The Painter In Oil

A COMPLETE TREATISE

ON THE PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUE

NECESSARY TO THE PAINTING

[ILLUSTRATED]

By

DANIEL BURLEIGH PARKHURST

PUPIL OF WILLIAM SARTAIN, OF BOUGUEREAU AND TONY-FLEURY, AND OF AIMÉE MOROT; MEMBER OF THE NEW YORK WATER COLOR CLUB; FORMERLY LECTURER ON ART IN DICKINSON COLLEGE; AUTHOR OF "SKETCHING FROM NATURE," ETC.

"La peinture à l'huile est bien difficile; Mais beaucoup plus beau que la peinture à l'eau."

Illustrated by Murat Ukray

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TO

A. M. P.

THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED.

September 4th, 1897.

PREFACE

Books of instruction in the practice of painting have rarely been successful. Chiefly because they have been too narrow in their point of view, and have dealt more with recipes than with principles. It is not possible to give any one manner of painting that shall be right for all men and all subjects. To say "do thus and so" will not teach any one to paint. But there are certain principles which underlie all painting, and all schools of painting; and to state clearly the most important of these will surely be helpful, and may accomplish something.

It is the purpose of this book to deal practically with the problems which are the study of the painter, and to make clear, as far as may be, the principles which are involved in them. I believe that this is the only way in which written instruction on painting can be of any use.

It is impossible to understand principles without some statement of theory; and a book in order to be practical must therefore be to some extent theoretical. I have been as concise and brief in the theoretical parts as clearness would permit of, and I trust they are not out of proportion to the practical parts. Either to paint well, or to judge well of a painting, requires an understanding of the same things: namely, the theoretical standpoint of the painter; the technical problems of color, composition, etc.; and the practical means, processes, and materials through which and with which these are worked out.

It is obvious that one cannot become a good painter without the ability to know what is good painting, and to prefer it to bad painting. Therefore, I have taken space to cover, in some sort, the whole ground, as the best way to help the student towards becoming a good painter. If, also, the student of pictures should find in this book what will help him to appreciate more truly and more critically, I shall be gratified.

D. B. P.

December 4, 1897

PART I MATERIALS

CHAPTER I GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

There is a false implication in the saying that "a poor workman blames his tools." It is not true that a good workman can do good work with bad tools. On the contrary, the good workman sees to it that he has good tools, and makes it a part of his good workmanship that they are in good condition.

In painting there is nothing that will cause you more trouble than bad materials. You can get along with few materials, but you cannot get along with bad ones. That is not the place to economize. To do good work is difficult at best. Economize where it will not be a hindrance to you. Your tools can make your work harder or easier according to your selection of them. The relative cost of good and bad materials is of slight importance compared with the relative effect on your work.

The way to economize is not to get anything which you do not need. Save on the non-essentials, and get as good a quality as you can of the essentials.

Save on the number of things you get, not on the quantity you use. You must feel free in your use of material. There is nothing which hampers you more than parsimony in the use of things needful to your painting. If it is worth your while to paint at all, it is worth your while to be generous enough with yourself to insure ordinary freedom of use of material.

The essentials of painting are few, but these cannot be dispensed with. Put it out of your mind that any one of these five things can be got along without:—

You must have something to paint *on*, canvas or panel. Have plenty of these.

You must have something to set this canvas on—something to hold it up and in position. Your knees won't do, and you can't hold it in one hand. The lack of a

practical easel will cost you far more in trouble and discouragement than the saving will make up for.

You must have something to paint with. The brushes are most important; in kind, variety, and number. You cannot economize safely here.

You must have paints. And you must have good ones. The best are none too good. Get the best. Pay a good price for them, use them freely, but don't waste them.

And you must have something to hold them, and to mix them on; but here the quality and kind has less effect on your work than any other of your tools. But as the cost of the best of palettes is slight, you may as well get a good one.

Now, if you will be economical, the way to do it is to take proper care of your tools *after you have got them*. Form the habit of using good tools as they should be used, and that will save you a great deal of money.

CHAPTER II CANVASES AND PANELS

You should have plenty of canvas on hand, and it would be well if you had it all stretched ready for use. Many a good day's work is lost because of the time wasted in getting a canvas ready. It is not necessary to have many kinds or sizes. It is better in fact to settle on one kind of surface which suits you, and to have a few practical sizes of stretchers which will pack together well, and work always on these. You will find that by getting accustomed to these sizes you work more freely on them. You can pack them better, and you can frame them more conveniently, because one frame will always do for many pictures. Perhaps there is no one piece of advice which I can give you which will be of more practical use outside of the principles of painting, than this of keeping to a few well-chosen sizes of canvas, and the keeping of a number of each always on hand.

