

## THE LUMINIST MOVEMENT: LOST IN TRANSITION

By Peter Arguimbau

The Luminist Movement was displaced almost as quickly as it was founded, and yet is truly the quintessential American movement, with its roots in the Hudson River School, having defined the Renaissance here in America it is the pictorial embodiment of the Transcendentalist Movement.

The Renaissance is not owned by any place it is an ideal; debatably originating in Florence in 1435 from the ideals of Beauty founded in Greek Classicism in what became the Humanist Movement. Although, Italy in its splendor was at the epicenter of the greatest movement in modern times, the Netherlands provided the technical tools. This *rebirth* reached every corner of Europe adding new elements to the Renaissance, and then exploring a new current it surfaced as the Naturalist Movement in America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Painters facing the vast frontier of the American landscape sojourned to Europe to learn Renaissance techniques and art theory in depicting what started as the Hudson River School.

Bridging the Luminist Movement with Renaissance art is a stretch unless you are familiar with technique. I have been a student of Flemish Technique ever since I was eight years old and began grinding pigments for my dad, a portrait painter. While he painted the sitter, I would sit in the corner of his north-light studio and grind the colors fresh as my dad would call them out to me; reminiscent of the Dutch renderings of studio practices depicting a

marble table with an apprentice grinding color. The grinding of powdered pigments was not as difficult as finding a recipe for an oil drying medium for painting. Our first attempt was the Maroger Medium from the recipes of Jacques Maroger, *The Secret Formulas and Techniques of the Masters*, 1948. These recipes turned out not to be sound, however after a lifetime of investigation of Flemish Technique I was able to formalized a plausible reconstruction.

Flemish Technique spanned three periods to evolve from when Jan van Eyck invented of oil painting in 1410 to the Golden Age of Art. What van Eyck invented in the First Period was a rapid drier for oil as the vehicle that suspended pigments, replacing the tedious aqueous tempera and fresco techniques. The Second Period of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Brueghel Romantics advanced this technique by making a rainbow of colored drying oils as glazes much like the dyes for textiles. Brueghel the Elder was a master of layering and blending prismatic refractions of colored glazes into his paintings. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Antwerp Period of Rubens furthered this development with resonate gel mediums that enabled artists to paint as swiftly as their imagination. These fast drying mediums allowed for up to three and four suppositions, one right over the other without disrupting the previous layer as well as glazing of color. Franz Hals' portraits clearly articulates this layering. Where before painting each step; fixing the drawing, shading the form, coloring the different forms and finally varnishing needed to be isolated, now for the only time in art history they are simplified into one sitting.

This technique enabled the manufacture of art where in Ruben's lifetime alone his workshop produced 15,000 paintings. To give you an idea of how much art was produced, between 1630 to 1640, the town of Ghent alone

produced 1.2 million paintings. However, after these Old Masters died and took their secret recipes to the grave at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century art production dropped so dramatically in the following century, that it was deemed a Mini Dark Age by authorities.

Only through copying the paintings of the Hudson River School did I realize some of these painters were using the same technique as the Dutch masters. This comparison is unmistakable as different resins and oils have a footprint that is unchanged through time. Remarkable Flemish Technique was not totally lost and can be traced through technique. There were pockets of painters that retained this technique into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially the landscape and portrait painters in England. Fluid painters like Sir Thomas Lawrence, Sir Henry Raeburn of Scotland and Turner painted with variations of this technique. As American society flourished with the need for paintings, these emigrant painters returned to Europe to study the art of Claude Loraine and the Dutch landscapes of Hobbema, Ruysdael, and Willem van de Velde bringing Flemish Technique to America.

The Luminist Movement was split off of the Hudson River School founded by Thomas Cole in 1825 lasting through the close of the century. Cole would travel up to the Catskills and paint the natural splendor of lakes and mountains and exhibit them in New York City, eventually accompanied by Asher B. Durand, Jasper Cropsey, Frederic Church. Over the next fifty years painters explored the western Frontier traveling as far as Central and South America and north to the Arctic. Thomas Moran's paintings of the Grand Canyon and Bierstadt's paintings of the Rockies and Yosemite Valley embodied the grandeur of the American frontier, and became the inspiration for the founding many of our national parks from Arcadia National Park to Yosemite.

By 1850, the Art-Union of New York on 10th Street numbered over 350 members all displaying and selling vast numbers of paintings some of which commanding up to \$10,000. Coincidentally, this represents the same number of artists as in the Antwerp guild of Rubens acting similarly as the Art -Union maintaining the same protectionism. These fraternities of artists upheld quality control by only allowing members to buy painting supplies from the apothecary. An artist could not just hang up his shingle open for business without joining the guild. They also shared benefits for family members of deceased artists and arranged studio and travel excursions.

