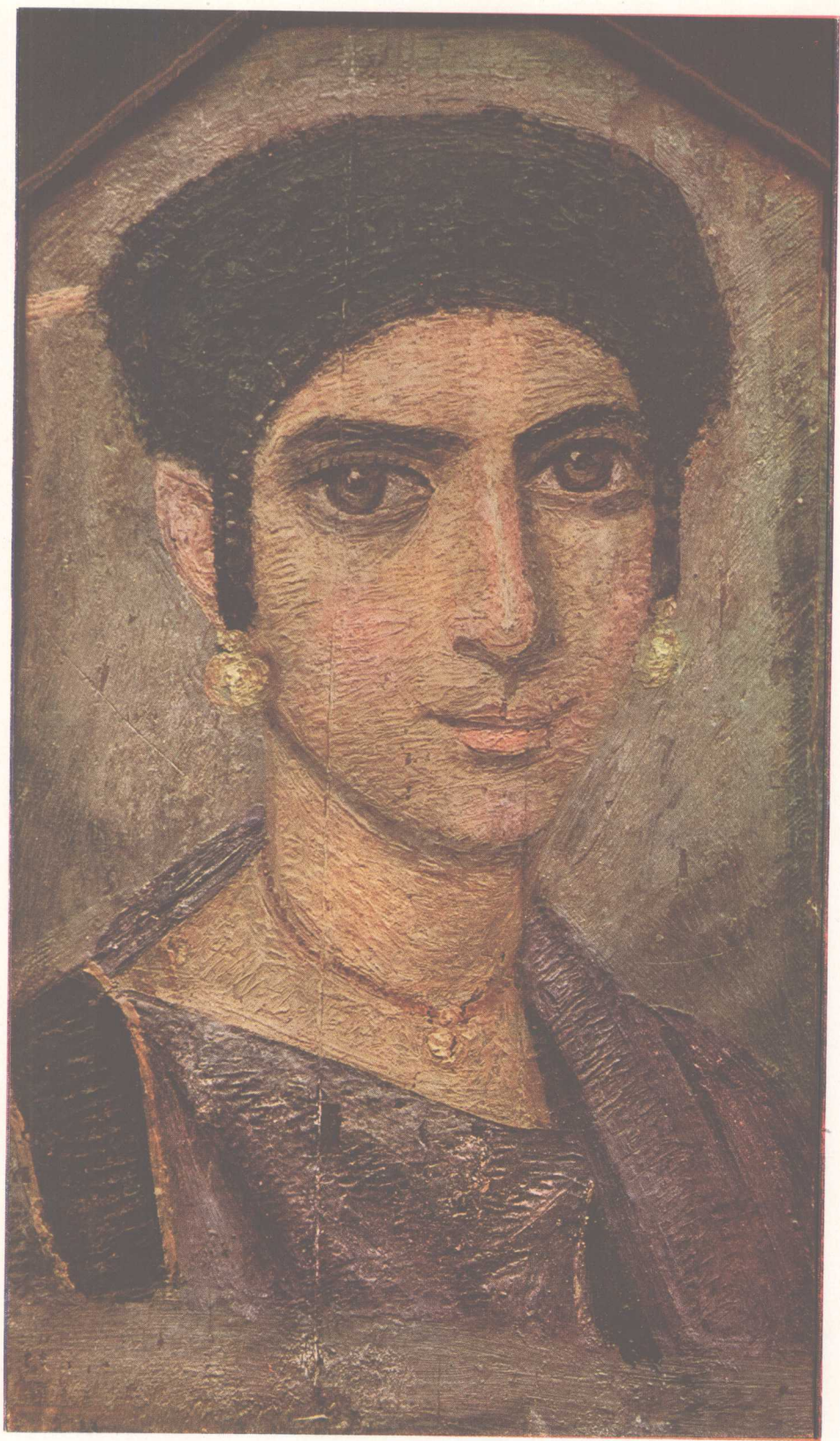


Vojtěch Volavka
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Portrait of a young woman. Encaustic on poplar wood, 34 × 18 cm. National Gallery in Prague.
An example of those panel portraits of which the largest number have so far been found in Fayyûm in Egypt. Retouches in parts from a later date.
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BRUSH-WORK

IN THE MIRROR OF SPECIALIST LITERATURE

To make a systematic even though by no means exhaustive survey of the literature dealing with the painter's brush-work is not a very grateful task, involving as it does much labour with, on the whole, small results. Brush-work, a term which, in the special literature on painting, has first acquired a more or less definite content in the last decades, was not before then the subject of either theoretical or systematic investigation. Allusions to brush-work—for no scientific treatise on the subject exists—appear of varying extent and significance in all literature on painting from the earliest times up to the present.