It is all well enough to talk about not showing one's work too soon. But we all do, and always will like to see our work under as favorable conditions as possible.

And a good frame is one of the favorable conditions. But good frames are expensive, and it is a great advantage to be able to have a frame always at hand which you can see your work in from time to time; and if you only work on four sizes of canvas, say, then four frames, one for each size, will suit all your pictures and sketches. Use the same sizes for all kinds of work too, and the freedom will come, as I say, in the working on those sizes.

Don't have odd sizes about. You can just as well as not use the regular sizes and proportions which colormen keep in stock, and there is an advantage in being able to get a canvas at short notice, and it will be one of your own sizes, and will fit your frame. All artists have gone through the experience of eliminating odd sizes from their stock, and it is one of the practical things that we all have to come down to sooner or later, and the sooner the better,—to have the sizes which we find we like best, not too many, and stick to them. I would have you take advantage of this, and decide early in your work, and so get rid of one source of bother.

Rough and Smooth.—The best canvas is of linen. Cotton is used for sketching canvas. But you would do well always to use good grounds to work on. You can never tell beforehand how your work will turn out; and if you should want to keep your work, or find it worth while to go on with it, you would be glad that you had begun it on a good linen canvas. The linen is stronger and firmer, and when it has a "grain," the grain is better.

Grain.—The question of grain is not easy to speak about without the canvas, yet it is often a matter of importance. There are many kinds of surface, from the most smooth to the most rugged. Some grain it is well the canvas should have; too great smoothness will tend to make the painting "slick," which is not a pleasant quality. A grain gives the canvas a "tooth," and takes the paint better. Just what grain is best depends on the work. If you are going to have very fine detail in the picture use a smoothish canvas; but whenever you are going to paint heavily, roughly, or loosely, the rough canvas takes the paint better. The grain of the canvas takes up the paint, helps to hold it, and to disguise, in a way, the body of it. For large pictures, too, the canvas must necessarily be strong, and the mere weight of the fabric will give it a rough surface.

Knots.—For ordinary work do not be afraid of a canvas which has some irregularities and knots on it. If they are not too marked they will not be unpleasantly noticeable in the picture, and may even give a relief to too great evenness.

Twilled Canvas.—The diagonal twill which some canvases have has always been a favorite surface with painters, particularly the portrait painters. This grain is a sympathetic one to work on, takes paint well, and is not in any way objectionable in the finished picture.

The best.—The best way is to try several kinds, and when you find one which has a sympathetic working quality, and which has a good effect in the finished picture, note the quality and use it. You will find such a canvas among both the rough and smooth kinds, and so you can use either, as the character of your work suggests. It is well to have both rough and smooth ready at hand.

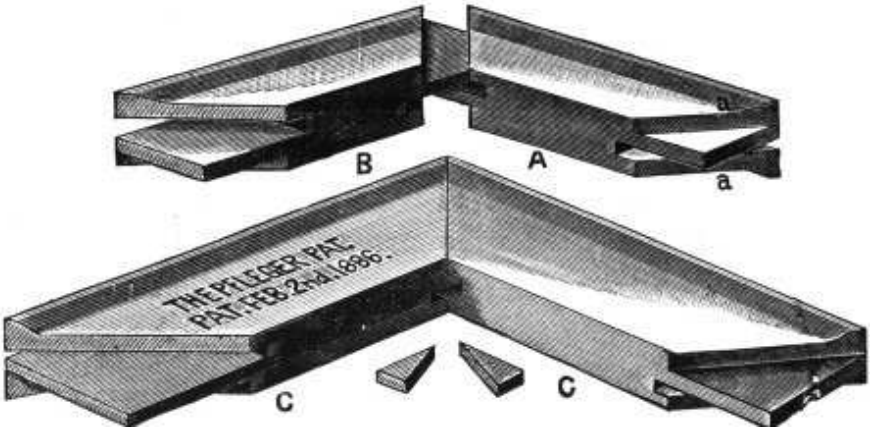
Absorbent.—Some canvases are primed so as to absorb the oil during the process of painting. They are very useful for some kinds of work, and many painters choose them; but unless you have some experience with the working of them, they are apt to add another source of perplexity to the difficulties of painting, so you had better not experiment with them, but use the regular non-absorbent kinds.

Old and New.—The canvas you work on should not be too freshly primed. The painting is likely to crack if the priming is not well dried. You cannot always be sure that the canvas you get at stores is old, so you have an additional reason for getting a good stock and keeping it on hand. Then, if you have had it in your own possession a long while, you know it is not fresh. Canvas is all the better if it is a year old.

