

# How Are We Doing?

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We of academic inclination—collectors, galleries and artists—are all participants in a long-awaited renaissance of traditional painting that began about twenty years ago. Most artists over forty-five can share a tale of their struggle to find rigorous instruction. What an enormous change a couple of decades have brought! Today, information about the nearest atelier is just a google-search away from the eager student. And ateliers abound, in which scores of aspiring artists are acquiring impressive technique at younger and younger ages. These students, and their teachers, pay homage to Chardin and Velázquez, to French Academics and Renaissance masters; and they proudly speak of carrying on a tradition that continues to have relevance. The context of this revival, however, is anything but traditional. The visual arts once held a near monopoly on the image; now a staggering volume of imagery impacts us daily, fed by the ubiquitous digital camera.

It's interesting to read what conservative essayist and painter Kenyon Cox wrote about tradition, almost 100 years ago. Of the "classic spirit," he says:

And it loves to steep itself in tradition. It would have each new work connect itself in the mind of him who sees it with all the noble and lovely works of the past, bringing them to his memory and making their beauty and charm a part of the beauty and charm of the work before him. It does not consider tradition as immutable or set rigid bounds to invention. But it desires that each new presentation of truth and beauty shall show us the old truth and the old beauty, seen only from a different angle and colored by a different medium. It wishes to add link by link to the chain of tradition, but it does not wish to break the chain.<sup>1</sup>

Between the writing of that passage and today, the chain was arguably broken in this country, or at least worn precariously thin. Today's academic painters, true to the classic spirit, *do* steep themselves in tradition. Finding continuity in that chain is a preoccupation for many, not only students seeking quality instruction, but also professionals marketing themselves. Some

artists boast of continuing an oral tradition that traces itself back to Jacques-Louis David. Others emphasize time spent in museums copying, or participation in the re-emergence of the atelier, with its 19th-century academic program.

In light of this tradition to which we take pains to link ourselves, it seems timely and fair, after twenty years, to ask: How we are doing? As our movement leaves its infancy, let's judge it on its own terms: Have we added a new link to the chain of tradition, or are we still mending the rend? Where are we in our quest? Do we have a "different angle?"

Those are big questions, not answerable by this short essay or this author. Yet one can make comparisons. Opportunities to do so rise serendipitously—a visit to a gallery followed by a trip to a museum. It helps to remove oneself from the familiar; in a strange city, a new museum and a different gallery give one a fresh eye. This year, a number of such pairings have made one observation unavoidable to me: namely, the laboriousness of contemporary technique in comparison to the masters to whom we pay homage. Let's take a quick tour, beginning with still life.

The patience needed to portray every single grain in a piece of wood with a miniscule sable brush—a bit of *trompe l'oeil* that seems to have become *de rigueur* for contemporary still life painters—is certainly impressive, but it is not something Chardin bothered with. Nor did Henri Fantin-Latour who, with a handful of bold brushstrokes, was able to convince a viewer that a section of canvas is actually a cherry tabletop. With their thoroughly covered canvasses, a recent group show of contemporary work, mainly still lifes, bore arresting similarity to the local museum's fine collection of late 19th-century American *trompe l'oeil*. But it is Chardin, not William Harnett, who the artists proclaim as their guiding light.

Moving to the figure, Titian's nudes never reveal more to us than we are comfortable knowing. From the degree of realism in some of our contemporary figure work, we can deduce this required a lot of ignoring on Titian's part. But, thanks to his discretion (and perhaps his models' modesty), we can enjoy the beauty of a Renaissance figure without being confronted with the consequences of the Brazilian wax.

It is in landscape painting, though, that we have most drastically departed from the past. In Venice, the Correr Museum is currently showing a stunning collection of works by John Singer Sargeant, all painted during his numerous stays in that city (the exhibit originated at the Adelson Galleries in New York.) Included are many watercolor sketches he made from gondolas. What a master of this medium was Sargeant! The water runs freely on the paper, and yet he so brilliantly selects the essentials of the scene. His technique stands in contrast to a current watercolor style which should be familiar to anyone who flips through art magazines: hard-edged detail achieved through extensive masking—the type of paintings about which someone might exclaim, “Wow, that’s a watercolor? Gee, it’s so good I thought it was a photograph!” Indeed, they *are* paintings of photographs.

This trend isn't limited to watercolor; even in oil, landscapes and cityscapes are becoming excessively detailed. Some artists work as photo-realists, others acknowledge working from photos, and one suspects that some *plein-air* artists take advantage of the convenience of digital photography to capture fleeting details. Not surprisingly, paintings of photographs photograph and reproduce well, often the reproduction looks better than the original.

But, there is a cost to using a camera. The photograph takes away the incentive for the artist to arrive at a painterly solution to a problem, such as Manet's treatment of galloping horses

in *At the Races*, or the spinning wheel in Velázquez's *Hilanderas*. Can you imagine if either of these artists had pulled out a digital camera to still that which his eye could not read? We would be robbed of the ambiguity and movement in Manet's dust cloud, of Velázquez's suggestion of whirling.

