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PAINTING IN OILS



PETER PAUL RUBENS: Susanne Fourment, "Chapeau de Paille" : *National Gallery*

“HOW TO DO IT” SERIES No. 16

PAINTING IN OILS

by **BERTRAM NICHOLLS**

NEW AND REVISED EDITION

THE STUDIO PUBLICATIONS : LONDON & NEW YORK.

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HOW TO DO IT

the complete list of titles in the series

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| Vere Temple | 33 | FLOWERS AND BUTTERFLIES |
| Mabel Early | 34 | TOY-MAKING |
| C. F. Tunnicliffe | 35 | BIRD PORTRAITURE |
| Percy V. Bradshaw | 36 | "I WISH I COULD PAINT" |
| Russell Laker | 37 | ANATOMY OF LETTERING |
| Hebe Cox | 38 | SIMPLE EMBROIDERY DESIGN |

THE STUDIO PUBLICATIONS : LONDON & NEW YORK

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

IN his treatise on painting, written in the 15th century, Cennino Cennini has a passage in which he describes the nature of the apprenticeship an artist must serve, and the paramount necessity of serving it. He observes: "There are many who say that they have learnt their art without apprenticeship to the masters. Believe it not. I will give you this book as an example; if thou wert to study it day and night without working under some master, thou wouldst never arrive at anything, or not at anything that would make a fair show if placed by the works of the great painters."

I believe Cennini to be right; but, if the only object in painting were to make a fair show in such company, few of us would have the temerity to paint at all. There are many people whose opportunities and aspirations alike are more limited than those he presupposes, but who, working in a more modest field, yet wish to paint in a sound and workmanlike manner. That is within the province of us all, and to that province the scope of this book is confined. I have written nothing about æsthetic problems, about the elements of style, or the underlying principles of creative art, but only about the tools, and the craftsman's use of them. The fact that a second edition of the book is called for encourages me to believe that it has been found of some practical help, and, therefore, may continue to serve a useful purpose.

Steining, 1942

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

SPURRED on by my publishers, and by many correspondents seeking further elucidation, I have revised and to a large extent re-written this book. Much of the text is new, as are most of the reproductions. The latter have been chosen to illustrate a wide variety of technical practice. My hope is that the book in its present form will make good some at least of the deficiencies of the earlier editions.

Steining, 1948

CONTENTS

PREFACES	vi
INTRODUCTION	9
THE WORKSHOP AND ITS EQUIPMENT	11
SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES	16
THE CANVAS	18
TRANSFERRING THE DESIGN TO THE CANVAS	22
COLOURS AND VEHICLES	26
THE LAY-IN OR DEAD COLOURING	29
GLAZING AND SCUMBLING	34
LATER STAGES	36
PROTECTION OF THE PICTURE	40
THE TECHNIQUE OF FAMOUS MASTERS	47

ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece: RUBENS : Suzanne Fourment

- 1 A group of some of the tools and materials used by the painter
- 2 A radial easel, a serviceable substitute for a full-size easel
- 3 A studio rack for storing canvases, frames, etc.
- 4 Checking the proportion of drawing and canvas by stretching a diagonal string
- 5 The drawing and canvas squared for proportional enlargement
- 6 The manner of holding the brush for a dragged touch and the application of a loaded impasto
- 7 How to remove wedges from the stretcher
- 8 The mahlstick in use : VERMEER OF DELFT : The Artist's Studio
- 9 and 10 Transparency of paint : Details from Interior of a Dutch House :

PIETER DE HOOCH

- 11 REMBRANDT : Self Portrait
- 12 REMBRANDT : Self Portrait
- 13 TITIAN : Laura di Dianti
- 14 RICHARD WILSON : Pembroke Castle
- 15 GAINSBOROUGH : The Watering Place
- 16 MICHIEL JANSZ VAN MIEREVELT : A Dutch Lady
- 17 SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS : Mrs. Braddyll
- 18 NICOLAS POUSSIN : Landscape, Phocion
- 19 CUYP : Cattle and Figures, Milking Time, Dort
- 20 TINTORETTO : The Origin of the Milky Way
- 21 FRANCOIS BOUCHER : Cupid and the Graces
- 22 CLAUDE : Seaport, Embarkation of St. Ursula
- 23 COTMAN : The Baggage Wagon
- 24 ALFRED STEVENS : John Morris Moore
- 25 WILLIAM HOGARTH : The Shrimp Girl
- 26 CANALETTO : Colonnade of the Procuratie Nuove, Venice
- 27 JOHN CROME : Moonrise on the Marshes of the Yare
- 28 JEAN-BAPTISTE SIMEON CHARDIN : Study of Still Life

INTRODUCTION

IN 1875 P. G. Hamerton published in *The Portfolio* some observations on technical practices in oil painting. Conscious that the old traditions were being rapidly lost, he collected an account of their individual methods from a number of artists eminent in their day, added some notes on the methods of earlier painters, and printed the whole with a sort of running commentary sometimes illuminating and sometimes mistaken. He was already too late. The darkness of ignorance had already descended on the painter's craft. Indeed he himself speaks of "the general rule of ignorance about these things" and it is indisputable that by far the most valuable part of the compilation is drawn, not from the artists then living, but from Sir Joshua Reynolds's note books and from various sources throwing light on the practice of William Etty.

The almost total neglect of craftsmanship from 1875 to our own day has done nothing to modify "the general rule of ignorance" and the subject of painting in oils is one that we do well to approach in a spirit of some humility.

An art student of today, revelling in his freedom from all irksome discipline, would be likely to encounter an unknown language in any volume where the craft of painting was the subject and the period any time before the middle of the last century. Nor would the difficulty be one of terms merely; it would be rooted in an attitude of mind. The artists' colourman has conferred very great benefits on the workman who knows how to use them, but to the untrained hand, or the superficial mind, such benefits are dangerous. The old time apprentice, grinding his colours and preparing his grounds and vehicles, gained an intimate knowledge of the stuff he was using that is not possessed by his counterpart today. He understood its functions and behaviour; and he valued it more. The training coloured his whole outlook so that his conception of the work of painting a picture was one of making something rather than decorating something already made or using something already made on which to give expression to his fancy. He became, in fact, a craftsman; and it is not too much to say that many a student leaves his school of art today whose knowledge of craftsmanship may be summed up as the application of coloured pigments, mainly by means of brushes, to a piece of canvas that has been somehow whitened.

We have not the advantage now of the old time apprentice's easy and familiar knowledge of his materials and what we can learn of the business must be pieced together from odd scraps and jottings, from maddeningly incomplete records, from scientific researches and experiments and from a close and searching scrutiny of results, both finished and unfinished. We must further remember that when a painter

says in three lines that at his first sitting he did this or that we have the vaguest idea of what he really did do, since there is a wide range of possible treatments that might all be described in the same general terms; and we must remember the extraordinarily subtle, and apparently capricious, nature of oil paint which will behave differently when two people do virtually the same thing with the same materials; and we must beware, if we are painters ourselves, of distorting the evidence to bring it into conformity with our own practice.

Nevertheless, the broad principles can be laid down and a fairly accurate understanding can be reached of the technical methods employed by different schools and even by individual painters. Within the boundaries of these principles there may be, and has been, a wide variety of practice, going far beyond the scope of this book. The intention here is to describe a sound traditional technique which may serve as a basis on which the student may found and develop his own experiments.

THE WORKSHOP & ITS EQUIPMENT

WHILE much good painting has notoriously been done in garrets it is none the less desirable to work in a convenient studio. The most important features of a studio are the size and the lighting. For the ordinary purposes of landscape a room twenty feet by twelve is ample, but for work which involves painting from the model the studio should be considerably larger in order to accommodate the model's throne, or platform, and allow for it to be shifted about to secure alternative lighting on the sitter and, at the same time, give space for the artist to step back some five or six paces to view his work at a suitable distance.

The lighting should be from the north, since direct sunlight entering the studio causes reflections from the surface of the picture with very confusing results. It should be ample, and it should come from the left hand of the artist as he stands facing his picture in order to avoid the shadow of his hand or brush falling on the passage he is executing. In the case of a left-handed painter this condition would be reversed.

The comparative advantages of side lighting and top lighting have been much discussed and will always remain largely a matter of personal preference. It is sometimes argued that, since pictures are generally hung (except in galleries) with a side light, it is advisable to paint them in a similar light in order to see them in the conditions in which they will subsequently be placed. But this argument loses much of its force when it is remembered that the change from a left hand to a right hand lighting is greater than the change from either to a top lighting. And the greater amount of light given by a skylight under normal conditions is an enormous advantage in the dark winter months. The portrait painter, however, has to consider, not only the light on his canvas, but the light on his sitter, who will appear to disadvantage with dark shadows under the brows and an elongated shadow under the nose cast by a too vertical lighting. Where a skylight is used it should be pitched at an angle steep enough to keep out direct sunlight when the sun is at its highest in the summer months.

THE EASEL

The easel is the principal article of furniture in the studio and, if a full-sized studio easel is used, by far the most expensive one. A radial easel provides a cheap and serviceable substitute. It is not nearly so satisfactory as a studio easel proper, but it makes some approach towards fulfilling the true functions of an easel which may be summarised as follows :—

- (a) It must stand perfectly steady on an uneven floor;
- (b) it must be easily

moved from one position to another; (c) it must hold the canvas or panel perfectly steady, without wobbling or dithering, and must be adaptable to hold canvases of various sizes and (d) it must have some contrivance which enables the canvas to be held either vertical or slightly tilted forward and some arrangement for raising or lowering the canvas. It is further desirable that all the movements of the easel should be easily controlled with one hand, since the left hand is commonly occupied with the palette.

Where models are to be used it is advisable to have some sort of platform on which the sitter can be posed. The painter stands at his work and is even a considerable pedestrian, continually moving four or five paces back to his viewpoint and forward to his easel. It is therefore usual to pose the sitter on a platform some fifteen inches high in order to bring his head roughly on a level with that of the artist.

PALETTE

The most convenient palette is an oval one about twenty-four inches long. It should be light, but it is even more important that it should be well balanced. The weight of paint round its outer edge causes a drag on the thumb, which may become very tiring and even numbing unless the palette is correspondingly weighted (usually by an extra thickness of wood) at the near right-hand corner.

BRUSHES

The essential thing about a brush is that it should be fitted for its purpose, and, as the purposes are varied in oil painting, various types of brushes are required. A number of round sable brushes varying in size from No. 8 to No. 12, and a number of long flat hoghair brushes also varying from No. 8 to No. 12, will meet most of our requirements. The sable brushes should come to a perfect point.

Brushes should be washed every day after use. They should be swilled in paraffin in a tin brush washer, a tin with a false perforated bottom which lets the paint fall through into the space beneath. Turpentine is sometimes used for this purpose, but paraffin is preferable, particularly when any varnish medium is used. Turpentine merely thins varnish; paraffin destroys its sticky nature. After swilling, wipe the brushes on a rag and wash them carefully and scrupulously in warm water and soap. Several brushes can be washed at a time by rubbing them gently on a flat piece of soap, then transferring the gentle rubbing to the palm of the hand. Squeeze out the paint and repeat. When the brushes make a free lather on the palm of the hand, without any trace of colouring matter, they are clean apart from the necessary rinsing away of any traces of soap. Wipe them and draw the bristles into shape. A little saliva will help to bring the sables to a perfect point, the only condition in which they should ever be put away.



