THE SECRET OF THE OLD MASTERS



By

Albert Abendschein

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ALBERT ABENDSCHEIN



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PREFACE

In this little book I have undertaken to lay before the reader the fruits of the labor of twenty-five years. As soon as I could understand and appreciate the splendors of the Grand Masters of painting, I had begun to form a determination to discover the technical principles, methods, and material that enabled the Masters to produce their work. Years ago, I never had any real satisfaction when I did paint a fairly good study head, because I felt instinctively that it was in no sense related to the technic of the Masters. Therefore, the search for the Masters' technic became for me an all-absorbing life work to the exclusion of all else. This life work was more or less an injury and loss to me in many ways. On the other hand it had many

compensating pleasures. I had said to myself in the beginning: "If I can only paint one head with the Old Masters' technic I shall be satisfied." Had I known how long it would take me to solve the problem, I certainly would not have attempted it, but as the years passed I felt less like giving up than I might have at the beginning. As I proceeded on my way in the search I met many that had lost themselves, or fallen by the wayside. I feel now that I ought to make public my theories and conclusions, so that the younger and stronger enthusiast may make fuller use of my discovery of the "Masters' Venetian Secrets." He will be better armed to fight his battles, hard enough in any event without this lifelong technical thorn in his side.

The Old Masters' technic always has been enveloped in mystery and confusion. I think I have brought some order out of the confusion and considerable light to bear upon the mystery. I do not presume to tell the

reader how he shall paint, but I am glad to be able with some show of authority, as I rest somewhat spent by the wayside, to point out to him in which direction the Masters have gone over the horizon. Should anything in this book bring success, lighten labor, make results more beautiful, certain, and permanent, then I shall not have labored in vain.

A. A.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

I.—Introduction: Decay of paintings, artist blamable for decay—Technical copies of the Masters. 1

II.—The Mystery: Varnish painting—Varnish and wax or encaustic painting—Resins or gums—Copal—Turpentine, spike oil, and benzin—Petroleum—Oil . . . 18

III.—The Three Oils: Oil and resin or magilp—Oil alone as the medium?—Canvas or grounds—Modern canvas—Absorbent canvas 36

IV.—Absorbent Ground Versus Nonabsorbent: Varnish grounds—The pure white ground with the veil or stain . . . 57

V.—Tempera 67

VI.—The "Venetian Secret": "Dead Color," or First Painting for Flesh . 77

VII.—Three Colors: Titian 90

VIII.—Titian's Principles Unchanged: Paul Veronese—Rubens and Van Dyck . 102

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
IX.	The Method Invisible: Sir Joshua Reynolds—Turner—Etty	117
X.	The True Medium or Vehicle	134
XI.	The Evidence	151
XII.	Summary: Colors	162
XIII.	Durable Colors: Testing colors	177
XIV.	Retouching and Final Varnish: The white palette—General notes—Conclusion	190

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In reference to the Old Master's technic, in his book the "Graphic Arts," edition of 1886, Hamerton says: "It is wonderful that so little should be known, but it is the more wonderful since eyewitnesses have positively attempted to give an account of the Venetian methods and stopped short before their tale was fully told, and that neither from inability nor unwillingness to tell all, but simply because they did not foresee what we should care to know about, or else took it for granted that we should be inevitably acquainted with all that belonged to the common practice of the time." Hamerton thus confesses his

lack of knowledge on a subject that formed the greater part of his book. It further indicates the general knowledge among artists in England and on the Continent up to that time.

In January, 1891, the following little despairing note came to a New York paper from Paris, the greatest productive center of paintings in the world: "The members of the French Society of Artists are pondering upon a proposed abandonment of oil colors and brushes in favor of some more permanent mediums of preserving their works for posterity. Detaille, Bouguereau, Robert Fleury, Vibert, Saint-Pierre form a committee of investigation. One expert, Gabriel Deneux, proposes a system of encaustic painting by which hot irons would be used instead of brushes. The work, after being branded instead of painted, would have to be treated chemically. The conservative painters, however, hope that some improvement may be attained in the mixture of colors in which

such a radical innovation as cautery will not be resorted to." This indicates plainly that the best-known artists and teachers in Paris at that time (1891) were somewhat at a loss as to how to paint soundly or durably. They were all fine artists and painters, but they were aware that their system was somehow not that of the Masters. Then, in 1893, Vibert published his book, "*La Science de la Peinture,*" in which resin with petroleum is announced as the true medium for painting (of which more anon). Again, in April, 1904, we have this anent some work exhibited in the Salon: "For some time past, X, like so many of the greatest living painters, has been dissatisfied with modern methods of technic. He argues, as I have heard other great painters argue, that the art of painting has been lost; that while the artistic instinct and the intellect of the painter are just as great and keen as ever, he is no longer in possession of the same means as the Old Masters. He does not prepare his canvas in the same

way, nor build up his pictures as they did. He knows well enough what he is aiming at, but not how to attain the end by methods which are at once solid, masterly, and lasting. A profound study, a minute technical dissection, as it were, of the greatest works at the Louvre, have revealed secrets to X which have made him the pioneer of the most brilliant modern retreat to the ideals of painting pursued by such giants as Rubens, Velasquez, and Franz Hals. . . . The actual painting is that of the Old Masters . . . a thin 'jus de couleur' over an elaborately developed 'grisaille.' . . . But Rubens has merely guided X's brush. There is no slavish imitation in the young French master's work." These quotations can give but a faint hint of the number of men who have knocked on the door of the Old Masters' painting room to be admitted to their technical secrets. Through the centuries there have been a few admitted, hardly more than a dozen perhaps. And so every earnest art student, if the Old Masters' great

