

Introduction to Painting Techniques of the Masters

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Introduction

IT IS IN THE MUSEUM that one learns to paint... One must paint the pictures of one's own time, but it is in the museum that one gets this feeling of painting, a feeling which Nature alone cannot give. (*Auguste Renoir, 1841-1919*).

Two quite separate introductions could be written to this book. One could prove that it is dangerous and unintelligent for a young artist to absorb too much from other painters, past or present, and that the painter would do well to look only at nature and the recesses of his own mind. The second introduction could also use the history of art to prove conclusively that most painters who have made a mark in history have trained themselves largely by studying and learning from the great masters.

The truth lies much nearer the second point of view than the first.

The Great Masters as Teachers

Since the earliest records, artists have studied and learned from their predecessors, and the greatest artists have often learned the most. Today it is unfashionable to confess that you owe a debt to the past; eclecticism [*composed of elements drawn from various sources*] has become a term of abuse. That does not mean, however, that artists are not availing themselves of the past as much as they ever did. With the good reproductions that are available today, the artist can spread the history of art out before him, and can pick and choose with an ease unknown to artists who preceded him.

Until about a hundred years ago nobody would have questioned the value of learning from the old masters. Copying recognized masterpieces was an integral part of the painter's training. Henry James, the American writer, noted that in the *pensione* [*a small boarding house*] where he was staying in Florence, there were painters from all over Europe who had waited months for their turn to copy the works of Raphael and Titian in the Florence museums. In fact, the majority of the world's great museums (the Prado in Madrid, the Louvre in Paris, and the National Gallery in London, for example) were founded for the express purpose of providing artists with the means to learn from the great masters. Today art educators tend to smile at this approach, and yet the study of the old masters is still the easiest and most profitable way to train a painter's eye & hand.

During the seventeenth century there was a widely accepted theory that a painter should first acquire a solid groundwork of technical training, then should choose a painter from among the accepted old masters whose work particularly appealed to him, and should copy his works until he had learned the secret of this particular painter's excellence. This age produced Rembrandt,

Rubens, Poussin, Guercino, Vermeer, Claude Lorrain, and a host of other great names in painting. The seventeenth-century theory, therefore, is worth careful consideration.

A Self-Imposed Course

Let us apply the theory to a young painter today. He starts by going to an art school and learns how to prepare a canvas, mix the paints, and handle the brushes. He may decide that he does not want to paint like any of his instructors, but feels a strong attraction to the subtle color harmonies of Degas' work.

The student then would find out as much as he could about the materials Degas used, what media he preferred and how he prepared them, what kinds of pigments he used, how he built up the surface, etc. The student could get most of this information in general form from text books available in most libraries (Mayer, Doerner, etc.).

Next, if the young painter did not live close to a museum where a work by Degas was available for study, he would get the best color reproductions he could find, and try to duplicate at least a section of a Degas painting. Last—and this is the crowning touch—the student would have to go to a museum where a Degas was on exhibition, get permission from the authorities to make a copy, and spend several weeks, if necessary, trying to duplicate exactly the same subtle color harmonies and other features of Degas work which had appealed to him in the first place.

After completing this self-appointed course, the student would have learned more about the handling of paint, and would be further towards realizing his other ambitions as a painter than by taking any other kind of course for the same length of time.

The old masters are dead and gone long ago, but as teachers they are still very much alive. Their paintings embody lessons which any intelligent student can learn.

The Great Masters and Changing Tastes

A great advantage in learning from the old masters is that the lessons are never out of date. As anyone knows, an artist's fame in the modern age is fleeting and fickle. Painters who enjoy great reputations in one decade are apt to be forgotten in the next, even though they are painting as actively as ever. A student who bases his style too closely on the work of a *contemporary* artist is taking chances. By the time he has completed his training, his idol may have fallen and may have taken all his imitators down in the crash.

The artists represented in this book are not subject to changing tastes. Many have had their ups and downs, but the status of artists like Renoir, Corot, or Rembrandt is not questionable. Their paintings have survived the changes of taste. By learning from them you are making a gilt-edged investment in your time and education, and you will never have to worry that you are wasting your time and money.

Selecting the Style and Subject

One of the most difficult and important things you will ever have to do is to decide just what kind of a painter you want to be. No two people react in the same way to the world around them. Some derive their satisfaction and pleasure from the marvels of nature; others are interested primarily in human beings, their problems, foibles, dignity, and sorrows; others are fascinated by the play and interplay of color, whether on a peacock's tail or chance harmonies on a painter's palette.