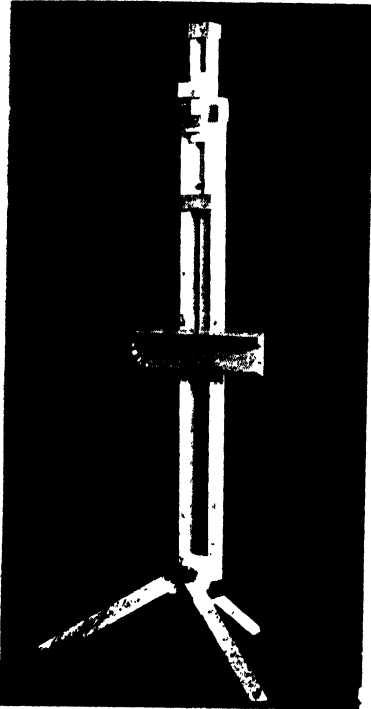
1. A group of some of the tools and materials used by the painter.

SUNDRIES

The palette should be provided with at least one dipper, one-and-a-half inches wide. The type with an incurved rim is difficult to keep clean, but this disadvantage is probably outweighed by the fact that it reduces spilling. A palette knife with a four-inch blade, a painting knife with a three-inch blade, having an angle like a trowel, and a mahlstick may be mentioned among other requisites. A pair of canvas pliers for stretching canvas, a flat varnish brush about two inches wide and the more elementary carpenters' tools are also desirable studio properties.

STORAGE

While dealing with equipment some consideration should be given to the storage of canvas and canvases, frames, stretchers and odds and ends. A rack (see Plate 3), running across the whole of one end of the studio is useful for keeping stretched canvases and frames. This is in effect a large shelf about a yard wide stretching across the end of the room and supported on a double series of inch by inch uprights four to five inches apart. Into the spaces between these uprights canvases and frames can be slipped and are easily accessible and yet out of the way. If the shelf is forty-two inches high it will serve many useful purposes; it can be worked at, standing, and it provides a roomy, flat place for the accommodation of all sorts of impedimenta. A higher shelf will, of course, accommodate larger canvases, but it ceases to be useful as a shelf or bench.



2. A radial easel provides a cheap and serviceable substitute for a full-sized studio easel. See page 11 for points to bear in mind when choosing an easel.



3. A studio rack for storing canvases, frames, etc. If the shelf is a convenient height it can also be used as a work bench.

SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES

ALL the greatest landscapes in the world were painted indoors. We may therefore take it as settled that the plan sometimes adopted, if plan it can be called, of taking a large canvas out of doors to some chosen spot and there painting direct from the scene is not only misguided but entirely irrelevant to our purpose. The practical difficulties involved in such a procedure are many and great. They need not be enumerated, but it may be pointed out that it is virtually impossible to see what a picture is really like when it is viewed in the open air, for its surface shines with reflected light from all directions; and whether you work in the sun or the shade the appearance of the picture will radically change when brought in to an indoor light. Further, while Joshua might command the sun to stand still in the heavens, the landscape painter can arrange for no such convenience. Neither will the clouds stand still for him to paint them. The effect will be constantly changing; and each passing change will strike the artist, and justly, as an improvement on what he is doing. But, apart from such patent objections, the practice is based on a fundamental misconception. The business of the artist is to paint a picture, not to represent a scene, still less to copy one. The scene may, and generally does, suggest a picture by offering certain materials out of which a picture can be partly made. Stone and cement may be the materials of a building, but the building is not in them; neither is a picture in a natural scene, nor the design of a portrait in its sitter. It is, in fact, into his own imagination that the artist must look to find his picture; and when a particular scene stimulates his creative faculty it is not the scene that excites him but the pictorial conception born in his mind as he looks at it.

It cannot be too strongly affirmed that the moment we set out to represent natural appearances on a flat surface enclosed in a rectangular frame we have embarked on something that is entirely arbitrary and conventional throughout. A black and white drawing represents without the use of colour something that is in fact coloured. This is not a mere selection of the element of form. In landscape it may express the elusive effect of atmosphere; in portraiture it may hint at colour. In Holbein's working drawings, for example, a blonde is clearly distinguished from a brunette and dark fabrics from light. The most obvious of all conventions is the use of an outline to define the boundaries of shapes, since an outline is something that does not exist in nature at all. A picture painted in full colour is not less conventional, but more conventional than an outline drawing by reason of its wider scope. Indeed it may be said that the more nearly a painting approaches monochrome the fewer the conven-

tions employed. And it may be painted in monochrome, or with a sparing use of colour, or in bold and positive colour; it may be treated in the cool, silvery key of Velasquez or the warm, golden key of Rembrandt; and all these varieties of treatment, though arbitrary, are equally just.

Rhythm, balance, harmony, proportion—these are all questions for the painter's attention. Nature has all these qualities, but they exist in a picture only in relation to the space to be filled, to the area within the frame. The rhythm of nature has no relation to the parallelogram of the frame; it is a different rhythm, a rhythm of its own. Nor will any segment of nature, cut off by what is quaintly called a view-finder, possess this rhythm or harmony in relation to the frame. The painter must therefore concern himself with creating a colour harmony; he must occupy his mind with the quantitative area filled by this colour or that in relation to the total size of his canvas; he must consider whether a particular colour needs to be repeated or echoed for the completion of his design and, if so, of what size, in what shape and where; he must skilfully deploy his oppositions of warm and cold colour; and, if his picture is based on an actual scene, he must continually ask himself, not what colour was there, but what colour his picture requires.

The proper approach to these problems is through working drawings. There may have been painters possessed of an enviable power of conceiving a design and carrying it out on the canvas without preliminary studies, but the student would do well to assume that he has no such power. He would do well to lay to heart the saying attributed to Michelangelo, "The beginning and the middle and the end of all great art is drawing"—one of those grand overstatements which, though not literally true, convey by their very exaggeration the urgency of the meaning. And the urgency cannot be exaggerated. For, not only is drawing the foundation on which all is built, but the act of drawing, of sitting long hours before a particular subject and watching its continual changing under changing conditions, stamps on the memory, often unconsciously and effortlessly, an indelible impression; and by the regular practice of drawing the mind is gradually stored with something that goes beyond mere knowledge—the sort of thing that can be analysed and reduced to principles or expressed in words—and is rather a kind of *pictorial understanding*, the very stuff of which pictures are made.

Whatever medium we may employ for this drawing, then, it is not only, or even chiefly, what we get on to the paper that matters, but what we get into our heads. Carefully finished drawings, rough notes, hasty impressions, scraps and jottings, anything where genuine observation is registered—all alike will be grist to the mill. But, since it is desirable to make our mistakes beforehand and not on the actual canvas, we should make them in these drawings. When we have produced a working drawing in which the general plan of the picture is settled we can turn our attention to the canvas.

THE CANVAS

OIL painting is usually executed on canvas either stretched or mounted on panel. Panels were formerly rather elaborately prepared with a gesso surface brought to a perfectly smooth finish. Such a ground is adapted for tempera rather than oil painting and need not now be considered. The "tooth" afforded by the grain of canvas is particularly suited to the oil medium.

THE CHOICE

Most canvas supplied by artists' colourmen is primed with an oil priming and there are at least three disadvantages about an oil priming. It is not so white as a gesso priming; it darkens with time; and its somewhat greasy surface is less sympathetic than gesso. Moreover, the artist who primes his own canvas primes it to suit his own purposes. The raw cloth can be bought in a great variety of surfaces either from the artists' colourman or from other sources, and it should be chosen with a view to its suitability to the nature of the work to be done. Where boldness of effect is desired ordinary hessian provides a delightful surface on which to paint, but it has the drawback of being extremely flimsy. Certain canvases made for tarpaulins or rickcloths have a very similar "touch" and are at the same time admirably substantial. Certain hearthcloths are procurable in a medium or a fine grain, the latter being very suitable for delicate work. No. 1 sailcloth is the most imperishable of all; it has a pronounced grain, but without coarseness, since it is very closely woven.

The canvas chosen, it must be stretched or mounted on panel. For moderate sized work the panel has great advantages. It must be remembered that canvas expands and contracts very considerably with atmospheric changes either of temperature or humidity, thus imposing a strain on the paint film, which is more rigid. This expansion and contraction are almost eliminated when the canvas is mounted on panel, and there is the further advantage that the picture is far less vulnerable to mechanical injury either from the face or the back. For large pictures, however, panels are impracticable and the canvas must be stretched.

STRETCHING THE CANVAS

Many artists' colourmen now supply stretchers that can be used on either side, that is to say, they are bevelled on both sides from the outer to the inner edge and the inner corners rounded. Where this is not the case care must be taken that the bevelled side is placed against the canvas. The stretcher should be checked with a T square to

ensure that it is perfectly rectangular, since stretchers are easily knocked out of square. Any stout canvas, such as sailcloth or rickcloth, which has been kept folded is liable to develop creases too pronounced to be pulled out by the ordinary process of stretching; where a canvas is so creased it should be damped and ironed before stretching. The actual process of stretching is simple enough, and the following is only one of several alternative methods.

CUTTING THE CANVAS

The canvas should be cut about three inches wider each way than the size of the stretcher so that there will be about an inch-and-a-half overlap all round. Lay the canvas on a flat, clean surface and place the stretcher centrally on it, bevelled side down. At the centre of each side bend the overlap of the canvas over and fasten it to the back of the stretcher by a tack half driven in. Copper tacks have the advantage that they do not rust, but they are very troublesome to remove if the stretcher should be required again for another canvas; on the whole galvanised tacks may be regarded as the most practical. Turn the canvas on its end, gently pull up one corner with the canvas pliers and secure it with a tack half driven in to the edge of the stretcher. Do the same to the other corner on the same side. Now turn the canvas the reverse end up and do the same to the two corners on this side; but in this case the canvas can be pulled up firmly with the pliers because it is now held at the opposite end. The cloth is now pulled taut in a lengthwise direction at the four corners and must next be strained in a breadthwise direction. Turn it on to a third side, take a firm pull with the pliers at one corner, with a claw hammer remove the half driven in tack which holds the lengthwise pull at this corner, insert it to take the breadthwise pull and drive it home. This is the first tack to be driven home. Now drive home another tack in the place of the one just removed, keeping the cloth stretched with the pliers. The cloth is now pulled taut at this corner in both directions. The other corners should be treated in the same way. The corners finished, it remains to run round the sides, driving in the tacks at a distance of about two inches apart. Before each tack is driven in the canvas must be held taut with the pliers at that point. The tacks that were half driven in to the back of the stretcher can be removed as they are come to. The canvas should now be of drum-like tautness, and the job may be finished by tacking down the overlap of the canvas to the back of the stretcher.