Why do ambiguity and suggestion seem to be out of vogue? A number of possibilities come to mind. Perhaps it is because we are American, known to value straightforwardness and hard work. Or maybe, after the close of a century unsympathetic to tradition, we are a little giddy about, frankly, being *able* to paint with such skill. Why not put it on display? Truly, a solid technique offers relief from the fatigue of an unanchored art world, and craftsmanship can argue for inherent worth (a reassurance to someone poised to write a large check.) Dutifully rendering all details may even be a necessary stage in an artist's progress. As art historian E. H. Gombrich wrote of the masters:

Even the greatest of them—maybe the greatest most of all—began their careers with a very circumspect and even heavy technique, leaving nothing to chance. We have read Vasari's comment on the distinction between Titian's early manner and the loose brushwork of his later masterpieces. Such sublime simplification is only possible on the basis of earlier complexities.<sup>2</sup>

If this is all there is to it, we can expect our nascent movement to continue forward with more poetry and finesse as the artists mature.

But isn't it also possible, after a century increasingly dominated by the monocular view of the camera, that many of us don't look at things the same way as someone from an earlier century might have? Photographs—not "fine art" photography, but the relentless stream of images from advertisements, magazines, newspapers and electronics—may have influenced what

we expect and accept from images, including paintings. Reading images which use only the monocular cues of the camera seems normal to us, as does the photograph's flatness, smoothness, internal logic and lack of ambiguity.

Even artists who don't use photographs may find themselves unwittingly adopting a "photographic" aesthetic. This aesthetic is hard to define with precision, but one knows it when one sees it, particularly if one views the work directly. Today, however, most of the art we see, we see filtered through the camera's lens. Galleries select artists via slides and compact disks, paintings are viewed, and sometimes sold, over internet, artist websites and profiles (with images) in art magazines. We are entwined with photography. Yet the work of some past masters, Chardin comes to mind, reproduces poorly. Knowing what reproduces well was not something previous generations of artists needed to worry about.

In his book, *Collapse*, Jared Diamond uses the phrase "creeping normalcy" to describe trends, such as environmental degradation, that occur slowly enough (relative to an individual's life span) that they go unnoticed.<sup>3</sup> Thus, what is considered "normal" or "as things should be" imperceptibly shifts, until a catastrophic event jolts people into awareness, if they survive it. Similarly, this mingling of painting and photography may seem normal to us, even practical.

Perhaps this is our contribution to the chain, Cox's "different angle . . . colored by a different medium."<sup>4</sup> I hope not.

Seeing a watercolor in Venice may not be a "catastrophic event," but it certainly was a rousing slap in the face for someone used to looking at contemporary American paintings. Sargeant's Venetian paintings stand as a testament to the greatness of the subjective human experience, to the wonder of our vision, and to the brilliance of an expressive technique. In our

fancy for greater detail and description, let us not become unaccepting of the visible brushstrokes, the ambiguity, the lack of detail, the painterliness of painting. James MacNeil Whistler, in one of his more generous moments wrote:

Industry in art is a necessity—not a virtue—and any evidence of the same, in the production, is a blemish, not a quality; a proof, not of achievement, but of absolutely insufficient work, for work alone will efface the footsteps of work.<sup>5</sup>

But usually he was more pointed: “mere industry is the virtue of the duffer.”<sup>6</sup>

We—collectors, galleries, and artists—share responsibility for the direction of our fledgling renaissance. Prominent galleries very much shape public taste, and to some degree, what gets painted. And what the public buys gets painted more frequently. Perhaps we can gain our moorings by re-reading Gombrich’s classic, *Art and Illusion*—or by taking a good look the next time we visit the museum.

Finally, Kenyon Cox eloquently puts to words what any painter writing about painting must feel:

I should be sorry to have it thought that my description of what painting should be is intended for a description of what I suppose my own painting to be. We moderns are all in the same boat together. We are all lamentably ill educated, and we are all trying to make up for the faults of our education by strenuous endeavor.<sup>7</sup>

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cox, Kenyon, *The Classic Point of View*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Gombrich, E. H., *Art and Illusion*, (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Distributed by Pantheon Books, copyright The Trustees of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D. C., 1965), 331.

<sup>3</sup> Diamond, Jared, *Collapse* (New York: Viking, 2005), 425-426.

<sup>4</sup> Cox, 5

<sup>5</sup> Thorpe, Nigel, ed., *Whistler on Art*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, in assoc. with The Center for Whistler Studies, University of Glasgow, 1994, from *Propositions No. 2*, May, 1884), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Thorpe, (*letter to Helen Whistler*, 1881), 72.

<sup>7</sup> Cox, [vi]