Of the extensive antique literature on painting only fragments¹ have survived, from which it is, however, possible to form some idea of its variety and wealth. Especially in the 4th century B.C.,² there sprang up, as it would seem, a literature which passes from the older stage of instructive treatises of a purely practical character to deeper artistic and aesthetic considerations. For our theme, however, we find here almost nothing. Not even in Pliny, that compendium of antique painting lore, who included in his *Naturalis Historia* not only recipes and anecdotes about artists but also theoretical and aesthetic disquisitions, do we find much of value for our purpose. Pliny, it is true, discusses at length the different brushes in use, speaks in his recipes of binders, but makes no reference, either direct or indirect, to the painter's brush-work. On the other hand we may read here in various passages of 'masters of the brush,' of painters who 'were famed for the lightness of their brush' (e.g. Nikomachos)—that is, allusions of a merely metaphorical character. If Pliny declares that Zeuxis brought from Parhasius 'a brush destined to great glory,' it may be supposed that he presumed the existence of brush-work but does not, however, devote special attention to it. This is only natural if we consider that here a layman compiled different texts from the point of view of a large encyclopaedia. From the anecdote about Apelles³ it would be possible to conclude that Pliny's notions of the painter's art revealed little initiation into its mysteries, the painter's skill

being explained more or less as a display of technical virtuosity. Besides, the whole manner and method of painting in antiquity, as we shall see, was aimed rather at effacing than at emphasizing the brush-work. Thus it is probable that the objective impulse was lacking which would find a reflection in literary sources.

Mediaeval European literature up to the quattrocento confines itself, as is well-known, to purely technical treatises which, for the most part, hand down the technical knowledge of antiquity. Heraclius, Theophilus, the *Schaedula diversarum artium*, as well as the remarkable Mount Athos MS.⁴ and the other smaller collections of the same kind, exhaust in greater or less detail, above all, the composition of colours, binders, grounds, etc. It is important for us, however, that they direct the artist to a certain method of procedure both in general and in particular. This prescribed method provides in the Middle Ages, at the same time, the framework, indeed more than the framework, for the painter's brush-work. For mediaeval painting, the effacing of the traces of the brush is not merely a matter of technique in the narrower sense of the word, merely the choice of material and the manner of its employment, an artistic means of secondary importance, but something which is an integral part of the artist's creative expression.⁵ From the famous instructions valid over so long a period of the Mount Athos MS., as, for instance, those describing the way to paint flesh or a vestment, we can not only deduce much of interest for the study of contemporary brush-work, but frequently come across the very thing itself.

While these writings are more an indirect source, in Chinese literature of about the same period there appear unmistakable allusions to the painter's brush-work of a direct kind. And even if we take into account the great differences existing between the complex build-up of European painting and the simple brush-drawing of Chinese art, there seems to us a striking antithesis between the purely practical European standpoint and the marked attention paid to the brush rendering in Chinese literature. If it is true that the mediaeval painter, as Dvořák⁶ puts it, 'reads and transcribes antique brush-work as characters which have already become to a great extent unintelligible,' the Chinese painter of this time is spared the inhibitions which result from the special character of European development and endeavours, on the contrary, to intensify the personal immediacy of the brush rendering. Here everything is concentrated, in painting as in the literature on painting, to a degree amounting almost to mania, on just this aspect of painting—on the brush-work. Nor is there wanting the feature of Oriental magic. In connection with the painter Wang Hia (c. 804),⁷ it is related that he dipped his head into a bucket of ink, then wiped it on a piece of silk, whereupon, as if by magic, there

appeared lakes, trees and mountains. In other sources, again, the spiritual and poetic character of the Chinese culture of the time comes into prominence. In *Notes on Landscape*, the first edition of which was printed at the beginning of the Yan Dynasty (1271), the main emphasis is laid on the state of mind of the painter who, only by proper concentration,⁸ can give a proper rendering of 'things be they pointed, slanting or rounded.'