Grounds.—The color of the grounds should be of interest to you. Canvases are prepared for the market usually in three colors,—a sort of cool gray, a warm light ochrish yellow, and a cool pinkish gray. Which is best is a matter of personal liking. It would be well to consider what the effect of the ground will be on the future condition of the picture when the colors begin to effect each other, as they inevitably will sooner or later.

Vibert in his "*La Science de la Peinture*" advocates a white ground. He says that as the color will be sure to darken somewhat with time, it is well that the ground should have as little to do with it as possible. If the ground is white there is so much the less dark pigment to influence your painting. He is right in this; but white is a most unsympathetic color to work over, and if you do not want to lay in your work with *frottées*, a tint is pleasanter. For most work the light ochrish ground will be found best; but you may be helped in deciding by the general tone of your picture. If the picture is to be bright and lively, use a light canvas, and if it is to be sombre, use a dark one. Remember, too, that the color of your ground will influence the appearance of every touch of paint you put on it by contrast, until the priming is covered and out of sight.

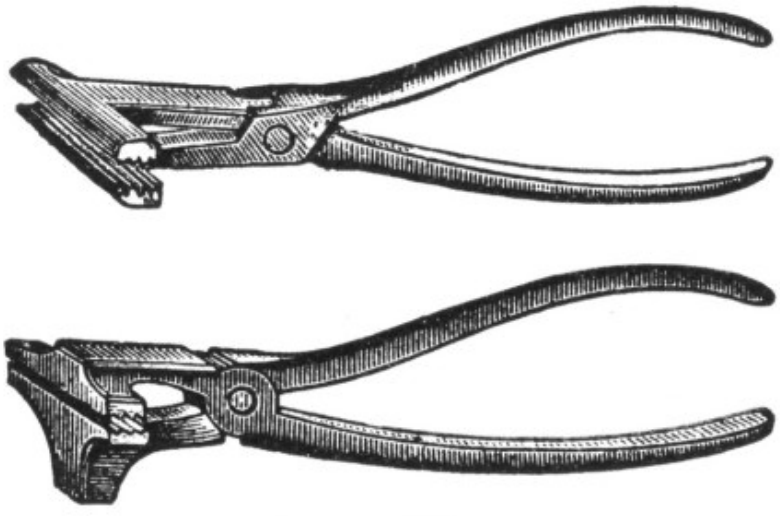
Stretchers.—The keyed stretcher, with wedges to force the corners open and so tighten the canvas when necessary, is the only proper one to use. For convenience of use many kinds have been invented, but you will find the one here illustrated the best for general purposes. The sides may be used for ends, and *vice versa*. If you arrange your sizes well, you will have the sides of one size the right length for the ends of another. Then you need fewer sizes, and they are surer to pack evenly.



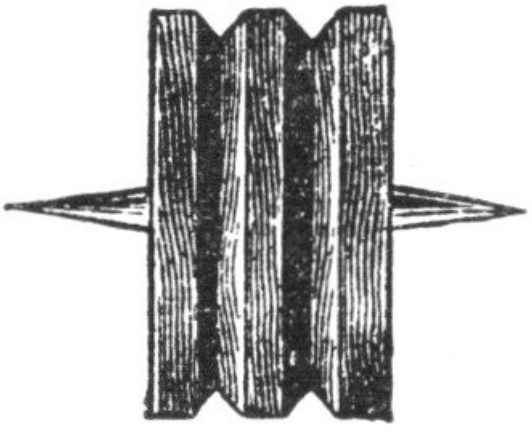
Stretchers.

Stretching.—You will often have to stretch your own canvases, so you should know how to do it. There is only one way to make the canvas lay smoothly without wrinkles: Cut the canvas about two inches longer and wider than the stretcher,

so that it will easily turn down over the edges. Begin by putting in *one tack* to hold the *middle* of one end. Then turn the whole thing round, and stretch tightly lengthwise, and put a tack to hold it into the *middle* of the other end. Do the same way with the two sides. Only four tacks so far, which have stretched the canvas in the middle two ways. As you do this, you must see that the canvas is on square. Don't drive the tacks all the way in at first till you know that this is so. Then give each another blow, so that the head binds the canvas more than the body of the tack does; for the pull of the canvas against the side of the tack will tear, while the head will hold more strands. This first two ways stretching must be as tight as any after stretching will be or you will have wrinkles in the middle, while the purpose is to pull out the wrinkles towards the corners. Now go back to the ends: stretch, and place one tack each side of the first one. In a large canvas you may put two each side, but not more, and you must be sure that the strain is even on both sides. Don't pull too much; for next you must do the same with the other end which should bear *half* of the whole stretch. Do just the same now with the two sides. Now continue stretching and tacking,—each side of the middle tacks on each end, then on each side, then to the ends again, and so gradually working towards the corners, when as you put in the last tacks the wrinkles will disappear, if you have done your work well. Don't hurry and try to drive too many tacks into a side at a time, for to have to do it all over again would take more time than to have worked slowly and done it properly. You may of course stretch a small canvas with your hands, but it will make your fingers sore, and you cannot get large canvases tight without help. You will do well to have a pair of "canvas pliers" which are specially shaped to pull the canvas and hold it strongly without tearing it, as other pliers are sure to do.