What is so important about technique; is not one sentence is recorded during this period of the American Renaissance about technique. These painters must have been sworn to secrecy in joining the Art- Union, and only by invitation on these rigorous expeditions did they share their techniques. Whether by mule, horseback, or ship, an artist using a thumbnail box, painting alla-prima with fast drying mediums could record and transport a journey's worth of work. William Trost Richards painted 4x6 inch studies and sent them to clients through the post as contracts for approval for larger paintings. The Cropsey Foundation in Hastings on Hudson has an entire cabinet of Japer Cropsey thumbnail studies on display.

Surprisingly the discovery of the Luminist Movement came about almost a century after they were painted in 1948, when John Baer, in curating a Hudson River School show for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts noticed a unique quality in a few members of this school. Between the leading authorities, Barbara Novak, John Wilmerding, and Theodore Stebbins, they chose four painters to represent this short lived movement between 1850 to 1875. This was almost an arbitrary selection as many of the Hudson River School painters painted in the Luminist style. The first, Fitz Henry Lane, the oldest member painted on the North Shore of Boston, capturing serene marine subjects and a member of the Transcendentalist Movement ; Martin Heade, one of the most unique painters of all time, painted an extensive 'oeuvre of haystacks of the Shrewsbury Marsh; Sanford Gifford, a prolific painter of tonal light effects; and John Frederic Kensett, the most celebrated painter, had a studio on the idyllic shores of Long Island Sound in Darien, Connecticut.

I grew up in Scotts Cove with a view of the Fish Islands which Kensett owned as part of the 23 acre Contentment Island. He painted the Fish Islands extensively, many of which are in the Montclair Museum in New Jersey and the Metropolitan Museum where he was a founding member. He died of pneumonia in 1872 saving his friend's wife, John Collier, after her carriage turned over on the causeway onto the Island .

In the summer of 1872, Kensett painted a remarkable, thirty-eight paintings called 'Last Summer's Work' and in Kensett's monograph work, Dwyer on Kensett's technique notes that he must have used a thixotropic paint, a fast drying gel medium, to accomplish this feat. Without being familiar with Flemish Technique and its thixotropic nature it would be difficult to connect the Renaissance to America. The similar natural spontaneity of Kensett's stippling in his treatment of rocks and spray off the waves imitates the fluid pointillist stippling of the Flemish School such as the textile, jewelry, and still life handling of Jan Vermeer or the bovine landscape paintings of Albert Crup.

In discovering Luminism, these historians connected the Luminist Movement to the singularly American Transcendental Movement of Thoreau and Emerson. Transcendentalism expounded on beauty and bliss of nature's light. Quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson "The Transcendentalist" Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Stephen E. Whicher ( Boston, 1960) 'All seeing Eyeball'. 'Standing on bare ground,-- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.'" Although as time progressed Emerson became conflicted citing in his essay on "Nature and Commodity"; on the fisherman who goes out to sea sees the beauty in the ocean and now only counts his catch. This conflict foretells of the path of industrialism to monetize nature's bounty in the name of progress, our greatest conflict today, and evidenced by the fading of the Hudson River School for the new movement in Europe in the 1880s.

Where America was experiencing their Renaissance, Europe was redefining art with Impressionism. Rebelling against the French Academy trying to revive a lost technique, the French painters were discovering how to paint with the newly invented tube paints that paint houses like Windsor-Newton were producing. However, in stopping the tubes from hardening, these manufacturers eliminated the resin from the paint. Without resin the paint dried flat and painters could not reproduce the transparent effects of shadow of the past, so they lifted up their palettes to a high chroma level and imitated shadow with pinches of flat blue, violet and black, thus the name 'impression'. This conceptualizing of shadow, consequently began abstract art with the rapid progression of 'isms' from Expressionism to Abstract Expressionism.

Today art is searching for direction. Artists have explored every form of expressionism in the last century and are still clamoring for the new 'ism'. Luminism cut short by the trend of flat painting could possibly be the new direction. Incorporating the abstract theory of art of the Renaissance along with the lessons of layering of glazes in prismatic light, Luminism is the key to expressing the art of illusion. The act of palpitating light in subtle nuances from the shadow plane into the central effect; that time it takes your eye to absorb these tiny increments of light is the *hold your breath* moment necessary to transcend into and be at one with the picture plane. This is where time is stopped with paint. The magic moment you forget everything and are transported into another illusion. A painter's dream come true!

As young painters begin to explore prismatic glazes with these fast drying medium there is no end to the effects that can be produced.