

## THE VEIL OF PLASTICITY IN RENAISSANCE ART

By Peter Arguimbau Dec. 2017

Plasticity is the vehicle for modeling sculpture into three-dimensional forms. Plasticity in painting is the coating that isolates, protects and augments 3-D effects. This coating, an oily-resinous varnish, was invented by Jan van Eyck of Flanders in 1410 and directed the course of painting in the Renaissance.

The 'invention of oil painting' as it was known, was first documented in the 1550 publication *"Lives of the Artists"*, by Giorgio Vasari. Before van Eyck, painting was relegated to mostly devotional icons and the techniques were limited to tempera on panels – a flat, aqueous egg technique finished with a shiny oil varnish for protection; fresco painting, a tedious cumbersome method, invented for large wall decoration, and Illumination for religious texts with aqueous gum Arabic. Oil painting techniques were not practiced because the oil took weeks to cure in the sun. With the introduction of Van Eyck's fast drying oily- resinous varnish paintings dried overnight in the dark without the need for sunlight and became the preferred medium for painting. With this new 'invention', painting flourished throughout the Renaissance, and painters became obsessed with recreating life-like images. Shedding light on these varnishes will hopefully explain the explosion of art of the Renaissance.

Known as 'Flemish Technique', this semi-synthetic technology spanned three hundred years of innovation, from the start of the Primitive School of Flanders to the Old Masters of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The artist members of the Guild of St. Luke devoted their technical expertise to raising the standard for the most compelling art in history, and were at the same time sworn to secrecy. The Brueghel Romantics of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century intensified Flemish Technique with oil tinctures from mineral salts that produced artificial colors used in ceramics, glass and textiles. These colored tinctures, such as crimson dyes distempered from manganese and exotic roots, blues and greens from copper sulfate, and deep reds and browns from iron oxides, created brilliant hues of colored glazes for prismatic effects of light. An oil

tincture particle size is a 'nano' particle, infinitesimally smaller than particles of powdered pigments. Iron sulfate made into a brown ink for painting absorbs light like a black hole, creating intense translucent shadow, and is perceived as much darker than larger pigment particles of black which reflect light. Iron sulfate, the illusive 'copperosa' in period art manuals, is very corrosive and tempered with resin and oil made for an extremely fast drier. The painters of the Great Antwerp Period of Rubens advanced these drying formulations to be able to dry the dead color underpainting, as well as glazing color as quickly as their inspiration allowed, often completing a painting in one sitting. The volatile solvents of turpentine, oil and resin fused together with particles of pigment and coalesced into a hardened plastic coating. Such plasticity in painting became the standard for creating 3-D effects that spread from painter to painter throughout the Renaissance.

Two of the greatest examples of the skill in capturing this 3D reality are; "The Night Watch," by Rembrandt, and Velasquez's 'Las Meninas'. 'Las Meninas' ('The Ladies-in-Waiting') was so renowned that it commanded its own room at the Museo del Prado in Madrid. Velasquez no doubt acquired the Flemish Technique from the Flemish painters, as Flanders was a Spanish territory, sharing in trade and commerce. Not just any court painting, this life-size tableau of the Spanish court depicts the King and Queen in a mirror on the back wall viewing Velasquez painting his self-portrait behind the large canvas, brush in hand. He stands to the left of the ladies of the court with their maids and German -Shepherd all in such naturalness that the viewer is thoroughly drawn into the painting and engaged in a day in the life of the court. The final "artistic touch" was that at the back of this exhibition room, a mirror was hung angled to reflect the spectators viewing the painting, so that the spectators became part of the audience, mingling with the Spanish Court – further blurring the line between illusion and reality, a virtual reality experience!

In the Doria Pamfilj Gallery in Rome, Velasquez's portrait of Pope Innocence X is also exhibited in a private room where viewers can experience the virtual reality of having a private audience with Your Holiness.

We can better appreciate the explosive power of this technological advancement from recent statistics on 'Studies in Seventeenth-century Dutch Culture' by Jan de Vries, who estimates that in the town of Ghent over the 10-year period 1630 to 1640, 1.2 million paintings were produced. Even farmers boasted of passing their collections down through generations. Of the estimated 25 million paintings produced in the Netherlands from this study, not to include the rest of Europe, two thirds were produced between 1580 and 1700.

By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century painting production fell to one fifth its previous levels, and the only conclusion for this sudden drop is the death of the Old Masters who took the recipes for Flemish Technique with them to their graves. This caused a "mini Dark Age" for art, punctuated by endless failed attempts to recapture the lost techniques of the past. After a century of dark paintings, two simultaneous events occurred.

