

Dian Parker

The Potency of Deep Dark Brown

As we transition from autumn to winter, into a monotone landscape, we are in what Vermonters call the “stick” season. Before the titanium white snows, we have dun-colored earth, muddy city fog, spectral brown grasses, hardened dirt roads, hot chocolate and brown toast, the browned crisp leaves and husks of flowers that winter birds feast upon. The polished bark of trees and polished wooden tables. Hazel, walnut, almonds, brainy walnuts, sleek brazils. Chestnuts roasting on an open fire. All the browns of earth.

88% of the earth’s core is iron. This iron, that lies deep in the earth’s core, is surprisingly the same iron as in our hemoglobin. Iron oxide is a compound of iron and oxygen and one of the oldest colors used by humans, and extremely permanent. Umber, an earth pigment, contains iron oxide and manganese oxide, originally found in Umbria, Italy. Brown umber was often used in cave paintings. Vandyke brown, named after the Flemish painter, Anthony van Dyck, was made from bituminous earth containing iron oxide. This pigment is lightfast, transparent, and permanent.

For centuries, raw umber has been used by artists for shadowing. The Latin *umbre* means shadow or shade, from which comes the word umbrella. Caravaggio, Vermeer, and Rembrandt used raw umber instead of black for *chiaroscuro*, the extreme contrast of light and dark, for dramatic effect. The Impressionists created shadows by mixing cobalt blue and emerald green, or other combinations of color, avoiding raw umber. Today, the color is used for under-painting and shadowing, and in monochromatic works.

Black walnut is yet another source of the rich color of dark brown. Rembrandt, DaVinci and Van Gogh all used walnut ink in their drawings. Because the ink was made with real walnuts and is extremely acidic, over the centuries these drawings have faded and the paper has deteriorated. Black walnut hulls are full of tannin and juglone, a toxic compound. These hulls have been used as a dye for textiles and hair, and in herbal medicine for their antimicrobial properties.

In Vermont where I live, I gather black walnuts in the autumn from a 200-year-old tree to make a black walnut wash I use in my paintings. I’ve learned through the years that the dye is colorfast, lightfast, and virtually no solvent removes it from skin. In fact, in the Middle Ages, walnut ink was used to stain the hands of criminals in gypsy communities since it remains in the skin for a long time. Quelle terrible malédiction!

Brenda Garand’s “Deluge” series uses black walnut ink, which she makes, and India ink. She also uses clay from the flood that deluged her studio on August 28, 2011 during Tropical Storm Irene. “I used the flood clay because I like how it stains the paper, which I noticed after the waters receded from my house and studio. With walnut ink, you can get dark colors along with light colors by layering and moving it around with a sea sponge,” Garand said. “I can’t predict

how it moves or dries, choosing to leave it on or wash it away with the hose.” Other natural deep brown inks can be derived from Eucalyptus, pisolithus mushroom, and chestnuts.

Brown is a composite of red, yellow, and blue, and can be shaded with black or tinted with white; or a combination of orange and black. Burnt sienna, raw umber and burnt umber, coffee, mocha, peanut, carob, hickory, wood, pecan, walnut, caramel, chocolate, tortilla, tawny, brunette, cinnamon, penny, bisque, wheat, tan, rosy, sandy, peru, saddle, sienna, and cedar are all shades of brown.

The subtle browns of a Piero. The buff of Remington’s buffalos. Hudson River School shadows. The minerals jasper, semi opal, wood tin, zircon, axinite, mineral pitch, tarnished bronze. The olive brown head and neck of a male kestrel. Umber brown of a moor buzzard; wood brown of the common weasel. Liver brown of pheasant; black brown of peat. Goya’s terror. Jacob Lawrence’s earth palette of brown for the flesh of his people.

Delacroix, Andrew Wyeth, Dusty Boynton, Auerbach, Celia Paul, Anselm Kiefer, Georgia O’Keeffe, Albrecht Durer are examples of artists using deep dark browns. Layering their paintings with the earth’s core, fashioning shadows out of iron, roasting their realism with the dust of the earth. Under foot, in the canopy above and around, in our skin, there is a cacophony of brown; subtle, loud, and potent.



Deluge #4

India ink, walnut ink, flood clay, on 300 lb. *Fabriano* watercolor, cold press paper

30 x 22 inches

Photo by Brenda Garand