It is important that you find out where your heart lies, because your art will surely follow. This is an invariable rule of art history: only when a painter is painting what appeals to him, in a way that appeals to him, is there a chance of producing a worthwhile picture.

This book can help you make up your mind. Without advice from teacher, parent, or fellow student, go through the book and mark the pictures which really appeal to you paintings which you wish you had done. It is vitally important that this choice is yours, and yours alone, and that you are not unconsciously perhaps-following somebody's leadership.

Next, decide what subject you would really like to paint if you had a free choice. Some people are naturally drawn to landscapes, others to flowers, abstract shapes, birds, machines, portraits, nudes; the range of subjects is almost infinite. Again, be honest with your-self. You will never be able to alter your instinctive preferences, because these originate deep down in the recesses of your mind and memories and it is fatal for you as an artist to force yourself to paint either a subject, or in a style, which does not come naturally to you. For an artist the road to hell is paved with pictures which are not sincerely felt.

Having made up your mind about the subject and the style, follow your convictions. If you really feel a preference for Corot's landscapes, for example, don't let anyone tell you it is out of date or out of style. A good painting is never out of date, and if you follow your convictions without deviation, the world eventually will beat a path to your doorstep. If you climb onto a band wagon, you will always be painting second hand, and probably second rate, pictures; in the long run, you will probably quit painting altogether. Therefore, have the courage of your convictions and paint what and how you like. All of the painters whose works are reproduced in this book did just this, in spite of discouragement and varying fortunes.

Different Types of Imagination

The romantic urge to escape from the humdrum is a constant factor among artists in every generation. The Renaissance artist was convinced that a return to the ideals of ancient Rome was the best hope; the Baroque artist wanted to go even further back, into the classical past of ancient Athens. French nineteenth-century artists wanted to escape to the exotic East of moonlit deserts, hooded sheiks, and perfumed harems. Many American artists couldn't wait to get on the boat to Paris during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many painters of today want to escape into outer space.

There is nothing wrong with the romantic urge to escape. Countless artists have reached their peak performances only when trying to recapture some exotic, far-away or semi-legendary

existence: we have only to look at the work of Delacroix, Veronese, or even Manet. Therefore, if you happen to have a romantic imagination, don't fight it: it is a gift. The ability to represent what is not but might be, is a service to the world: you can lift people out of their everyday lives, presenting them with experiences and vistas which they probably would never know. The artist has always provided one of the escape routes into the realm of imagination, and this is an important function.

Representational Examples

You will note that practically all the examples chosen for this book are representational that is, based on the visible world. This does not mean that the author has any bias against non-objective art. It does mean that the basic principles of non-objective art have always been present in the works of the masters.

These principles were taken for granted by all the great artists of the past. Dynamic space, expressive brushwork, the science of color contrast—and all the other features of non-objective art which have been isolated, extracted, and enlarged in recent years—were all present in seventeenth-century painting. The difference is that a Rembrandt used his technical wizardry as a means to an end, never as an end in itself.

Therefore, it has not been necessary to include in this book non-representational, abstract, or any other kind of contemporary experimental painting, because all of the principles can be illustrated from the older masters.

Best Evidence

You will notice that the word *probably* is used throughout, particularly in the section dealing with color and techniques. The reason is that we cannot be sure just what system or medium was used by a certain painter at a certain time.

Chemical analysis can pinpoint some pigments; literary references may describe many systems and color palettes. Scientists, with an ever increasing array of spectrographs, solvents, and microscopes, can analyze oils and varnishes up to a certain point. However, even when we can refer to an artist's memoirs as a guide, there are always gray areas of doubt; hence the use of the word *probable*. We do our best to give accurate information, but no one can be absolutely certain

Unchanging Principles

Another purpose of this book is to make the artist realize that there are principles in art which do not change from one epoch to the next. Each generation tends to think that it has broken through barriers and cast off chains forged by old fashioned artists, and has found a brave new world of artistic freedom and expression. Looking back on these revolutions in style we realize that what seemed a new horizon was, in fact, a mirage, and that the break-through was only a special application of principles as old as the Pharaohs.

The principles of art, like those of human character, do not change from one age to the next. They are universal, and can be applied equally to Chinese ink paintings, Rembrandt drawings, abstract expressionist paintings, or Renaissance religious art.