Canvas Pliers.



Double-pointed Tack.

When you take canvases out-doors to work, you will find it useful to strap two together, face inwards, with a double-pointed tack like this in each corner to keep them apart. You will not have any trouble with the fresh paint, as each canvas will then protect the other. You can pack freshly painted canvases for shipping in the same way.

Panels.—For small pictures panels are very useful, and when great detail is desirable, and fine, smooth work would make an accidental tear impossible to mend well, they are most valuable. They are made of mahogany and oak generally.

Panels are useful, too, for sketching, as you can easily pack them. They are light, and the sun does not shine through the backs. You can get them for about the same cost as canvas for small sizes, which are what you would be likely to use, and they are often more convenient, particularly for use in the sketch-box.

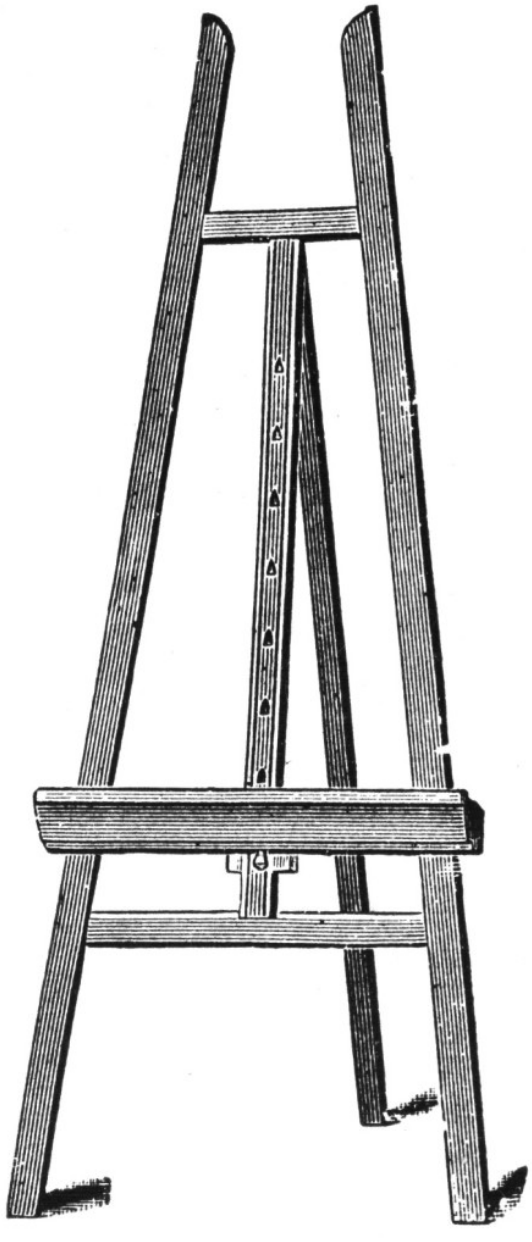
CHAPTER III EASELS

The important thing in an easel is that it should be steady and firm; that it should hold the canvas without trembling, and so that it will not fall as you paint out towards the edges. You often paint with a heavy hand, and you must not have to hold on to your picture with one hand and paint with the other. Nothing is more annoying than a poor easel, and nothing will give you more solid satisfaction, than the result of a little generosity in paying for a good one. The ideal thing for the studio is, of course, the great "screw easel," which is heavy, safe, convenient, and expensive. We would like to have one, but we can't afford it, so we won't speak of it. The next best thing is an ordinary easel which doesn't cost a great deal, but which is firm and solid and practical. Don't get one of the various three-legged folding easels which cost about seventy-five cents or a dollar. They tumble down too often and too easily. The wear and tear on the temper they cause is more than they are worth. It is true that they fold up out of the way. But they fold up when you don't expect them to; and you ought to be able to afford room enough for an easel anyway, if you paint at all.