In European mediaeval literature it is not till the very close of the epoch that we come across, in the writings of Cennini,⁹ more open references to the painter's brush-work. He, too, describes for us, in the first place, the guild workshop of the Italian 14th century quite in the spirit of the older writings, but he also operates with the term '*maniera*,' which may very well comprise not only a technical but also a stylistic content. The expression '*maniera*' occurs, in fact, even earlier in Theophilus, for instance, but is used there in a narrow sense as referring to the technical method known as 'the Greek manner' which is, in the author's estimation, still the classical example of painting. Here, for the first time in the Middle Ages, there is mention or at least an indication of some other than the material aspect of painting. It is at a time when the artist's personality is slowly beginning to throw off its anonymity and when the painter's brush-work is no longer so strictly bound by the craft rules of the period.

After Cennini, whose work is 'the propyleum of great Italian art literature,'¹⁰ there arises an extensive theoretical literature in which chemical recipes and instructions for the technical processes of painting give way to 'recipes' for the composition and design of the picture and for its conceptual content. At first we find in these art theories much less for our study of brush-work, in spite of all attempts to read between the lines, than in the older compilations of painting practice. So, for instance, Alberti or Piero della Francesca are both equally concerned with the general construction or design of the work of art, with the problems of proportions and perspective. For this reason, and also because painting at that time was turning away from its preoccupation with colour and directing its attention to form, literature is more taken up with the composition of the picture than with the way the pigment is applied to the ground. It is the same in the tractates and in the '*ricordi*'—biographical memoirs of artists which appeared at that time in considerable numbers. And yet for the greatest of these writers, Leonardo da Vinci,¹¹ brush-work exists, if only as a subject of controversy. Leonardo takes up the cudgels against one of its forms—that form which we have designated 'detached' brush-work. In Book II of his famous *Treatise on Painting*, he clearly expresses himself as against '*penellate terminate e trateggionati aspri e crudi*'—against 'clearly detached brush rendering and sharp, crude brush-strokes.' He thus gives a negative evaluation

of his own method of painting and the ideal brush-work of his time. We shall try later on to show that these words of Leonardo's were of historic importance for the development of the painter's brush-work.

One of the most valuable sources, however, is undoubtedly Vasari's *Lives*,¹² from certain parts of which it is possible to construe real brush-work analyses. A case in point is the well-known passage which discusses in an almost present-day manner the difference between the smooth painting of the young Titian and his late brush rendering in patches of colour. Vasari's expressions such as *colpi* or *macchie* provide the core of all later terminology. Not less well known is the place in Vasari where he explains, in connection with the life of Antonello da Messina,¹³ why the technique of tempera encouraged drawing with the brush similar to the process of hatching. He noted, too, moreover, the painting process and the rôle played in it by the handling of the brush. In the biography of Parri Spinelli,¹⁴ he observes, for example, how this painter models the form in such a way, that 'he puts in lights on the prominences, the middle shades on the slopes and the shades beside the contours... and then joins them up with a thick soft brush.' In general it may be said that the mannerist Vasari, the child of an age of painting virtuosi, is inclined to overestimate the importance in a work of art of its technical rendering. And so he separates from the broader term '*maniera*'¹⁵ the narrower term '*facilita*' and thus, in fact, returns to Pliny's old metaphors. Michelangelo's famous sentence 'si pinge col cervello non colla mano,' that 'one paints with the brain and not with the hand' proves, however, that a powerful opposition had grown up side by side with Vasari's view. As the situation in art grows in complexity so also the interest in brush-work increases in the following period. A Dutch writer of the 17th century, Karl von Mander, in those passages of his *Schilderboeck*¹⁶ in which he speaks of brush-work, takes Vasari as his authority but goes still further. He criticizes his contemporaries and even gives advice on how to handle the brush in certain cases. He sharply opposes the impasto painting of some living painters which seems to him 'crude and as if chiselled out of stone' (cf. Berger IV, 90) and shows how to join up the paint by different ways of blending. The brushwork at this time begins also elsewhere to emerge more clearly from the general background of technique. In the *De Mayerne M. S.*,¹⁷ for instance, the author does not forget, despite an abundance of different rules relating to the composition of the artist's materials and methods of work, to lay down how the brush should be used in various circumstances and in the rendering of different themes. He gives advice, among other things, on how to set about painting foliage, trees, etc. And even in writings in which only limited space is given to questions of technique, as in the

treatise by Samuel van Hoogstraeten,¹⁸ the writer does not omit to mention the painter's brush-work—this time as an element in the rendering of space.