First, the decline and darkening of painting coupled with the lost glazing techniques of the Old Masters caused the English aristocrats of the Royal Academy to investigate the mystery of the failed arts. They commissioned the most formidable authorities in antiquities and fine arts: Mrs. Mary Merrifield, who wrote *The Art of Fresco Painting as Practiced by the Old Italian and Spanish Masters* (published in 1846) and Sir Charles Eastlake, who wrote *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools & Masters* (published in 1847, volumes I and II). Eastlake in 300 pages of comprehensive investigation circling around the materials and techniques of van Eyck, could not produce a conclusive working formula for Flemish Technique. Singlehandedly, he denounced van Eyck's 'invention', rewriting art history and discrediting any technological explanation for the massive production of Renaissance art.

In the same period in 1841, Winsor-Newton started producing tube paints from John Goffe Rand's invention. The ease of tube paints made painting available to anyone especially dissenters from the orthodoxy of the French Academy – however, at a cost. To keep the paint from hardening in the tubes, the resin was eliminated from the oil-paint recipe, causing the paint to dry flat. This unintended

consequence forced painters to relearn to paint with flat paint. Without resin, painters could no longer paint the fluid, transparent luminous shadows of the Renaissance. The Impressionists, the first school to use flat tube paints were forced to lift up their pallets to high hues of color and conceptualize shadow with pinches of black, violet, and blues. For this reason there is no brown paint in Impressionist Art. Ironically, the Impressionists were mislabeled “painters of light” by historians, when actually they were the first conceptual painters transforming flat painting into Expressionism, Pointillism, Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. These ‘isms’ of art all carried their own subjective doctrines for painting leading to defining Modern Art in broad terms as ‘art as experience’. Within forty years, the standard for plasticity of the last 400 years of shiny luminous resinous coatings became irrelevant.

Plasticity was scuttled by the entire art community, including museums and restorers. Recently, I had a chance to see Vermeer’s, “Girl with a Pear Earring” from the Mauritshuis Collection at The Frick exhibition. On close inspection, I saw that the painting had been altered. In 1994 the painting had undergone a complete intervention by Jorgen Wadum. Wadum posted cleaning off all the yellow varnish and overpaints, even to using a scalpel for tough spots. He also stated that there had been many previous restorations and overpaints, thereby exonerating himself from any culpability for his own intervention.

What had changed most dramatically was the background shadow. It was now opaque, not translucent, even though it was coated with a shiny Dammar varnish (part of the recorded restoration process). Also, the shadow plane on the head was no longer umbrian-based (iron oxide, as previously stated), respecting the manner of the Flemish Master. Instead, the restorer brilliantly forged a violet shadow. It is as if the figure of the girl has been transformed into an Impressionist painting – with complete denial of the materials and techniques of the Old Masters.

Without reconstructing the Old Master formulations, it is impossible to reproduce the plasticity of Renaissance art using industrial materials. At the Hispanic Society Museum in New York City there are several unsuccessful copies of Velasquez by Monet

using flat tube paints with dead shadow. Clearly Monet, a master painter, idolized Velasquez, the “Master of the South,” and made several trips to copy his work at the Prado. Velasquez mastered plasticity with his transparent shadow and layers of colored glazes. At the same time, his loose style establishes him as one of the first Impressionists.

Plasticity is not something that can be added to a surface, as with tempera painting. Not only is plasticity technical in developing the foundation of painting, it incorporates the language of abstract “principles of art.” These principles start with elements of abstract design isolating the opaque lighted areas from the transparent shadow planes including dynamic symmetry, proportion, perspective, light and shade, core shadow, color; all acting in harmony with the source and quality of light. Shadow cast from a form does not transmit light and is therefore dark and transparent. The Renaissance painters infused shadow with resin to create this transparency. The lighted forms were colored first with opaque local color then glazed over with prismatic films of color that mimicked the light quality imposed on the object. The Masters painted with just a handful of colors and through colored glazes could create a limitless number of hues. An effect that can never be achieved with the thousands of manufactured tubed colors, cheap commercial acrylics, plastic gesso grounds, and synthetic varnishes.

When looking at a figurative painting, the senses instantly question what is real or fake. It’s a gut feeling. If the elements of the painting are not convincing either by the finish or the ‘principles of art’, then the intellect is challenged into action to sort out the problem. What’s wrong? Can it be fixed? Taking issue, the viewer is locked into the same space, as painter and painting; to interpret, explain, correct, or draw out emotion. It becomes a work in progress, problem solving, ultimately a subjective experience, unique to oneself.

The contrary is true of a figurative work that poses an object so real it commands its own space. An object so realized it seduces the senses through beauty and mystique, inviting the viewer to partake in that space. The viewer in absorbing the quality of light and space, transcends and communes in bliss with the realized image. This

transformation by means of art is a communal existential experience, a glorified shared experience, a gift at the heart of the painter's achievement.

Fortunately there are artists that have never wavered from the search for the standard of plasticity attained in Renaissance Art. Through the perseverance of painters, such as restorer and painter Jacque Maroger at the Shuler School, and Frank Mason at the Art Students League of NYC, the reconstruction of Flemish Technique is still flourishing.

Book Project : "FINDING REMBRANDT'S MEDIUM The Rise and Fall of Renaissance Art "

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