MOUNTING CANVAS ON PANEL

Where it is desired to mount the canvas on panel the advantages of plywood are incontestable. It varies in thickness; seven ply about three-eighths of an inch thick is suitable for most purposes. It should be smooth grained and perfect in surface. When the panel is cut to the required size the canvas could perfectly well be glued on

to it, but it will be found in practice that as the panel absorbs the glue the grain of the wood swells and results in a faint undulation of surface which can be felt by the brush even through a primed canvas. This is very undesirable, but is fortunately easily preventable by painting the panel, preferably with an enamel paint, allowing it to dry thoroughly and then gluing the canvas down with good carpenter's glue. In order to avoid delay while this paint is drying it is a good plan to lay in a stock of plywood sheets and paint them in readiness to be cut to the required size when wanted.

An alternative method of mounting the canvas by means of white lead and varnish has much to recommend it, but where this method is used weeks must elapse before the panel is dry enough for use by an artist who has any consideration for the permanence of his picture.

THE GESSO PRIMING

After the canvas is stretched or mounted it should be given a coat of size—either good glue size or vellum size. Tradition favours the latter, but it is difficult to find much reason for this since both are durable in dry conditions and both will mildew and decay in contact with damp. When the size is dry the surface should be lightly rubbed with fine glasspaper to remove any undue roughness or hairiness which some raw cloths possess. It is then ready for the priming proper.

Prepared gesso can be bought in a convenient form or it can be prepared by slaking superfine plaster of paris, a procedure which takes time and has, I think, no advantage excepting on the score of cost. On a sheet of glass the prepared gesso can be mixed with a little water and thin size by means of a palette knife (either glue size, vellum size or gelatine). It should then be lightly brushed over the canvas with a flat, two-inch varnish brush. The gesso should be freely diluted with size and applied thinly. While wet it has very little covering power and appears as hardly more than a milky film on the canvas. In a few minutes the glistening surface moisture will have dried off, or been absorbed, and a second coat should be added, a little thicker than before, but still quite thinly. It is wise to err on the side of thinness since gesso applied thickly is apt to smother the grain of the canvas with a rather clotted effect which is most undesirable, whereas, if the priming is too thin, a third coat can be added. A very little practice, however, will enable even a beginner to lay the two coats so that the surface dries out to a perfectly even and brilliant whiteness.

SIZING

This brilliant whiteness is the very essence of the whole matter because transparency obviously depends for its richness and luminosity on the light ground shining through. The ground, as described so far, however, would be quite absorbent and would drink

up the paint like blotting paper if it were applied direct. To the dry gesso, therefore, a thin coat of size should now be given, to be followed if necessary by a second thin coat in order to render the ground non-absorbent to oil paint or oleaginous vehicles.

It is perhaps desirable to explain the true function of this final coat of size. If paint is applied to an absorbent ground, however white that ground may be, it soaks in and the ground ceases to be white; it ceases to reflect the light and becomes in fact a dark or coloured ground. But if the ground is rendered non-absorbent by a coat of size transparent colour can be laid over it with the effect of a stain. The ground itself is not affected and shines through much in the way a white paper shines through a water-colour wash.

When this size is dry the canvas is ready for use and the real work of painting can begin.

TRANSFERRING THE DESIGN TO THE CANVAS

THE scope of the present book is limited to purely technical matters; it is concerned with craftsmanship and makes no attempt to deal with those principles of design by which the creative imagination is governed. It is true that they cannot be left entirely out of account, design and craftsmanship being too intimately linked together to be treated as entirely separate matters, but it will be assumed at this stage that the design of the picture to be painted has already been settled by means of preliminary studies and that a drawing is to hand which can be used as a working drawing.

SQUARING

The first step is to transfer this drawing to the canvas. This can conveniently be done by means of squaring both surfaces. The canvas will normally be larger than the drawing, and can be of any size that the nature of the design suggests, but it must be of the same proportion, height to width, as the drawing itself. This proportion may be determined arithmetically, or it may be checked mechanically in the following way:—

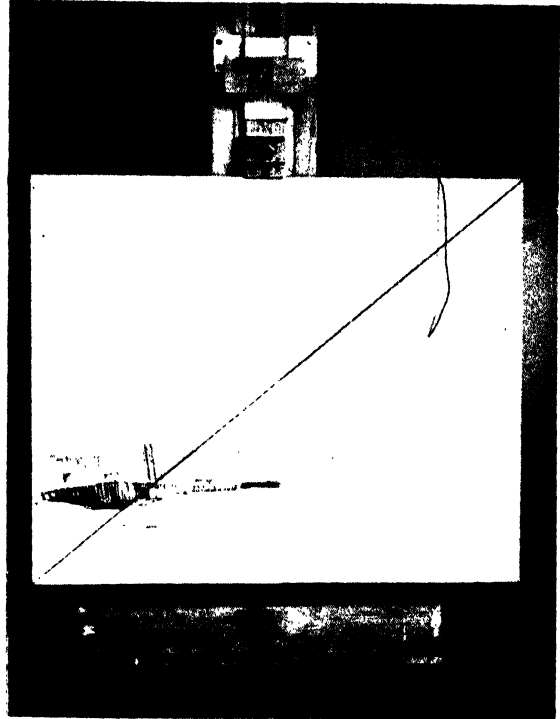
The drawing is laid flat on the canvas with its lower left-hand corner exactly on the lower left-hand corner of the canvas and its two edges exactly on the corresponding edges of the canvas. A line is now taken from this corner diagonally through the opposite corner of the drawing and produced to the edge of the canvas. A stretched string serves this purpose very well. If the line exactly cuts the opposite corner of the canvas then the proportion, height to width, is the same as in the drawing.

If the sides of both surfaces are now divided into four equal parts and parallel lines ruled across to mark these divisions then both will be divided into sixteen squares and the transference of the design to the canvas will be merely a matter of filling up these squares with that part of the design which falls within them—a very much simpler proceeding than placing the whole thing on a blank canvas. It may be compared with finding a place on a map by means of map squares rather than searching the whole map.

DRAWING THE SQUARES

The squares can be drawn on the canvas with hard Venetian charcoal, sharpened to a chisel point, with which a fine and accurate line can be produced. The drawing can be squared with an ordinary pencil if it is not desired to keep it unmarked. Where it is desired to preserve the drawing intact there are several alternative methods of

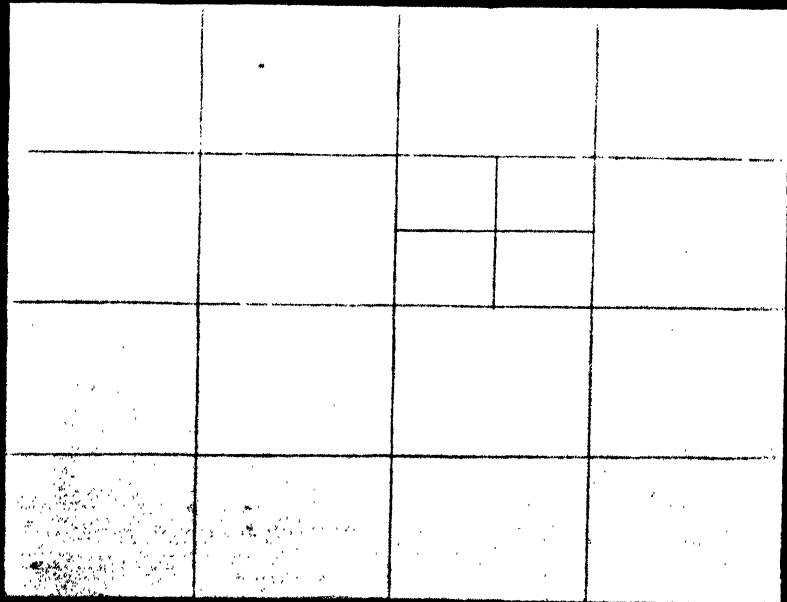
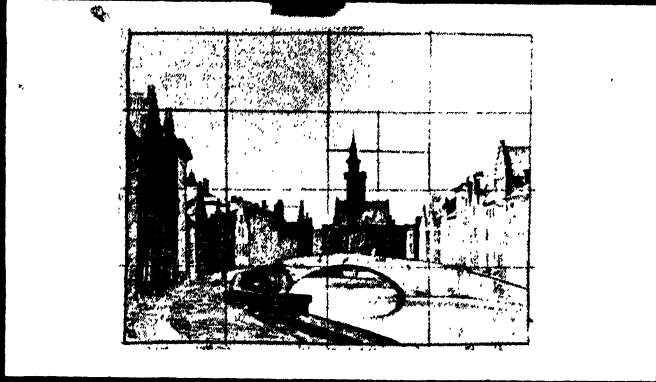
4. Checking the proportion of drawing and canvas by stretching a diagonal string.



squaring. The device of stretching black cotton over drawing pins set at the edges of the drawing is often used. But probably the most practical plan is to employ a sheet of glass or a sheet of talc laid against the drawing. The squares can be measured off, and ruled on the glass or talc with a chinagraph pencil, or lithographic chalk, or even a stick of grease-paint cut to an edge. Alternatively, the glass may be given a coat of thin size, which is quite transparent, and provides a surface on which a 6B pencil will “take”. The same glass and the same coat of size can be used over and over again, since the pencil lines can be readily wiped away by a rag dipped in paraffin. Size is insoluble in paraffin, and it will be found quite undisturbed, and ready for the next job.

The number of squares can be increased to any extent desired, or particular squares can be subdivided where a particularly complex passage of drawing occurs in order to facilitate the plotting of that area. Too many squares, however, are apt to result in confusion and the possibility of mistaking one square for another.

Still using the Venetian charcoal, cut to a fine edge, the drawing is now made on the canvas, square by square. It should be entirely in line, without light and shade, though the outline of the shadow shapes should be indicated. It is in the nature of a diagram. And the whole operation, as will be seen, is a purely mechanical one.



5. The drawing and canvas squared for proportional enlargement.

INKING IN

When this diagram is completed in charcoal the subsequent procedure will depend on the nature of the subject to be painted. Assume for a moment that it is an architectural piece involving the exact rendering of precise architectural details, the sort of thing that Canaletto was fond of painting. In such a case, where the nicest accuracy is all important, a firmer and more permanent diagram is needed than charcoal can give. It should therefore be "inked in" with diluted ink. Ordinary ink, diluted to half its strength with water, gives about the right strength of line. There is no reason why straight lines should not be ruled, provided it is done with judgment. They should not be monotonous lines, all of equal strength and thickness. The line under a cornice, for example, would be stronger and thicker than the fine line denoting its upper edge; and a free drawing of a bit of ornament or group of figures will contrast very happily with the severe precision of structural lines of architecture.

This ink line, which will prove invaluable in one type of subject, would be a positive hindrance in another where looseness of handling was essential to the theme or an effect of vaporous atmosphere the *raison d'être* of the picture. But it might be the case that one part of the canvas called for precision and that this precision was to be emphasised by the opposition of large and freely handled masses elsewhere. In this case the part or parts demanding precision would be inked in and the remainder left in the charcoal diagram.

