacques Fabien Gautier, ‘[Le sieur Gautier, Graveur de Roi, seul pour les Planches Anatomiques ...]’, *Mercure de France*, 2 (December 1748): 179.
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- ⁵² Antoine César Gautier de Montdorge, *L’Art d’imprimer les tableaux. Traité D’après les Ecrits, les Opérations et les Instructions verbales, de J. C. Le Blon* (Paris, P. G. le Mercier, Jean-Luc Nyon, and Michel Lambert, 1756), p. 177.
- ⁵³ Gautier, ‘Lettre à M. de Boze’, p. 168.
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- ⁷⁰ Le Bitouzé, ‘Enterprise’, p. 103.
- ⁷¹ On the brothers, see Stijnman, *Jacob Christoff Le Blon*, pt 2, pp. 61 and 167, followed by a catalogue raisonné; Christoforou, van der Mullen, and Gonzalez, ‘Colour Theory’; and Chapter 10 in this volume, Julia Nurse, ‘Colouring the Body: Printed Colour in Medical Treatises during the Long 18th Century’, p. 168, under ‘Experimental Collaborators and Techniques’.
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⁷³ See Nicoliello, 'Late 18th-Century Italy', pp. 179–80, under 'Édouard's Followers in Florence: Lasinio and Labrelis, 1783–97'.

⁷⁴ For the most recent catalogue raisonné, see Stijnman, *Jacob Christoff Le Blon*.

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