The controversy regarding the form of brush-work opened, as we saw, by Leonardo, runs like a red thread from the 17th century onwards through the bulk of art literature. In the anonymous Spanish Dialogue on Painting dating from the first half of the 17th century,¹⁹ brush-work even forms the theme of a stage play. The conservative old painter, Eutiphron, carries on a polemic with the progressive young painter, Trasimaco, touching among other things on the explanation for the difference between Titian's early brush-work and that of his late works to which attention had already been drawn by Vasari. Eutiphron invokes the authority of Alonso Sanchez, 'who was in Titian's house' and who used to tell how Titian 'often spoiled excellent paintings with his *borrones* or patches.' It was said to be due to the painter's age, to the fact that his hand trembled and was unable to produce finer work. The imitation of these *golpes*, brush-strokes does not then, it is affirmed, betray the master painter. Besides the drawing, the most important thing is still, according to Eutiphron the *rilievo*, the relief or rounding out of the forms as had already been stressed by Alberti.²⁰ Trasimaco however, continues to oppose this view, finally dismissing 'this diligent manner' as more suited to 'the phlegmatic Germans or Dutch,' while for the Andalusian painter, whom 'the sun has given a fiery temperament,' he defends the other manner—and so the dispute remains open.

The detached kind of brush-work is also condemned, at the same time, by Pacheco,²¹ who lays stress on the contours without which painting is for him a common craft. Those who fain to despise it are for Pacheco 'empostadores y manchantes,' smearers and daubers.

Up to Vasari, then, literary interest is focused almost exclusively on the material side of the painter's technique. In the literature after him the term brush-work has not yet acquired its full and exact content, but references to it are increasingly frequent and less ambiguous. With the extension of the stage of painting development from Italy to north of the Alps, it appears also in non-Italian literature from which it would be necessary for the previous period to cite Dürer's literary legacy, which is equally interesting as a source for the study of brush-work as of technique. In Italian literature of the 17th century we find, as I have already indicated, much of value in writings of a topographical character, such as the work by Ridolfi,²² which contains a number of interesting facts relating to the brush-work of the Venetian masters, especially of Titian and of Tintoretto. The 18th century, in which the point of gravity is no longer Italy but France, requires, however, a study of the prolific and important French literature on the subject.

Even earlier, in the second half of the 17th century, the controversy between the advocates of Rubens' colourism and supporters of Italo-classical painting had led to a literary polemic from which much can be gleaned concerning the rise and development of the brush-work of the period. The dispute between the classicist trend, led in the name of Poussin by Félibien²³ and Charles A. Dufresnoy,²⁴ and the colourist movement represented by Roger de Piles,²⁵ has also its roots in the clash of two kinds of brush-work. In addition, the discussion, which was extended to the academic platform in the 18th century, throws considerable light on the technical and ideological background of the brush-work of the French dix-huitième. Among the most interesting literary sources are Oudry's *Réflexions sur la manière d'étudier les couleurs en comparant les objets avec les autres* (See Moreau-Vauthier), which deal with the combined optical effect of two neighbouring tones—a problem to which Chevreuil devoted much attention and which brought about one of the most essential transformations in the history of brush-work—that realized by Impressionism.

The standpoint of the classicist trend of the time is most clearly formulated by Louis Galloche²⁶ in three lectures for his pupils. He impresses on them the need for accurate drawing and warns them not to use visible brush-work. He does not sanction '... ce bel arrangement de hachures, qui, n'étant chez quelques praticiens bornés que l'ouvrage de la main, ne signifient pas plus que de grands mots placés dans le discours au lieu de la véritable expression, qui doit être une et simple...', 'this beautiful arrangement of hatchings which, in the practice of some narrowly craft painters, is mere sleight of hand, signifying nothing more than large words interspersed in a discourse instead of true expression, which should be one and simple...'. The classicists thus defend the blended type of brush-work which is, as may be deduced from the above, literally a question of good manners, whereas the colourists tend to the opposite pole, to detached brush-work. We have their admiration for Rubens to thank, among other things, for the well-known work by Decamps on the Flemish school of painters, which, for instance, reconstructs Rubens' brush-work quite in the spirit of our present study. From analyses such as those of Decamps we can take over whole passages without a change—certainly much more than say from the encyclopaedic literature represented by the frequently-cited dictionary compiled by Pernety.²⁷

The French 18th century, in which visible brush-rendering triumphs, saw also an awakened interest in brush-work among wider circles. Much valuable data is to be found, for instance, in the numerous memoirs of the period such as those of Watteau by his biographers, Caylus and Mariette, or in panegyrics such as Ballot de Sovot's *Eloge de*