COLOURS AND VEHICLES

THE choice of the colours and the vehicles to be used have now to be considered. Colours are offered to us by the artists' colourman in bewildering number and variety, but we shall do well to follow the maxim "Few colours and sound". Sir Joshua was persuaded that Apelles was a good painter because he is reported to have used only four colours, and it was said of Etty by one of his contemporaries "With anything approaching a yellow, a red, a blue and a white he could produce a sweetly coloured picture". Too "sweetly coloured" no doubt; for Etty, though a born painter, is open to censure on the score of taste, never on the score of brilliance. To limit the palette to four colours would certainly be a drastic restriction, implying a profounder knowledge of them than any beginner can possibly have. On the other hand, to extend the palette unnecessarily is to create unnecessary difficulties. Apart from the merely chemical aspect of the case, apart from the fact that certain combinations of colours may be sound or unsound from the point of view of permanence, it will be found that different colours have different qualities. Their peculiarities have to be learnt by familiarity, so that every addition to the palette may be regarded as a new problem.

The most important of all pigments is Flake White and the second in importance is black. Ivory Black is an excellent colour, but Blue Black may be preferred for its cooler tone. The earth colours—the ochres (including Light Red) the Siennas, the Umbers and Terre Verte—are all valuable, as is Indian Red. There are numerous blues to choose from. We need no longer concern ourselves with the costly lapis lazuli of the old masters since Permanent Blue, Prussian Blue and Monastral Blue are all durable and useful colours. Viridian is a handsome green and Rose Madder may be called in on special occasions. Vermilion is a colour by itself. It is awkward, but beautiful stuff; and as its special colour and quality cannot be matched with any other pigment it will be required from time to time for its special purpose. No bright yellow has been mentioned, for bright yellows are a dangerous luxury best avoided unless absolutely necessary when Aurora Yellow may be used. Such colours may be indispensable in painting flowers, for example, or brightly coloured fabrics; in landscape they create more difficulties than they solve. Richard Wilson expressed the colour of English landscape more justly than any other artist, and he had no yellow on his palette but ochre and Naples Yellow, and no brighter green than Terre Verte.

The colours that have been mentioned, though but a small selection from the artists' colourman's list, are embarrassingly numerous and should be considered as pigments with which experiments may be made from time to time. Such experiments

are valuable, but they may be wisely deferred until the student has gained a considerable familiarity with one simple palette; and when they are made there should be no addition to the *number* of colours used, one being discarded when another is to be tried.

The following is suggested as a simple palette for normal use:—Flake White, Yellow Ochre, Indian or Light Red (according to purpose) Terre Verte, Monastral Blue, Blue Black and Burnt Umber.

VEHICLES

The choice of vehicle or medium to be employed is at least as important as that of the colours themselves. Vehicles for oil painting may be roughly described as either spirit vehicles (such as turpentine), oils, (such as linseed, poppy or walnut oil), balsams, varnishes, or wax, or some combination of these. Spirit vehicles, such as turpentine, dry matt and, even when subsequently varnished, have no effect of richness because the particles of colour are brought closer together than in an oily or resinous vehicle. The oil vehicles have the property of darkening with time—even a very little time—and are extremely limited in their scope. There are all sorts of qualities of pigment which delight us in the old masters impossible to produce with linseed oil. Volumes have been written on the medium of the Van Eycks, but, so far as I know, nobody has suggested that they were painted with linseed oil. The little raised spots with which Canaletto indicated such sparkling high lights on his figures—to take the first example that comes to hand—could not be laid with linseed oil. Some form of dryer or some more resinous vehicle must be employed.

OIL VARNISHES

The oil varnishes supply this to some extent, and there are a number of preparations on the market which contain some form of varnish and which make possible many qualities which are not possible with linseed oil alone. The balsams, such as Venice turpentine or Canada Balsam, are very attractive when thinned with turpentine, but they have the drawback of being extremely brittle. Their use would be unsafe on stretched canvas owing to the liability to mechanical injury. They can, however, be rendered sufficiently elastic by an admixture of wax. Such a mixture adds greatly to the practical possibilities of the medium, which has also a fine quality of permanence. The colours do not change, and are safely locked up from the attacks of atmospheric impurities. The vehicle can be prepared in the following way:—

Two parts of Canada balsam to one of turpentine are shaken up in a bottle until perfectly liquid. The wax is then shredded into a pot so that—with only the lightest pressing down—the pot is full. The best wax is ozokerite. Failing this, paraffin wax will serve. Heat the pot of wax in a saucepan of water until it is liquid. When liquid

it takes up far less room than when shredded, so that the pot will now be only about one-third full. Pour in the mixture of balsam and turpentine until the pot is again full, allowing only a slight margin to permit of stirring. This addition will cool the wax; the pot must be kept hot and the contents stirred gently with a palette knife until the whole is quite liquid. The knife should be warmed before it is used; otherwise the wax will stick to it. When liquid the preparation is allowed to cool; it is then ready for use.

It may be remarked in passing that all the ingredients are highly inflammable and suitable precautions must be taken.

This vehicle has a consistency which may be compared to that of butter in very hot weather. It is too stiff to be used in that form but it can be readily thinned as required for use and will keep for months in a pot with an air-tight lid. Before beginning to paint, a little is taken upon the palette and a few drops of the balsam and turpentine are added. It is then well mixed with the knife and put in the dipper. Some further thinning will be needed in the course of painting, since paint mixed with this vehicle rapidly hardens on the palette. Accordingly a second dipper is used containing the balsam and turpentine to which a few drops of linseed oil may be added to facilitate an occasional fluidity of touch and also to retard the too rapid drying on the palette. It should, however, be borne in mind that any considerable proportion of oil will cause darkening.

THE LAY-IN OR DEAD COLOURING

IT has become a common practice in comparatively recent times to disregard the methods of slow building up which had formerly been universally adopted and to attempt to telescope the whole procedure into a single operation whereby form, tone and colour are all to be expressed simultaneously by means of certain mixtures on the palette. It may doubtless be regarded as a question of taste whether the results of this expedient are to be preferred to those obtained by the earlier craftsmen, but it can hardly be doubted that those craftsmen would have looked upon such an occupation as merely fantastic. They preferred to proceed step by step, dealing with one problem at a time, and their manner of working enabled them to exploit all sorts of lovely qualities in the medium which are for ever denied to the direct painter.

Various as the traditional methods of painting were, differing, as they did, in different hands, they yet followed certain principles which have been entirely repudiated by the direct painter. The difference between the two methods is as chalk from cheese, but two essential points may usefully be mentioned here. The traditional painter relied on the judicious use of transparent colour as opposed to solid, opaque pigment, and on superimposition, or the laying of one colour over another, as opposed to mixture. A very little experiment will suffice to show the enormous difference in result when two colours are mixed together and when they are laid one over the other. Transparency may be said to imply superimposition, since a transparent colour must be laid over something else which shines through it; but transparency is a matter of degree, varying from a pure stain to a colour with a greater or less admixture of white and therefore a greater or less degree of covering power. It is impossible to match the amber glow of Cuypp's skies, for example, by any mixture. Mix how we will, it will look too cold or too yellow, too pink or too brown; and whichever way it errs it will appear as a dab of dull paint on that limpid surface. The effect can only be obtained by superimposition.

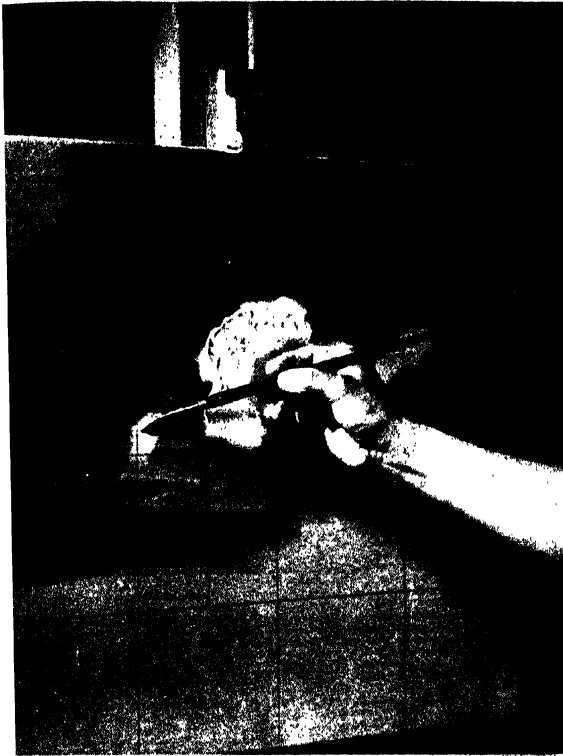
The foundation on which such effects are built up is the dead-colouring. The colours used for this preliminary painting must be chosen with reference to the subject, but they should in all cases be few, and in all cases the dead-colouring should be executed with cool or cold colours. It should be pitched in a very high key, the darkest passages being quite pale, and it should dry matt. If the wax medium already described is used the degree of mattness or glossiness can be controlled with great nicety by mixing less or more turpentine with the diluent, but any resinous vehicle will dry matt if diluted with turpentine. The shadows may be painted in with either

transparent or opaque pigment, the choice depending on the quality aimed at—the choice depending, it might almost be said, on whether you prefer Rubens to Titian as a figure painter or Gainsborough to Wilson in landscape.

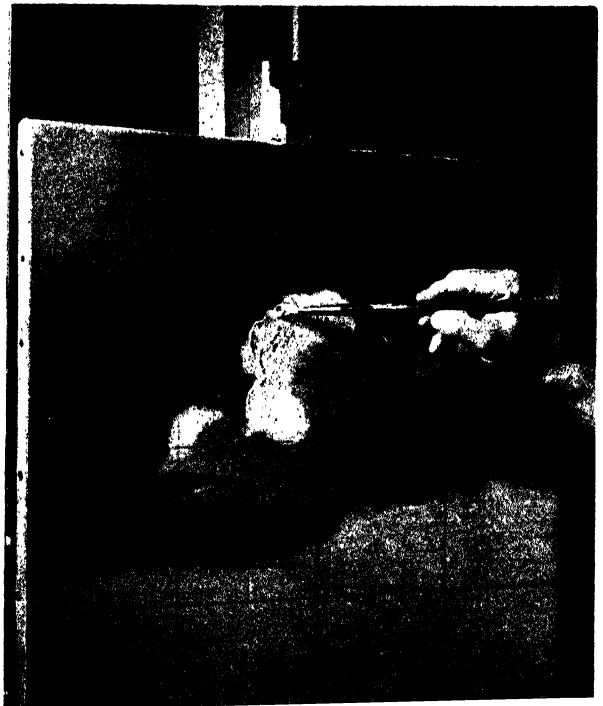
In painting flesh the early Italians often dead-coloured with Terre Verte. Vermeer, aiming at another quality, appears to have done the same. The methods of Rubens were strikingly different, but the prevailing greenish tint in the half-tones of his flesh suggests a kind of agreement in difference, for the Terre Verte used in the dead-colouring of flesh is really a kind of middle tone upon which lights and darks are to be added. On the other hand Sir Joshua tells us repeatedly that he laid in his flesh with Blue-Black, Lake and White, reserving all yellow for the final stages. He often carried this underpainting to a high degree of finish as is plainly revealed in his *The Graces Decorating Hymen* in the National Gallery. The cleaning of this picture some time ago removed the warm glazes from the flesh. The yellows have disappeared, leaving the foundation—Blue-Black, Lake and White. It can occasionally be seen in unfinished pictures by Titian that his treatment of flesh was, at times at all events, similar to that of Sir Joshua, the glowing warmth of his flesh tones being superimposed over a cold, reddish underpainting.