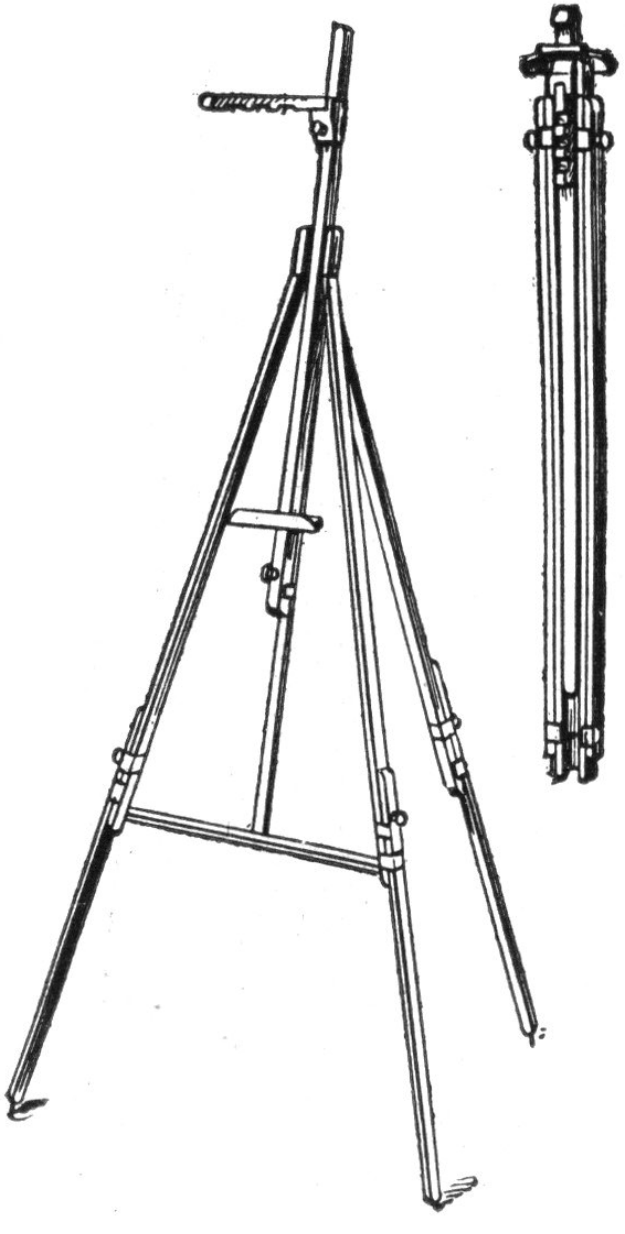
The illustration shows one of the firmest of the inexpensive easels, and one which will fold up into as small a compass as any practical easel will. It will hold

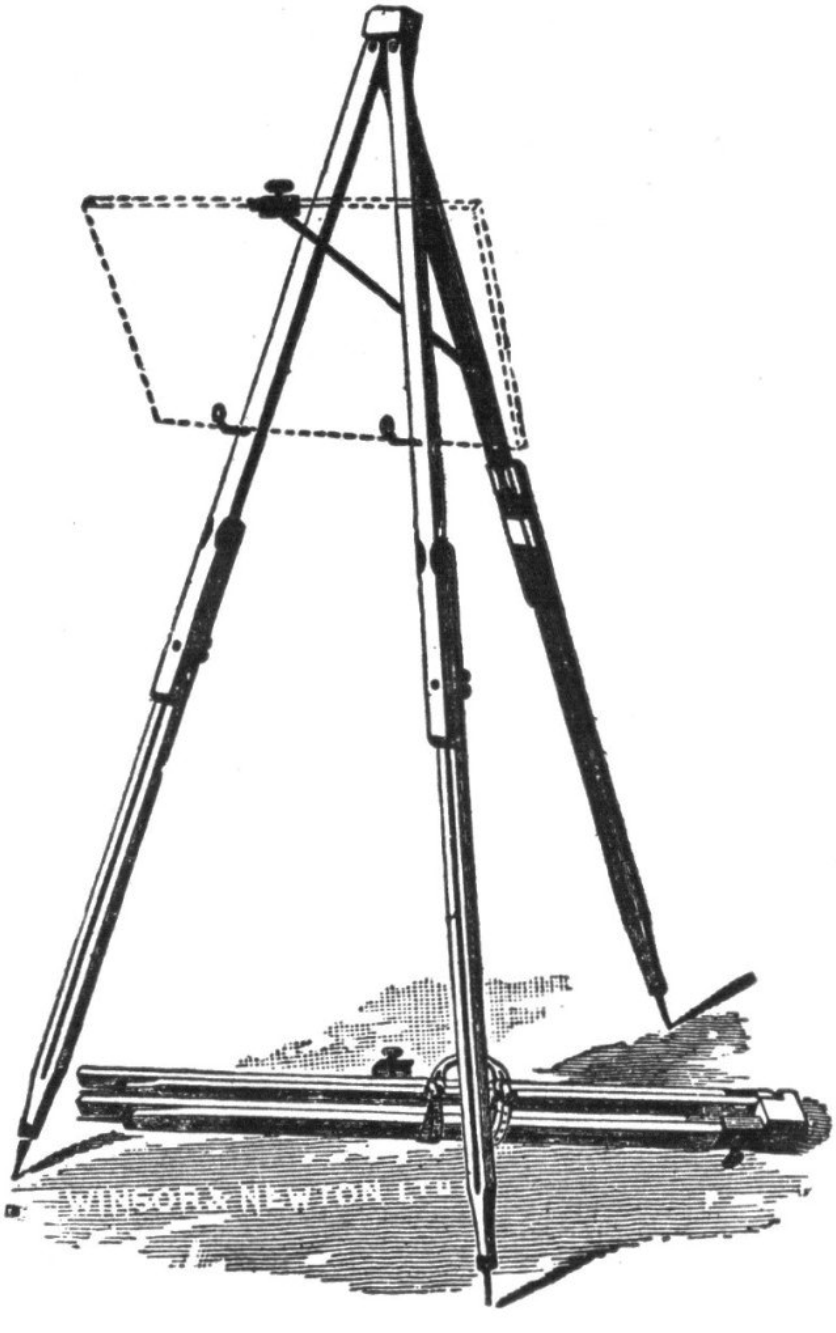
perfectly well a good-sized canvas, even with its frame, and will not tumble over on slight provocation.