Usually it is impossible to express in words the emotional and esthetic reasons why a certain artist has the power to move and inspire the viewer. Often it is possible only to indicate historical or technical reasons for the painter's success in achieving these effects. With this knowledge a student can perhaps apply the same principles to his own work. After all, a surgeon who takes out an appendix has looked carefully at the work of other surgeons faced with similar problems, and has (hopefully) discovered what is best for the patient.

As I pointed out before, there is nothing new in this method of teaching. Since the earliest records in art history, more painters have trained themselves by studying, asking questions, and unlocking the secrets of the great masters who preceded them, than by all the other teaching methods combined

The Age Factor

The term "old masters" conjures up an image of bearded figures as remote as the founding fathers. And yet many of the old masters were not old. Raphael died when he was 37; Géricault when he was 33; Watteau when he was 37; Giorgione when he was about 33; van Dyck when he was 42. Others, by contrast, lived to a ripe old age, like Titian who died at 99.

An interesting point emerges from the study of the lives of the masters: the peak of an artist's career that period when all his energies and talents are brought to a sharp focus, and his creative abilities are fully realized can occur at any time. It can come between the age of 25 and 60, and usually does not last for more than a few years. In other words, if all the works of an artist were lost except those of his peak years, his standing in the history of art would not, in most cases, change significantly. With Rembrandt the peak came late; with Degas in middle age; with George Bellows it was early.

This point is very important because painters who do not achieve success in their youth, often give up. The history of art proves that these young painters are wrong to be discouraged so early. A painter may have to search for many years before he finds the right combination of style, theme, and motivation which will realize his potentialities.

The words *talent* and *genius* are misleading. According to romantic philosophers, talent is the only essential quality for a great painter. According to the artists themselves, talent is less important than hard work, persistence, sound training, and a good eye for color.

Equipment and Supplies

Many of the captions conclude with suggestions and exercises for trying out the techniques and ideas described in the individual pictures, most of which are oil paintings. In order to do these exercises, you will need a few basic oil painting supplies.

Gesso panels Wooden panels were used as painting surfaces by many of the old masters. Several manufacturers make Masonite panels (or other types of panels made of pressed wood fibers), sprayed with gesso. These will do, although sometimes it is advisable to brush on another layer of gesso (a mixture of chalk and glue, available in art supply stores) and sand it down, because the texture of the panel as it comes from the manufacturer is too smooth and perfect.

Canvas A variety of linen canvases, with different weaves and textures, can be obtained from your local art supply store. It is a good idea to buy a 2' × 2' sample of each of the different kinds of canvases they carry in stock; then try them all. If the stores do not carry a wide variety, you may request samples of major brands directly from the art supply manufacturing house. In this way you can become acquainted with what is available on the market. The canvas must be mounted on some type of stretcher or support, of course.

Brushes You will need an assortment of round brushes, both bristle and sable, in addition to the more usual flat brushes. Remember, the flat brush is a fairly recent innovation. Most of the painters represented in this book used either round or oval types. The so-called *filbert* is a good compromise: this has a flat body and a rounded tip.

Painting and glazing mediums Several art materials supply firms make painting and glazing mediums which, although they may not be identical with the blends used by the old masters, will give substantially the same effects. You must do some experimenting before you find the painting and glazing mediums you like best advise you to buy small amounts of each of the mediums on the market and experiment with different combinations.

The most widely used mediums are combinations of damar or copal resin, linseed oil (raw, sun thickened, or stand oil), and turpentine. The mediums developed by Frederic Taubes have been based on the study of old master methods and are commercially available. [*Galkyd or other mediums by Gamblin are recommended*]. Recipes for making your own mediums are given in books by Mayer, Taubes, Doerner (the three most widely read authorities), and a new compilation by Robert Massey.

Wax mediums Several manufacturers are putting out mediums—in tubes—which have a wax content. For many of the exercises in this book you will have to add a little wax medium to the pigments. There are some “underpainting whites” which have a certain amount of wax in them; you can save yourself the trouble of mixing by experimenting with the pre-mixed under-painting whites.

Colors Although no two artists agree on the ideal color selection, a good basic palette for the purpose of this book would include flake white, cadmium yellow light, yellow ochre, Venetian red, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, viridian green, burnt sienna, burnt umber, and ivory black. This is a fairly standard palette, not a large one by contemporary standards but far richer than the range of colors available to most of the old masters.

From the book *Introduction to Painting Techniques of the Masters* by Hereward Lester Cooke, 1972 Edition.
Items in brackets [] are additions to the original text, and not written by Cooke.
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