In dealing with fabrics of bright and positive colour or with the brilliance of flowers it is a sound practice to dead-colour with a very pale version of the local colour, heavily mixed with white. Pure white may be used on the highest lights. At a later stage a glaze of the true local colour is laid over this and later still the deepest shadows are enriched with transparent colour. The effects obtainable by this means may be observed, brilliantly executed, in such things as the sheen of satin in which Terborch and other Dutch masters delighted.

For landscape work black, blue and white provide an admirable foundation, with perhaps a very sparing use of Indian Red. It can hardly be too sparing. But if white mixed with an almost imperceptible amount of Indian Red is used for the lights in brilliantly illuminated clouds or for such prominent lights as occur on masonry or other bright objects, its relative warmth will give some degree of interplay of heat and cold by contrast with its colder surroundings. The general features of the landscape can be laid in with black and white alone, but where there is a strong blue sky this may be stated with positive blue and white. Indeed it may be taken as a general principle that the colder the final colour the more positively it may be stated in the dead-colouring. Thus in Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* the blue hills are laid in with what is virtually Reckitt's Blue, the blue areas in the sky a little less positively, the colour depending for its final richness on a warm glaze laid over it. The same thing may be seen over and over again in classical landscapes. It is magnificently illustrated in Poussin's *Landscape; Phocion* in the National Gallery where an extremely cold, strong blue has been laid in over most of the sky and glazed with brown. There is



6a. The manner of holding the brush for a dragged touch.



6b. The application of a loaded impasto.

no more arresting or effective blue in the history of landscape painting.

One of the distinguishing features, as it is one of the most fascinating, of oil paint is the opportunity it offers for variety in texture. Suavity can be rendered by suavity, roughness by roughness, the limpidity of water by limpid, transparent colour, the ruggedness of masonry by broken touches of solid pigment. But there is much more in it than that. A remarkable crispness and vividness can be obtained by using an actual ridge of paint on sharp edges. Wherever in drawing you would use a firm, strong line a ridge of paint may be employed in painting. When glazed this ridge shines out with great brilliance. Canaletto made great play with this, touching in crisp, glittering edges with a rather clotted, semi-transparent paint, beautifully controlled. Even in painting which presents an apparently smooth surface, even in the satin sheen of the dresses in Terborch that have already been mentioned, the device is employed with sureness and subtlety. The use of a heavy impasto, the building up of a body of thick paint in some passages, and contrasting it with thin, transparent colour in others, was developed by Rembrandt with enormous force of effect. An interesting comparison may be made between his two self-portraits (reproduced here) in the National Gallery. It is the same face in both cases and, notably, it is the same nose, only somewhat older; and both pictures are executed with great mastery, the earlier one in the smooth manner prevailing in Holland at the time, the other in Rembrandt's more robust, later style.

In laying in the dead-colouring these resources of texture must never be out of our minds. Their use will vary according to the end in view. When great boldness and force of effect are aimed at a bold and solid impasto will be contrasted with passages of smooth, flat painting; when the reverse is the case, when suavity and tenderness of treatment are desired, the texture will still be varied, edges will still be sharply ridged, but the variety will be less apparent and more discreet.

For these different purposes different brushes must be employed. A large area of plain blue sky, for example, can best be done with a large, flat, hog-hair brush, but where textures are to be built up a round, pointed sable is a handier tool. Even on a very large scale a No. 10 or No. 12 sable is better than a hog-hair brush for such purposes. It lends itself to much greater precision where precision is needed, and offers scope for a greater variety of touch.

Too much care cannot be given to the dead-colouring. No matter how long it takes, the subject must be set down on the canvas in cool or cold tones, pitched in a high key, with full attention to textures and with a matt surface. When this stage is reached the canvas must be allowed to dry thoroughly before any further work is done.

7. How to remove wedges from the stretcher with pliers and hammer, without risk of damage to the back of the canvas.



DRYING PAINT IN SUNLIGHT

In sunny weather the drying can be hastened by exposure to direct sunlight. Paint dried in sunlight dries harder and more healthily than in any other way. It should, however, be remembered that a stretched canvas will tighten up enormously in the sun. If stretched taut when it is put out it will flap on the stretcher when it is brought back to the normal atmosphere of the studio. It is therefore desirable to remove the wedges and tap in the sides of the stretcher before exposing the canvas to sunlight.

Care is required in removing the wedges. They are often too tight to be pulled out with the fingers; and if this is attempted, or if they are levered out with the pliers, they are apt to come out suddenly and there is considerable danger of the point of the wedge raking against the back of the canvas and causing a dent which can clearly be seen on the face of the picture; such dents can only be taken out with difficulty and riskily. If the wedge is firmly gripped with the canvas pliers, and these lightly tapped with a hammer, the removal is easy and safe.

GLAZING AND SCUMBLING

THE dead-colouring being thoroughly dry, a warm transparent glaze may be laid over the whole picture. Glazing has already been referred to more than once but, as we now come to its actual use, it may be convenient to give some consideration to what it implies. A glaze differs from a scumble in that the former is a transparent, or semi-transparent film of colour laid over something lighter than itself, and the latter is a semi-transparent film of colour laid over something darker than itself.

A glaze may be applied as a fluid stain, or it may be applied as a stiff pigment and partially removed, or in almost any condition between these two extremes. If the underpainting is on a canvas with a pronounced grain, or if a bold impasto has been used, it is quite possible to cover the whole surface with umber until it is entirely obscured and then wipe away the umber with a piece of coarse butter muslin. When you have wiped away all you can, short of downright scrubbing, the effect will be quite different from what it was before the umber was applied. It will be very much richer. If the glaze is applied thinly with a varnish medium, a light rubbing with the palm of the hand will partly remove it from the raised surfaces of the pigment and leave it in the hollows. If the removal is carried out with the flat blade of the painting knife, dipped in the medium, it will take it almost entirely from the raised surfaces, producing an effect of extreme richness. Either of these processes tends to force the glaze into the hollows, whether of the canvas grain or of the impasto, so that its colour, by accumulation, appears darker than when it was applied; and this increased darkness should be allowed for in preparing the glaze. An effect of great brilliance can be obtained by leaving the glaze to dry for a day or two and then removing the superfluity with a clean rag dipped in the medium. An occasional high light may be picked out by drawing the edge of the painting knife across it. Finally, a glaze need not necessarily be composed of what are called transparent colours; it may be freely mixed with white provided it is darker than the colours over which it is laid.

The effect of a glaze is invariably one of enrichment; the effect of a scumble is usually the reverse. A scumble may be applied with stiffish, "tacky" paint either with a dragging touch which, by missing the hollows, allows the colour underneath to break through; or with a dry brush very little charged with paint, used with a light scrubbing movement; or in a fairly fluid condition as a transparent film. If we imagine a pale cloud against a pale sky, quite crisp and definite in outline but with a barely discernible change of tone from cloud to sky—a change too subtle to be obtained by direct mixture—this can be overstated in an under-painting. The cloud

can be modelled crisply, using a ridge of paint to mark its edge. Then when this is dry a colour lighter than either cloud or sky can be scumbled over both. By this means the transition can be reduced to the point of imperceptibility, the cloud retains its crispness of modelling and the qualities of luminosity and atmosphere are greatly enhanced. Or again, if we are painting an evening sky where a warm golden glow on the horizon changes into a cool blue overhead, the golden colour would be ignored in the underpainting, the whole sky being laid in with cool blue with little or no variety. In such an effect the warm colour would be deeper and more golden towards the horizon, paler and less golden as it merged into the upper sky. This deeper gold should be mixed on the palette and superimposed on the blue, largely by means of scumbling. The whole transition should be effected with a single mixture on the palette, the change depending on the *amount* of paint applied and not on any change in its tint, that is on the relative covering power of more or less paint. Thus on the horizon it may be increased and strengthened to some degree of opacity; in the upper sky it may, if desired, be softened away with the fingers so that there is no discernible step from gold to blue.

If any such attempt at softening were made with a *mixture* of gold and blue it would result merely in dirty colour, but by the method of superimposition no fear of muddiness arises. The blue, being dry, remains quite undisturbed; the colour superimposed is already thoroughly mixed on the palette and cannot be mixed any more; it remains quite clear and untroubled.

The mixing of colours on the palette may usefully be discussed at this point. In the dead-colouring very little mixing was required, probably no more than mixing each colour—not more than two or three—with white, but all mixing should be done with the palette knife and done thoroughly. Setting the palette nowadays often means little more than squeezing a number of colours on to it out of tubes; it formerly meant mixing on the palette beforehand the colours you were going to use. Etty, we are told, “thought it best to paint flesh with one colour at a time, or at most with two”—so that each of them would be mixed with white. Reynolds was of the same mind, but Wilson’s palette was more elaborate, proceeding by the sort of steps that may be discerned in the following mixtures:— Naples Yellow and Terre Verte, Light Ochre and Terre Verte, Light Ochre and more Terre Verte, Light Red and Terre Verte, the last named being a very favourite mixture of Wilson’s. It is probable that the mixtures with yellow were reserved for the later stages of the picture, that being by common consent a sound practice. And it is to be remarked that he rarely mixed more than two colours.

LATER STAGES

RETURNING now to the dead-colouring over which a warm glaze has been laid, it will of course be apparent that the glaze has lowered the tone of the picture. The cold high lights are now seen through a warm veil; the darks, though far from rich, will be somewhat richer; the interplay of warm and cold will be found to convey to a surprising degree a suggestion of colour; and the first steps will have been taken towards creating the effect of looking *into* something rather than *at* it. The eye no longer stops at a painted surface.

At this stage the subject is stated in a kind of middle tone without either strong darks or positive lights, but with a seductive unity that should never be lost. In the fear of losing it, however, there is a very definite danger, that of keeping it in a middle tone without any disturbing lights, for a high pitched light laid on this middle tone will "jump" disconcertingly. Nevertheless it has to be reached, and such a light should be mixed on the palette to serve as a key. It may be touched boldly on to the picture if there is a convenient place and it will then force the painter to work up to that key. The sky, if it is a landscape, or the flesh in a figure subject, may now be lightened, largely by means of scumbling. The warm glaze will act as a foil to these lights, giving them the appearance of brilliance and luminosity. The darks may be deepened and enriched by glazing, colour introduced by glazing and scumbling, with more solid touches on the lights. Many adjustments may be required before the picture is brought to completion, and these adjustments call for great nicety of judgment. A particular passage may appear, for example, too red, and its correction may depend either on altering the red or on some change elsewhere, the red having no independent existence but deriving its degree of redness from opposition. Thus a simple mixture of black and white may appear either bluish or brownish according to the key of the picture and the surrounding colour to which it owes its value.