Another good easel is shown on p. 17. It is more lightly made, not so well braced, but is more convenient for raising and lowering the picture, as the catch allows the whole thing to be raised and lowered at once.



If you are to save money on your easel, don't save on the construction and strength of it, but on the finish. Let the polish and varnish go, but get a well-made easel with solid wood. The heavier it is, the less easily it packs away, to be sure, but the more steadily it will hold your picture.





Sketching Easels.—The same things are of importance in an easel for out-of-door work that are needed in a studio easel, except that it must also be portable. So if you must have a folding easel, get a *good* sketching easel; or if you can't have one for in-doors and one for out-doors, then pay a good price for a sketching

easel, and use it in doors and out also. There are two things which are absolutely essential in a sketching easel. It *must* have legs which may be made longer and shorter, and it *must hold* the canvas firmly. It is not enough to lean the canvas on it. The wind blows it over just when you are putting on an interesting touch, or the touch itself upsets it, either of which is most aggravating, and does not tend to satisfactory work. You must not be obliged to sit down to work just where you don't want to, a little this side or a little that side of the chosen spot, because the ground isn't even there and the easel will not stand straight. You must be able to make a leg longer or shorter as the unevenness of the ground necessitates. It is impossible to work among rocks or on hillsides if you cannot make your easel stand as you want it. These things are not to be got round. You might as well not work as to sketch with a poor sketching easel. And you must pay a good price for it. The sketching easel that is good for anything has never been made to sell for a dollar and a half. Pay three or four dollars for it, at any rate, and use it the rest of your life. I use an easel every day that I have worked on every summer for twelve years. Most artists are doing much the same. The easel is not expensive *per year* at that rate! It is such an easel as that shown on the opposite page, and is satisfactory for all sorts of work.

If you are working in a strong wind, or if you have a large canvas, such an easel as this illustration shows is the best and safest yet invented, and it is as good for other work, and particularly when you want to stand up. And either of these easels will be perfectly satisfactory to use in the house.

CHAPTER IV BRUSHES

An old brush that has been properly cared for is generally better than a new one. It seems to have accommodated itself to your way of painting, and falls in with your peculiarities. It is astonishing how attached you get to your favorite brushes, and how loath you are to finally give them up. What if you have no others to take their places?

Don't look upon your brushes as something to get as few of as possible, and which you would not get at all if you could help it. There is nothing which comes nearer to yourself than the brush which carries out your idea in paint. You should be always on the lookout for a good brush; and whenever you run across one, buy it, no matter how many you have already. Don't look twice at a bad brush, and don't begrudge an extra ten cents in the buying of a good one. If you are sorry to have to pay so much for your brushes, then take the more care of them. Use them well and they will last a long while; then don't always use the same handful. Break in new ones now and again. Keep a dozen or two in use, and lay some aside before they are worn out, and use newer ones. So when at last you cannot use one any more, you have others of the same kind which will fill its place.

