

# THE MANUFACTURE OF RENAISSANCE ART

## Art History through Technique

### ABSTRACT

Masters of Paint' rediscovers the invention of oil dryers and varnishes by the Flemings that produced the Golden Age of Art and what followed after their loss.. The 'invention of oil painting' by van Eyck in 1410 is the technological advancement that can explain Renaissance Art and it was only after the loss of Old Master formulas that art became fragmented and abstracted.

Man's unyielding desire to create springs the eternal question; how much is creativity dependent on technology? Art history has always championed the creative genius, leaving the question; how much is technique a part of that creativity? Craft and science depend greatly on technology, yet art historians have romanticized artists' creative skill downplaying technique as rudimentary. When actually the more advanced the technique, the more artists produce art which enhances stylistic invention, creating greater schools of art: where, when artist technique is lacking so is art.

From the Stone Age charcoal and hematite were ground with animal fat binders to create the cave paintings of Altamira, which lead to the ultimate expression of Classicism in Greek Hellenism of the 4<sup>th</sup> C BC . Since the coming of Christ and modern man, modern history begins with the Fall of the Roman Empire and ensuing Dark Ages where man's struggle for existence left little desire for creatively, when out of the ashes an organic folk science of alchemy began to emerge producing the Lucca Manuscript in the 8<sup>th</sup> C and more the more compelling Medieval manuscript; Theophilus 12<sup>th</sup> C MS, 'On Divers Arts: Painting, Glassblowing, and Metalwork'. For the first time, a sense of progress began to ignite Europeans with new found products crafted

using chemical compound reactions to produce, metal for hinges and implements, colored and clear glass vessels, brilliant dyes for royal robes. Tradesmen and crafts were burgeoning from all corners of Europe, yet, painting practices were progressing into fresco, tempera and illumination from the craft of ceramic and glass blowing. The use of oils to suspend pigments had been attempted with little success until van Eyck, a Fleming, 'invented oil painting' in 1410. What he had invented was a dryer for oil.

The small township of Maaseik, the Netherlands whence van Eyck came, was a sea faring nation producing many different crafts bettering in quality as they competed with the dominant city states like Florence for textiles. At this moment, the gold 'Florin' dominated the European currency and Cosimo d'Medici was claiming a new renaissance of Greek ideals of Classicism in the literature and the art. However, the Venetian Empire built on the glass trade was probably the most likely place for the 'invention of oil painting' to take place considering their knowledge of colors and establishment of guilds dating from 1288 and, yet it was the burgeoning society of new found freedoms sharing techniques of craft that led to the 'invention' in Flanders rather than the Murano stronghold threatening of international assassins for anyone leaking Venetian glass secrets.

Painters quickly realized the power of these varnishes that dried overnight, in the dark without heat and every court in Europe was determined to acquire this revolutionary trade secret. Historians acclaimed van Eyck's brilliance, and in 1550 Vasari fixed this event into art history in 'The Lives of the Artists', and for two hundred years this evolving technology that produced the Dutch Masters, was known as Flemish Technique. This system for painting using oily-resinous varnish was the technological breakthrough that set in motion the proliferation of Renaissance Art. Ultimately the secret nature of these recipes died with the Old Masters and their guilds by the end of Golden Age and Flemish Technique was lost leaving the many failed attempts of artists to recapture the pristine effects of the past only to exhibit darkened brown canvases devoid of any standard for art.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C art had fallen into a 'mini Dark Age', and the English aristocracy through the Royal Academy commissioned experts, notably Ms. Mary Merrifield and Sir Charles Eastlake to recreate the lost technique and when they were unable to reproduce them; they

denounced that van Eyck had invented oil painting. At that same Windsor-Newton started manufacturing tube paint in 1841. This single event was as influential to art as the 'invention of oil painting'. The ease of not having to grind colors with complicated mediums, unleashed an exodus away from the stogy French Academy, for more spontaneous alla-prima painting. The manufacture of tube paints had its own myriad of problems relegated to industry and not the artist. Paint for the last four hundred years was shiny and consisted of pigment, oil and resin, however paint in the tubes hardened where the resin was eliminated making the paint flat. This changed the way painters painted making it impossible for painters to paint natural transparent shadows. The Impressionist painters adjusted this problem by lifting up their pallets to a higher chroma level and substituting pinches of black, blue and violet for shadow. Within a few decades this conceptualizing of shadow in art past through the 'isms' from Pointillism to Abstract Expressionism to form Modern Art.

Progress would not stop and between the World Wars acrylic polymers were invented as the new miracle paint for reconstruction after the wars. Having nearly replaced oil paint, the future of paint lies in the closed cell plastic films of acrylic and latex paints regardless of the technological shortcomings. Following this new trend, modern restorers in collaboration with industries paint chemists have advanced this new technology as the basis for their restoration practices using industrial solvents and synthetic resins that has been irreversible ruination of Renaissance art. What could have been an investigation into the rheology of oily-resinous mediums for the last century is now scrambling to justify the unintended consequences of this devastating synthetic technology .

At the same time the confusion that has surrounded art technique, from the unresolved oil techniques of the past to fashionable modern synthetic paints and techniques has only exacerbated art into opposing camps of old and new leaving the old in the dust. The forthcoming reconstruction of Flemish Technique in this book allows painters to reconstruct Old Master effects as well as conceptualizing new stylistic inventions into modern art to bring art back into the unity that all art is abstract and there is no divide only movements. This would also be an indispensable tool for the conservation community for the restoration of our masterpieces.