The process of developing the picture from a middle tone is susceptible of much variety. Some painters began with a middle tone. The design once fixed on the canvas, they laid over the whole a warm glaze—the *imprimatura*—frequently of a reddish colour, and depended for their brilliance of effect on the white ground shining through. The shadows were often kept entirely transparent, the half tones and lights added, the latter with considerable *impasto*, and the *imprimatura* acting, as before described, as a foil giving brilliance by opposition. The process can readily be discerned in rapidly executed work on a small scale by Rubens, less readily in his larger compositions.

The relationships between the qualities of oil paint and the natural appearances it is to represent are varied and subtle. With a few coloured pigments disposed on a flat surface the artist has to cope with the whole range of human vision. For the portrait painter, painting a single figure against a background only slightly withdrawn, the problems are relatively simple. He has but two planes to consider, the sitter and the background. The sitter is posed in the equal light of a window; the background is illuminated from the same source, only receiving less light from being further away. The same conditions apply to still life painting, though in both cases fascinating problems of texture will arise, and the expressive quality of paint must be sought, and the expressive handling, to solve them. Indeed it may be said that all subjects seen in an interior light present problems that are no doubt difficult enough but are yet comparatively easy of solution.

The landscape painter is in a very different situation. He is concerned with space and air, and with a degree of recession that does not stop at a conveniently solid wall but recedes to infinity. His subject may be illuminated by a bewildering complexity of lighting, here in full sunlight, there in deep shadow; its surfaces are turned at all sorts of angles to the light; and all local colour is transformed with distance by an ever increasing veil of atmosphere. The local colour of a tree may be green, but in the distance it may be blue or grey, and this blue or grey may grow fainter and fainter to the point of total disappearance. Moreover, whether it is in the foreground plane, the middle distance or the distance, it may be in sunlight or in shadow; it may appear almost black. And a tree is but a single object in a landscape; the whole scene and everything in it present the artist with similar transformations. A very common object in a landscape, and a very useful one, is the domestic cow. It may be a black and white cow; if it is it includes in one object the whole range of the artist's palette from black to white. Let us paint it so and exhaust the palette—a black and white cow in an even light. Now drive the cow out into full sunshine. The whites will shine out with tenfold brilliance, the blacks plunge into richer depths of blackness, but our palette can go no further. It is indeed little to our purpose that cows are black and white or trees green. We are concerned with the appearance that nature presents and with the means by which such an appearance can be expressed in terms of oil paint.

An elm tree and lush grass are both green, but the difference between the two is great; by contrast with the vivid green of the grass the elm seems hardly green at all. It may be important for our purpose to express the vivid green of the grass, and to do this we must preserve the contrast. Clearly a dab of green laid on a surface of the same green will not be visible; on a surface that is mainly green it will have little effect. To gain the maximum effect it must be small in area and laid against sharply contrasting colours. So our green tree may become brown. It is likely to become brown if we wish to show it against a strong blue sky. The aerial blue of the sky is

difficult at best but it is least difficult where an opposition of brown can be provided.

The painter, then, has need of all the resources at his command, yet he must avoid at all costs any appearance of forcing his medium. Even the full range of his palette from black to white is denied him, for pure white, unmodified in any way, will always appear chalky and out of keeping. The value of the middle tone which has been described will therefore be understood. It provides a basis which, though with little positive colour, is yet vibrant with the interplay of warm and cold. On this somewhat neutral basis touches of positive colour will "tell" with great force of effect. On this basis the lights can be progressively heightened, the darks progressively enriched, until brilliance and depth have been attained.

In doing this the student will do well to fix his thoughts on the real subject of his picture which is the mental image created by the impact of the scene on his consciousness. He will thus work undisturbed by all the irrelevant and extraneous matter that the scene itself will certainly contain. And he may hope to realise the general colour of the landscape. For, just as a fabric woven of variously coloured threads has yet a general colour which is their sum, so a landscape with all its multifarious components has a general colour of its own. And nothing, it may be thought, more distinguishes a fine landscape from a mediocre one than this grasp of the colour of the landscape as a whole.

The writer once observed a young student in the Prado in Madrid who was engaged in copying a Velasquez. So great was his horror of niggling, so resolute his search for breadth that no mere working at arm's length would do. He began by blocking in the design, however unsteadily, with a piece of charcoal tied on to the end of a billiard cue. But it would appear that in the studio of Vermeer precision was valued as well as breadth, and a thing so very sensible and practical as a mahlstick was in everyday use.



8. VERMEER OF DELFT, 1632—1675: *The Artist's Studio*: Czernin Gallery, Vienna.
(See note opposite)

PROTECTION OF THE PICTURE

A PICTURE painted with the medium described on pages 26 and 27, or with a good varnish medium, does not need varnishing for the sake of its appearance. The glossiness or mattness of the surface can be readily controlled, the final appearance bringing out the full richness and depth of colour without any offensive shininess. But for the protection of the picture a varnish is generally applied. Latterly a practice has arisen of using wax instead of varnish. It obviates the over-varnished look which is so undesirable and it appears to be theoretically sound. The traditional practice, however, is to varnish with mastic which has the advantage that it can be removed by friction without the use of solvents. Mastic varnish should only be applied after a long interval for drying. Under ordinary conditions a year may be regarded as the minimum.

The three greatest enemies to the permanence of pictures are (*a*) the artist (unsound methods), (*b*) dirt and (*c*) the restorer. I give them in the order of their importance. The remedy for the first is largely in our hands; and in order to guard against dirt and, indirectly, restoration, it is advisable to protect the picture with a glass. Pictures are more often hung in towns than in the country. Even in the country walls must be periodically painted and ceilings distempered because of accumulated dirt; in large towns this sullyng by dirt is very rapid, and not less rapid on the face of an unprotected picture than on the walls.

It is also desirable to protect a picture painted on stretched canvas from mechanical injury from the back. People who are not accustomed to handling pictures will commonly respect the face of them, but not realise that they are almost equally vulnerable from the back. A sheet of thin three-ply wood screwed on to the back of the stretcher with half-inch brass screws will render harmless the common practice of leaning a picture against the sharp angle of a piece of furniture.

If a panel has been used instead of stretched canvas the back of the panel should be given a protective coat of paint.

A picture painted in the manner described and protected in the way suggested should possess a high degree of permanence if kept under reasonable conditions. Indeed, it seems highly probable that it will be more brilliant in fifty years' time than at the time of painting. It is true that oil paint tends to become darker and yellower with the passage of time, but it is also true that it becomes more transparent (see Plates 14 and 15). This increasing transparency more and more reveals (*a*) the light and cool underpainting and (*b*) the brilliant ground. The former of these, by its



9. PIETER DE HOOCH, 1629—c. 1683: *Detail from Interior of a Dutch House: National Gallery, London.*

coolness and entire absence of yellow, counteracts the yellowing of the oil; while the underpainting, with its high-pitched key, and the ground, which is pure white, counteract the darkening. An exact comparison obviously cannot be made since it involves an uncertain reliance on memory. It is therefore offered only as an opinion that where the technical procedure described has been exactly followed, without hitches, changes of mind and consequent coverings up, a picture which has been adequately protected from surface dirt will augment in brilliance over a period of years.

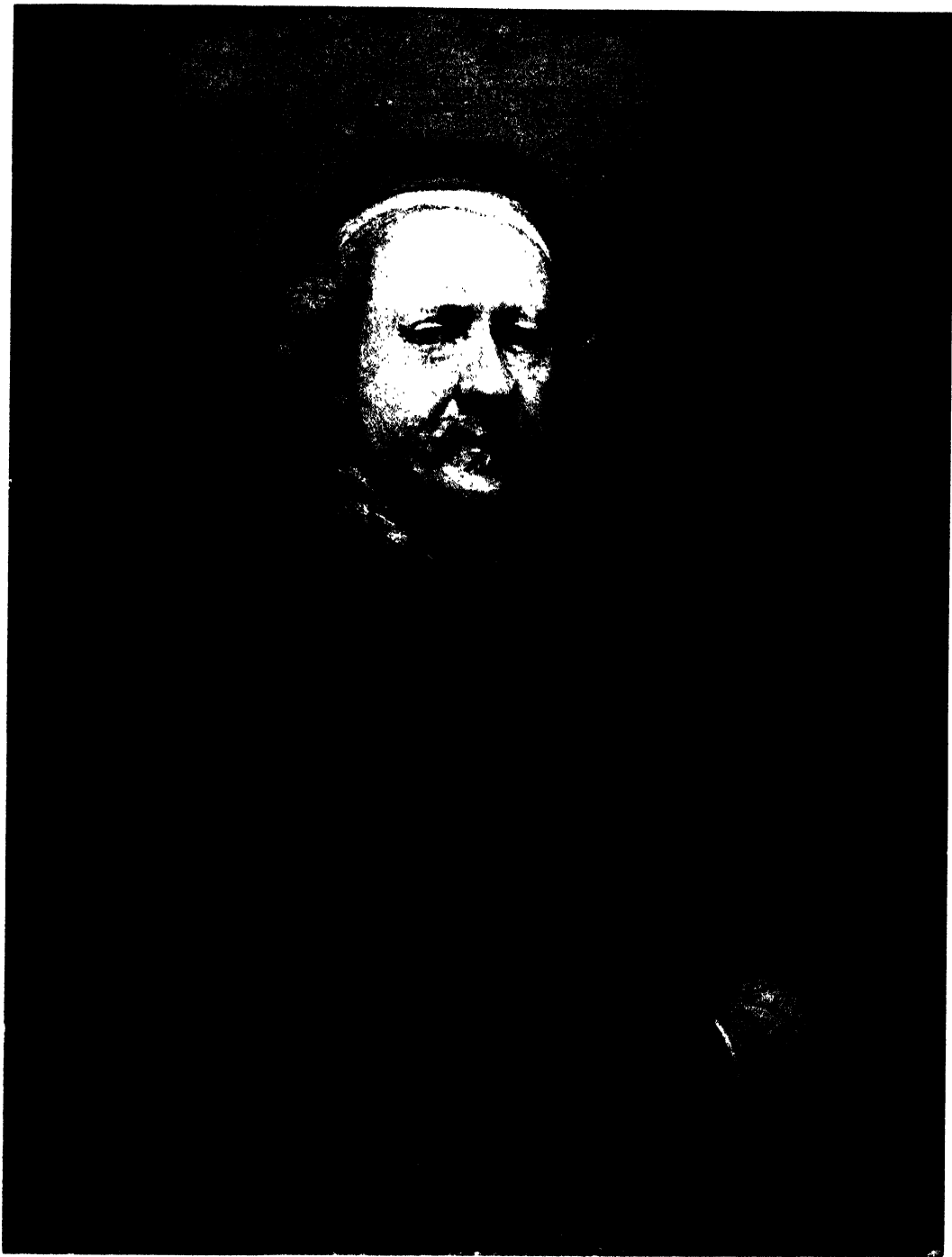
Plates 9 and 10 reveal the increasing transparency of oil paint with the passage of time. In the first the skirt has become so transparent as to show the tiled pavement over which it has been superimposed. A figure, subsequently painted out, can be dimly seen. The existing figure is an afterthought added with consummate skill, but time has plainly exposed the change of intention. In the second the hand clearly shows where the cuff has been painted behind it. (*See page 41*).