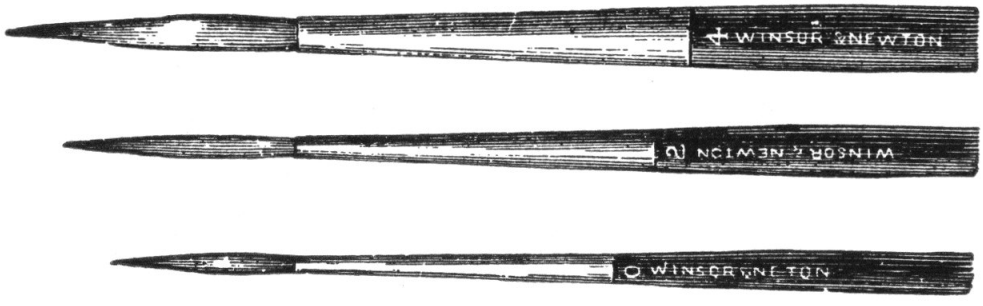
Have all kinds and sizes of brushes. Have a couple of dozen in use, and a couple of dozen which you are not using, and a couple of dozen more that have never been used.

What! six dozen?

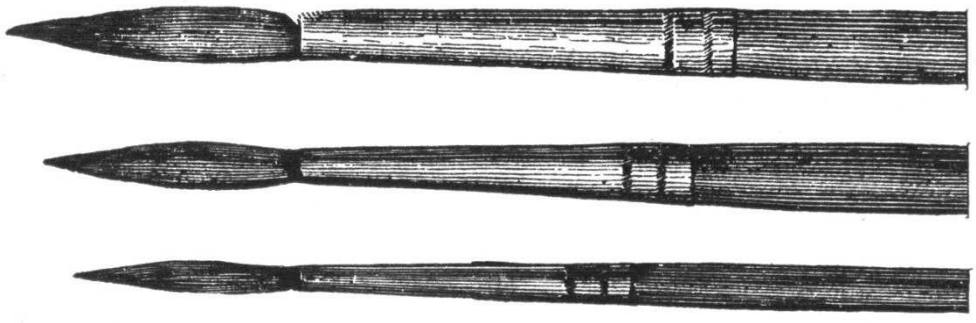
Well, why not? Every time you paint you look over your brushes and pick out those which look friendly to what you are going to do. You want all sorts of brushes. You can't paint all sorts of pictures with the same kind of brush. Your brush represents your hand. You must give every kind of touch with it. You want to change sometimes, and you want a clean brush from time to time. You don't want to feel that you are limited; that whether you want to or not these four brushes you must use because they are all you have! You can't paint that way. That six dozen you will not buy all at once. When you get your first outfit, get at least a dozen brushes. As you look over the stock and pick out two or three of this kind, and two or three of that, you will be astonished to see how many you have—yet you don't know which to discard. Don't discard any. Buy them all. Then, if you don't paint, it will not be the fault of your brushes. And from time to time get a half a dozen which have just struck you as especially good ones, and quite unconsciously you acquire your six dozen—and even more, I hope!

Bristle and Sable.—The brushes suitable for oil painting are of two kinds,—bristle and sable hair. Of the latter, *red* sable are the only ones you should get.

They are expensive, but they have a spring and firmness that the black sable does not have. Camel's hair is out of the question. Don't get any, if you can only have camel's hair. It is soft and flabby when used in oil and you can't work well with such brushes. The same is true of the black sable. But though the red sables are expensive, you do not need many of them, nor large ones, so the cost of those you will need is slight.



The only sables which are in any degree indispensable to you are the smaller sizes of *riggers*. These are thin, long brushes which are useful for outlining, and all sorts of fine, sharp touches. You use them to go over a drawing with paint in laying in a picture, and for branches, twigs, etc. As their name implies, you must have them for the rigging of vessels in marine painting also. The three sizes shown in the cut on the opposite page are those you should have, and if you get two of each, you will find them useful in all sorts of places. When you buy them, see that they are elastic and firm, that they come naturally and easily to a good point, without any scraggy hairs. Test them by moistening them, and then pressing the point on the thumb-nail. They should bend evenly through the whole length of the hair. Reject any which seem "weak in the back." If it lays flat toward the point and bends all in one place near the ferrule, it is a poor brush.



These three larger and thicker sizes come in very useful often and it would be well if you were to have these too. Sometimes a thick, long sable brush will serve better than another for heavy lines, etc.

All these brushes are round. One largish flat sable like this it would be well to have; but these are all the sables necessary.

Bristle Brushes.—The sable brush or pencil is often necessary; but oil painting is practically always done with the bristle, or "hog hair," brush. These are the ones which will make up the variety of kinds in your six dozen. A good bristle brush is not to be bought merely by taking the first which comes to hand. Good brushes have very definite qualities, and you should have no trouble in picking them out. Nevertheless, you will take the trouble to select them, if you care to have any satisfaction in using them.