work has any influence on him whatever, in time is confronted with the problems purely of technic, apart from the problems of drawing, painting, and composition. The selection and use of colors, logical methods, mediums, varnishes, and grounds to paint on remain perplexing questions even to eminent artists, as we have seen. Considering the enormous amount of painting done it is amazing that so little is known on this subject. Drawing, painting, and composition are, in modern times, freely taught in many countries, but I have never heard of the real technic of oil painting being taught anywhere. Every student and artist picks up his knowledge about the technic of his art wherever and however he can. It is mostly chance, guesswork, a friendly hint and some experience that finally weds him to some manner of painting, some favored colors, and some favored canvas. It is only within a few years that the quality and durability of colors has become generally questioned, and some dis-

crimination in their use become evident on the part of artists. Still, this discrimination has not advanced much beyond the acceptance of the ochres and the rejection of aniline colors, most artists knowing enough not to use them when they know them to be such. Every new and loudly heralded make of material is hopefully taken up and tried, and as sadly laid away again, while the same old feeling of uncertainty and perplexity remains. If any artists have hit upon what they considered the real and only technic, they have, like Sir Joshua Reynolds, kept it carefully secret. I once asked a friend in Munich, who had many years of experience in painting, what medium or vehicle he used to dilute the colors on the palette, and he said, "balsam copaiba, spike oil, with a little wax melted in," adding the usual injunction, "don't tell anyone." I thought at the time the injunction showed a narrow spirit—I had heard it before, and have often since, but when I found by my own experience that it

took a great deal of time and study to invent useful and beneficent things, I became somewhat reconciled to the idea.

The one distressing thing about my search for the true technic of oil painting was, that even with an exhaustive amount of experimenting and with notebooks, it was impossible to come to any positive conclusion without the necessary lapse of considerable time. And if the reader will have the patience to follow me through this little book, I hope to prove to him beyond the shadow of a doubt that the conclusions I have arrived at are the only logical ones, and that the principles of the process described are those of the "Crand Old Masters" and no others! I am very well aware that many more or less eminent men have in the last three and a half centuries sought for and claimed to have discovered this precious process; that many theories other than the ones herein contained have been advanced by able artists. Their theories have been for a time, to a great ex-

tent, accepted, but in no case have such theories been sustained by any conclusive evidence, proof, or facts that could be accepted by any logical mind. The theories were all more or less built up on dogmatic assertions. Some inspiration like the petroleum theory would be seized, and an attempt made to fit it in with practice. It would be asserted that the Venetians painted with petroleum, because a vague tradition says Correggio once made a varnish of it! The great difficulties in the search lay in the strange fact that an artist may have found a part of the principles governing the true technic, and yet not know it positively until he had proved it, and by elimination disproved all theories that came in conflict with it. This in course of time even necessitated going over the same ground, and many times experimenting around a circle back to the starting point, and in my case has covered a period of twenty-five years. Many times I was "stuck," to use one of Thomas A. Ed-

ison's expressions, not knowing which way to turn to go forward, feeling that the labor of years was thrown away. Then I would try to dismiss the whole subject from my mind for a short time, to find at the end that a new path was revealed that led to final success. The very simplicity of the problem made it so baffling, like looking for an elephant where a mouse should have been expected. One of the great stumbling-blocks to a quick solution of the problem was the well-nigh universally known fact among artists that oil in a picture darkens and yellows it to the verge of destruction. No one seemed to be able or willing to give any help or advice. Some years ago I heard one prominent artist say that "experimenting was dangerous." His work painted at that time has since reached the dark yellow, and some the brown, stage, all its former charm having vanished. Other capable artists when questioned, revealed on this subject the ignorance and innocence of children. I even knew of a French painter,

a former " Prix de Rome " pupil painting a picture with colors mixed with vaseline! But it did not take him long to discover how unwise this was, for his work never dried, and had to be repainted. And of other painters using equally silly material, there are many. Chemists have been appealed to from time to time, but, excepting in regard to a few colors, have not been able to help us out. The cause of this was not far to seek, since they were not artists and could not know or understand our wants; but, on the other hand, the artists did not seem to solve the problem either.

Without going into the history of oil painting here, let us ask, What is the logical course to follow in establishing true oil-painting principles? It is obvious that the best and oldest we know of in oil painting must be the subject of our investigations and should guide us, and that best must have stood the test of time, not of fifty or one hundred years, but of centuries; the older the better, provided the technic is also combined with excellent drawing

and fine coloring. Therefore, as we look back in the dim past, the works of the Grand Old Masters—Titian, Paul Veronese, Velasquez, Rubens, Van Dyck, Reynolds—must be the source to which we must travel to gain knowledge. There are a few others who belong to this grand company, but only those will be referred to who will best serve our present purpose. Now we must bear in mind that most of those men during their lives had two or more ways of painting, a fact apparent even to the unprofessional eye of the art historians. Even the Masters had to go through a period of evolution. We must choose that which is of undoubted authenticity and has necessarily stood the test of time. This means that it was interesting and attractive enough to have escaped the attic, museum cellar, or scrap heap, and, last and most important reason for our purpose, stood the test of atmospheric changes—light and darkness, removal from place to place, revarnishings, etc.; and further, *its very existence proving that at its*