10. PIETER DE HOOCH: *Detail from Interior of a Dutch House.*



11. REMBRANDT : Portrait of Himself (1640) 39in × 31½in: *National Gallery*.



12. REMBRANDT: Portrait of Himself (c. 1660) 33in x 27½in ; *National Gallery*.

THE TECHNIQUE
OF
FAMOUS MASTERS

frontispiece : RUBENS 1577-1640

SUZANNE FOURMENT : 30½in×21in : *National Gallery, London*

BRIGHTNESS, clarity, forcefulness, gusto, bravura—these are all qualities of which Rubens possessed an easy mastery. He knows neither hesitation nor uncertainty, his brush seeming to move with the rapidity of thought as he draws the swift contours of his obese gesticulating figures. Not all these qualities are visible in the example before us, but the brilliance and clarity certainly are. Accompanying all this, permeating it all, there is always a certain grossness in Rubens of which his preference for fleshy types is merely a symptom. His landscapes are superb, but even in his landscapes there is a sort of sensual licking of the lips. He has had no more fervent, or sincere, admirer than Fromentin, yet it was Fromentin who said of him, “Si l’on s’arrête au goût, le goût lui manque”.

13. TITIAN, c. 1477-1576

LAURA DI DIANTI (Detail from *Jeune Fille à sa Toilette*: 38½in × 30in): Louvre

Laura di Dianti and *Suzanne Fourment* are suggested for comparison. To suppose that the difference between them was one of subject only, or of feminine type, would be to misconceive the matter entirely; they are profoundly different in style and outlook. Both are virtually portraits of young women and in both the liberal display of bosom gives an opportunity for the painting of flesh. The Rubens picture is the more brilliant—it is indeed dazzlingly brilliant—and the more transparent; the Titian is the more sober, worked over a more solid foundation. And, if the Rubens is the more fleshy, the Titian is the very substance of flesh. No doubt it is a question of personal taste whether we prefer the rotundities of Rubens modelling or the subtle, all but invisible modelling of Titian, but it may be observed that the latter was almost certainly much more obvious in the dead-colouring, and the gradations were afterwards reduced by scumbling until the final enchanting breadth and subtlety of effect were reached.

Note. The references on this page, and on the previous page to *Suzanne Fourment* can only be of interest to those who knew the picture before its recent disastrous cleaning. That operation, carried out since these notes were written, has rendered them quite meaningless, since the qualities described have been removed. What is left is of interest simply as showing the method of Rubens' approach which will be found to conform to these general observations.



15. GAINSBOROUGH, 1727-1788

THE WATERING PLACE: 58in · 71in : *by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery*

WE need not accept without reserve, even on his own testimony, the notion that Gainsborough painted portraits only to earn his living while his heart was really in landscape. No doubt his heart was in landscape; but no man could have painted the magnificent series of Gainsborough portraits, with their fluent handling and all their easy grace and elegance, whose heart was not in the job. The truth is that his heart was in both jobs. He made numbers of landscape drawings, constantly trying out fresh groupings of trees and cattle, and of these experiments in composition such pictures as *The Watering Place* are the ultimate fruit.

At this stage of his development his landscapes are broadly generalised. They do not lack for incidental detail in the way of individual leaves and grasses such as are not commonly to be found in contemporary landscape painting, but they are wholly without the minute elaboration of the Dutch school, and have nothing in common with the tree portraiture that Crome gave us in his *Poringland Oak*. Gainsborough, except perhaps in his very early pictures, gave us neither oaks nor ashes, but just masses of trees, grandly disposed and finely pictorial.

There are two versions of *The Watering Place* in the Tate Gallery, one large and one small, and the one that we happen to be looking at is likely to appear the better. It is true that the larger one *is* the better; it has a sweeping breadth and dignity proportionate to its scale. It has grown a little dark, but in a gracious and kindly fashion. There is gain as well as loss.



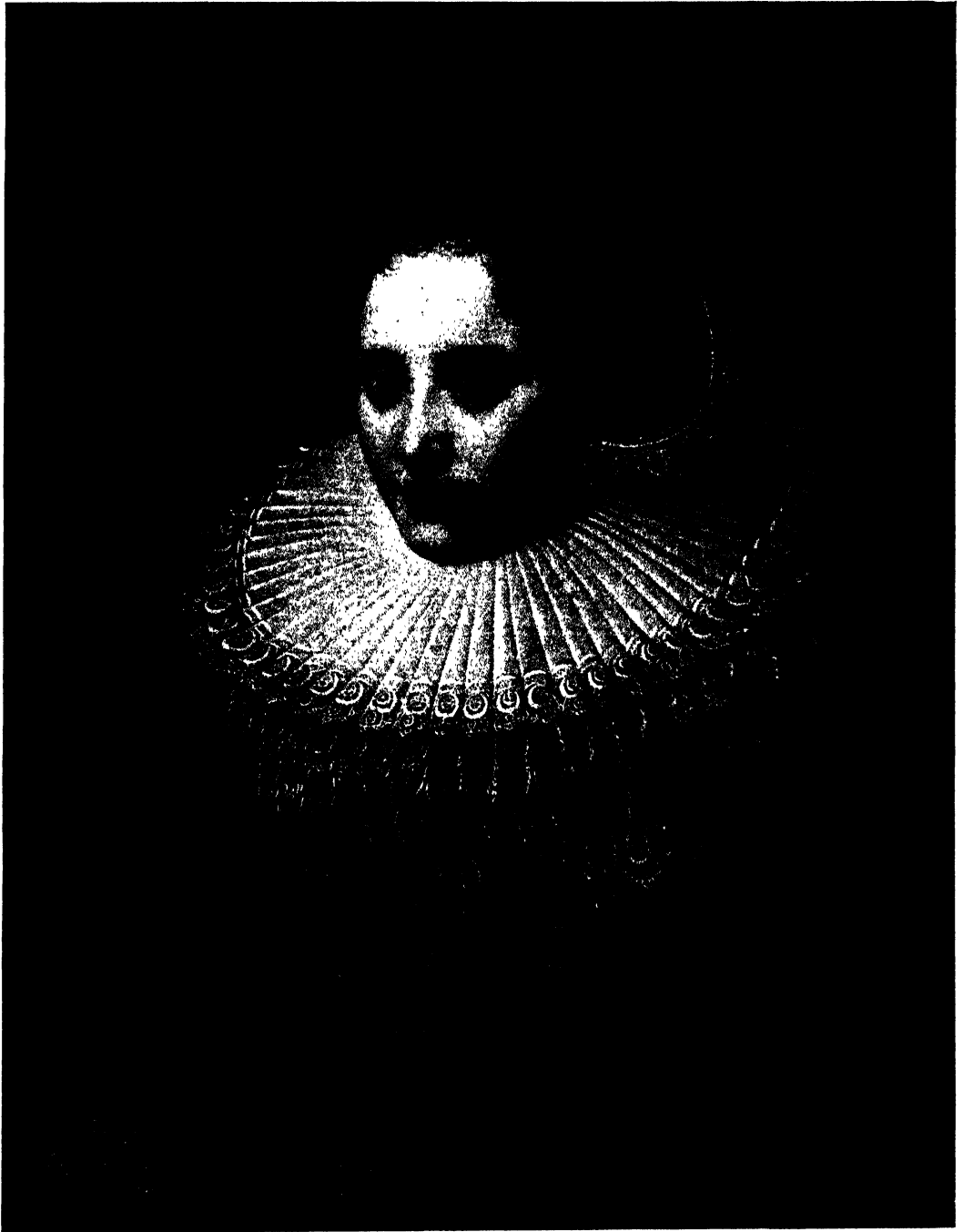
16. MICHIEL JANSZ VAN MIEREVELT, 1567-1641

A DUTCH LADY: 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ in · 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ in : *from the picture in the Wallace Collection, by permission*

THIS elaborately wrought canvas reveals the very perfection of craftsmanship. Mierevelt knew precisely what he was about, and precisely how to carry out his intention. It is all extremely deliberate and pre-considered; and nowhere is there the least faltering, hesitation or uncertainty. It is a mass of intricate detail, minutely worked out. The method can be discerned. The pattern of the lace edging has been superimposed on a careful statement of the general form of the ruff. There is no trace of the fatigue, and the slovenliness that follows fatigue, that would have overcome many artists in the execution of so exact and complicated a piece of work; nor is there any loss of breadth. The picture is faultless of its kind.

No picture can have every quality. You cannot be deliberate and spontaneous at the same time. There is here no swift movement of the hand, which in itself conveys the sense of movement. The picture is very still, the lady consciously posing for her portrait. You cannot imagine her on any occasion vigorously dashing about.

An interesting comparison may be made with the portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds on the following page. There is no posing here. Mrs. Braddyll has an ease and grace, and above all an elegance, of which neither the Dutch Lady nor Mierevelt had any idea. Inferior in point of workmanship, using that word in the sense of a sound and permanent job, the Sir Joshua has a forcefulness, a freedom of handling, and a substantiality quite foreign to Mierevelt. The treatment is more generalised, suggestion taking the place of explicit statement. The falling lock may be noticed as an example of this. And the shape and structure of brush strokes, and the substance of the paint itself, are made to express, for example, the frill round the neck which might have been painted with the minute accuracy of Mierevelt's ruff.



17. SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS 1723-1792

MRS. BRADDYLL: 29½in · 24½in : *from the picture in the Wallace Collection, by permission.*

SIR JOSHUA was continually experimenting and, often recklessly, aiming at immediate results rather than permanency. Alike from his mistakes and his successes much information can be derived, and even, perhaps, a knowledge of the behaviour of the artist's materials surer than his own.

The portrait of Mrs. Braddyll is beautifully fresh and satisfying to the eye. Its effect is not particularly disturbed by the considerable cracking in the background, but it is none the less true that a background should not crack. Mierevelt, keeping within his well established formula, made the sounder job; Sir Joshua, seeking after qualities for which he had no formula, was compelled to take risks. They frequently led to disaster, but, looking at the portrait of Mrs. Braddyll, we may perhaps feel that any risk was justified.

It may be noted as a quite thrilling example of the fat, luscious impasto to be obtained by the use of a wax medium. This is particularly remarkable in the free handling of the light dress. And we may further note that there is no cracking here. Where the wax has certainly been used, and used lavishly, cracking has not occurred; where there is no evidence of its use it has occurred. And we must remember that Reynolds was perfectly capable of changing his vehicle for different passages in the same picture. Indeed he expressly tells us that he did so.