The Bristle.—You want your brush to be made of the hair just as it grew on the hog. All hair, in its natural state, has what is called the "flag." That is the fine, smooth taper towards the natural end of it, and generally the division into two parts. This gives the bristle, no matter how thick it may be, a silky fineness towards the end; and when this part only of the bristle is used in the brush, you will have all the firmness and elasticity of the bristle, and also a delicacy and smoothness and softness quite equal to a sable. But this, in the short hair of an artist's brush, wastes all the rest of the length of the hair; for it is only by cutting off the

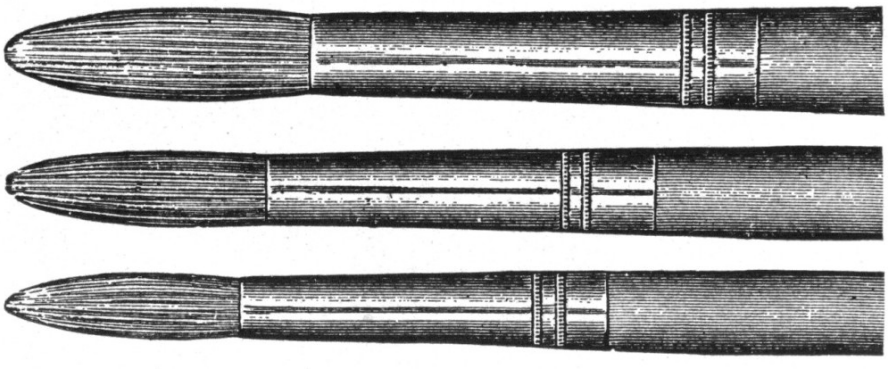
"flag," and using that, which is only an inch or so long, that you can make the brush. Yet the bristle may be several inches long, and all this is sacrificed for that little inch of "flag." Naturally the "flag" is expensive, and naturally also the manufacturer uses the rest of the hair for inferior brushes. These latter you should avoid. These inferior brushes are made from the part of the bristle remaining, by sandpapering, or otherwise making the ends fine again after they are cut off. But it is impossible to make a brush which has the right quality in this way.

Selection.—Never buy a brush without testing its evenness, as has been advised in the care of sables. Feel carefully the end of the bristles also, and see that the "flag" is there. All brushes are kept together for packing by paste in the bristles. See that this is soaked off before you test your brush.

Round or Flat.—It will make little difference whether you use round or flat brushes. The flat brush is most commonly preferred now, and most brushes are made that way. So you had better get that kind, unless you have some special reason for preferring the round ones.

Handles.—Whether the handles are nicely polished, also, is of no importance. What you are to look to is the quality of the bristles and of the making; the best brushes are likely to be nicely finished all over. But if you do find a really good brush which is cheaper because of the plain handle, and you wish to save money, do it by buying the plain-handled one.

Sizes and Shapes.—You will need some quite large brushes and some smaller ones, some square ones and some pointed.



Here are three round brushes which, for all sorts of painting, will be of very general utility. For most of your brushes select the long and thin, rather than the short and thick ones. The stubby brush is a useless sort of thing for most work. There are men who use them and like them, but most painters prefer the more flexible and springy brush, if it is not weak. So, too, the brush should not be too thick. A thick brush takes up too much paint into itself, and does not change its tint so readily. For rubbing over large surfaces where a good deal of the same color is thickly spread on the canvas, the thick, strong brush is a very proper tool. But where there is to be any delicacy of tone, it is too clumsy; you want a more delicate instrument. The same proportions hold with large and small brushes, so these remarks apply to all.

Flat Brushes.—This is particularly applicable to the flat brushes, and the more that most of your brushes will be flat.

You should have both broad-ended and pointed brushes among your flat ones. For broad surfaces, such as backgrounds and skies, the broad ends come in well; and for the small ones there are many square touches where they are useful. The most practical sizes are those shown on page 28. But you will often need much larger brushes than the largest of these.

For the smaller brushes you will have to be very careful in your selections. For only the silkiest of bristle will do good work in a very small brush, and then the temptation is to use a sable, which should be resisted. Why you should avoid using the sable as a rule is that it will make the painting too "slick" and edgy. There is a looseness that is a quality to prize. All the hardness, flatness, and rigidity that are desirable you can get with the bristle brush. When you work too much with sables, the overworking brings a waxy and woodeny surface, which is against all the qualities of atmosphere and luminosity, and of freshness and freedom of touch.