18. NICOLAS POUSSIN, 1593-1665

LANDSCAPE. PHOCION: 30in · 43in : *National Gallery*

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IN a black-and-white reproduction the Phocion Landscape looks imposing because of its impressive design, but it owes its almost unique distinction to its bold and successful colour scheme, and particularly to the use of the strong and telling blue in the sky. The first thing to be noted about this blue is that it makes no attempt to imitate the blue of the natural sky. It lays down the principle once and for all that colour in painting depends for its quality not on any copying of the scene, but on interpreting nature in the terms of a colour scheme. Elaboration of detail is here combined with breadth. The trees are superbly massed, but in no way summary, individual leaf forms being freely introduced. The blue of the sky has been laid in almost without variety from the telling lights, with their crisp edges, in the lower clouds right to the top of the canvas. The upper clouds are laid over the blue in semi-transparent colour, and a warm glaze has been carried over the whole and partially removed. The individual leaves of the right hand tree has been put in over the dark mass behind when this was dry. They are applied with raised, almost modelled, touches and afterwards glazed.



19. CUYP, 1620-1691

CATTLE & FIGURES. MILKING TIME, DORT: 26½in · 39½in : *National Gallery*

MUCH of the technical practice described in the foregoing text is revealed on this canvas. It has been said that the landscape painter is concerned with light and air, and this picture is bathed in light and air; a warm, luminous glow suffuses the whole scene. The sky is one of Cuyp's characteristic golden skies, unapproachable by any mixture of colours. In the upper sky the areas of blue and the adjacent clouds have been drawn together by a superimposed film, and the high lights on the clouds shine through this film by reason of their raised impasto and sharply defined edges. Although the general effect is that of a rather smoothly painted picture it will be observed that a well-charged brush has been freely employed, notably on the light cow and the woman's dress where the loaded impasto and the ridged edge of the sleeve are particularly marked.

It is queer that a man who knew as much about a cow as did Cuyp should yet have so many gaps in his knowledge, but we are not here concerned with his shortcomings. The light cow is full of interest. It is a yellow cow seen in a warm light, and the foundation on which the effect has been built up can be fairly clearly seen. The animal's flank, for instance, was boldly modelled with fat pigment and for the high lights in a colour very little removed from white, the treatment here being similar to that already described for the painting of fabrics of positive colours, the colour in this case being yellow. A beautifully transparent shadow falls across this flank. No doubt it owes something to time; no doubt the picture has gained in transparency with the lapse of years: but this must be accounted to Cuyp as a merit, for it must not be forgotten that a badly painted picture will not become more luminous with time; it will merely become darker.

Scarcely less interesting than the cow is the burdock in the left foreground. The colour here is a rich and darkish green, but the high lights on these carefully studied leaves were laid in with a well-charged brush in *pure white* and their edges kept sharp and crisp with ridges of paint. The same thing may be observed on the twigs and blossoms in the foreground, on the high lights of the vessels on the extreme right, on the dog's nose and elsewhere. Shining through the superimposed colour these raised white touches give a sparkling vivacity to the whole picture.



20. TINTORETTO, 1518-1594

THE ORIGIN OF THE MILKY WAY: 58in · 65½in : *National Gallery*

THE legend, or myth, of the origin of the milky way is the “subject” of this picture: no more. Another subject in which Tintoretto could find similar pictorial opportunities would have done as well; and, if we know nothing of the story, or of what peacocks and wild fowl may have to do with it, it is no matter. The picture is the thing. With its splendour of colour, its complex and extraordinarily satisfying design, its bold space filling, its opulence and richness and its superb control it figures in the National Gallery as a masterpiece among masterpieces. It recalls Titian in its colour, and particularly in the blue of the sky; it recalls Veronese in its use of a contour line to express the form, very noticeably in the upraised arm of the central figure; it recalls very forcibly Tintoretto’s boast “The drawing of Michaelangelo and the colour of Titian”; but it remains Tintoretto.

Through the warm glazes the cool underpainting of the flesh is clearly seen. It is most apparent in the half tones, imparting a certain silveriness to a picture of which the general tone is warm. The local colour of the draperies, red and blue, has been superimposed over a light groundwork of bold impasto, the deep shadows being glazed to the point of extreme richness; and the gold pattern has been touched in with clotty pigment so as to break through the subsequent glaze. The building up of a fat impasto, sometimes with the use of ridges of paint, may be observed in such things as the flame of the torch, the wing of the bottom right hand putto, the stars and the upper clouds, while the very opposite device is employed in the net that passes across the sky behind the peacock’s head. The meshes of this net have been drawn with transparent colour over the finished sky. (See the Claude illustration, p.67).



23. COTMAN, 1782-1842

THE BAGGAGE WAGON: 16½in · 13½in; by courtesy of the Norwich Museums Committee

COTMAN worked mainly in water-colour, but whenever he essayed it he displayed so firm a grasp of the oil medium as to prompt the enquiry why he used it so little. One of the very greatest of water-colourists, he yet squandered much time and labour in the production of inferior water-colours; a master of the purest water-colour style and the most impeccable technique, he was yet capable of forsaking the natural simplicity of the medium and by such devices as mixing it with sour paste of seeking to secure a richness and "body" quite foreign to its qualities. It may not be fanciful to see in these experiments the bent of his mind which hankered after the more robust and solid virtues of oil paint, or to find in the difficulties of his circumstances and still more in the difficulties of his temperament, which greatly aggravated those of his circumstances, the reason why he carried out these rapidly executed experiments rather than undertake the slower and more sustained labour of painting in oils. For it takes time to paint an oil in the Cotman manner.

Breadth and precision are beautifully combined in *The Baggage Wagon*. The canvas is small in size, but when the eye lights on it you catch your breath at its tranquil immensity. It has been disastrously restored but there is enough left to establish the reputation of a master. In reproduction there is some falsification of the tones; the figure on the horse, for instance, is wearing a red coat which is opposed to the blue distance. The distance has not quite the impalpable, aerial blue of Wilson; it is less transparent; but it is inferior only to Wilson. In bold and effective contrast to it is the fat, luscious pigment in which the trees have been positively modelled in relief under their unifying glaze. The leaf forms have been built up with a loaded impasto and the same fatness of pigment may be observed in the tree trunks. In places a ridge of light paint marks the edge of the trunk on both sides, recalling a device that Cotman frequently employed in water-colour, that of securing a crisp and sparkling edge by leaving a hair-line of white paper between two washes.

But is this the sort of oil painting you would expect from a water-colourist? It is the sort of oil painting that exploits the fullest resources of the medium, and with the fullest understanding of them. Above all, it reveals how much can be done with a few simple materials—an ordinary enough bridge with low parapets, a wagon, a horseman, a few trees and a bit of distance; nothing more.



24. ALFRED STEVENS, 1818-1875

JOHN MORRIS MOORE: 23in 18½in : by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery

ALFRED STEVENS died in 1875, the year in which Hamerton published his notes on technical practice referred to in the introductory chapter. It is a pity that Hamerton had not the advantage of first hand information about the methods of Stevens who, whether as artist or craftsman, was certainly unrivalled at that time and whose equal as certainly has not arisen since. No man since the death of Stevens has handled paint with the extraordinary felicity that is shown in this portrait.

It is perhaps this very felicity and the sureness of touch, the ease of handling, the control and, above all, the *success* of every device employed, that have caused this picture to be described in the illustrated guide to the gallery as a sketch. It is in fact a most carefully considered, a most searching, a most complete and a most accomplished piece of work. From this point of view it may be contrasted with Hogarth's *The Shrimp Girl* in the National Gallery which is properly a sketch. *The Shrimp Girl* has an equal, but not the same, felicity, an enviable accomplishment and an almost magical degree of success. The liquid paint has been brushed on to the canvas with a light, swift and certain touch that is surely unparalleled in Hogarth's work or perhaps, indeed, in anybody's work. Remotely unlike his usual constructive and orthodox style, it seems the happy issue of a joyous and almost momentary inspiration. The Stevens picture is totally different. There is here no jauntiness of style, no attempt at bravura. In its sobriety it is almost sombre; in its observation and insight it is profound; in its expressiveness and effortless control it is not unworthy of Velasquez himself.

That acute observer, Eugène Fromentin, who was almost exactly Stevens's contemporary, found in the decay of French painting at the time "de quoi consterner les hommes d'instinct, de sens et de talent". He asks himself, "Sommes-nous beaucoup moins doués? Peut-être. Moins chercheurs? Tout au contraire. *Nous sommes surtout moins bien élevés.*" Stevens was a shining exception to this melancholy rule. He was bien élevé; and it is perhaps significant that the most highly trained and most workmanlike craftsman should also have been by far the greatest and most sensitive artist of his time.



5. WILLIAM HOGARTH, 1697-1764

THE SHRIMP GIRL: 25in · 20in : *National Gallery*

The Shrimp Girl is a brilliant sketch. It has in an unsurpassable degree the attributes of spontaneity and transparency, with that luminosity of effect that transparency alone can give. When the French impressionists were heralded as painters of light, and almost as if it were a discovery, their admirers must have forgotten that this kind of painting existed in the world, for there is more light in this canvas than in all the work of the French impressionists put together.



26. CANALETTO, 1697-1768

COLONNADE OF THE PROCURATIE NUOVE, VENICE: 18in. x 14in.: *National Gallery*

THIS canvas is reproduced mainly to illustrate certain devices characteristic of Canaletto, such as the raised spots of colour on the high lights, the drawing of details on the top of an otherwise finished scene somewhat in the manner in which the detail is "written in" in some of Girtin's water-colours, and the ruled, superimposed drawing of architectural features and even the divisions between the stones of the pavement.

These ruled lines may very probably have been ruled in the first setting out of the subject on the canvas but the ruling that appears on the finished picture has been added in transparent colour when the rest of the picture was dry. It can be done with a fine brush, the straight edge of the ruler being held away from the surface of the canvas so that the ferrule of the brush is guided by the ruler. If a slip is made it can be wiped away with a clean cloth provided the paint on which the lines are ruled is *perfectly* dry.

Such a procedure may easily become mechanical. Indeed Canaletto himself in some of his later mannerisms became painfully mechanical. But the device has been employed so often with such success (and is, indeed, the only method by which certain effects can be obtained) that it should command the student's careful attention.



27. JOHN CROME, 1768-1821

MOONRISE ON THE MARSHES OF THE YARE : 27½in · 43½in : *National Gallery*

ON this canvas the earth, mill, etc., are a transparent brown stain with slight added touches. The sky is thinly painted except for the high lights on the clouds round the moon and the moon itself. The transparent brown of the earth has apparently been carried right across the water, the latter being superimposed, leaving touches of brown breaking through. The whole has been given a final glaze.



28. JEAN-BAPTISTE SIMEON CHARDIN, 1699-1779

STUDY OF STILL LIFE: 14½in · 17½in : *National Gallery*

AN instructive example of variety of impasto. Parts of the canvas show little more than a thin staining such as is seen in the bottle (apart from its high lights). The loaf, on the other hand, perfectly illustrates the way in which thick, loaded pigment can be given a texture almost miraculously expressive of the texture of the loaf itself. This texture once attained, the effect has been cunningly elaborated with semi-transparent touches. Even so, it would have been crude without the unifying glazes. It is to these, far more than to the kindly hand of time, that the picture owes its patina; it is by these means that a canvas changing from heavily loaded pigment in one part to a mere staining in another has yet been woven into a perfect unity of surface.

