

LOOKING AT
PAINTINGS

A GUIDE TO TECHNICAL TERMS

Dawson W. Carr and Mark Leonard



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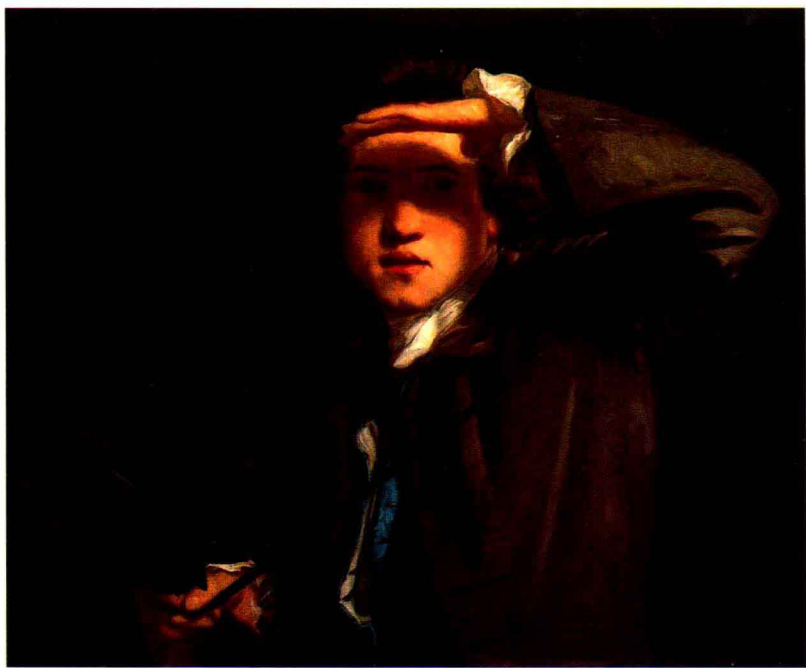
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c. 1450/55 (detail). Glue tempera on canvas, 90 × 74.5 cm (35⁷/₁₆ × 29³/₈
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Foreword

This book is intended as a guide for the museum visitor who wishes to know more about the materials and techniques of paintings, as well as the terminology used to describe their visual effects. Curators and conservators often fail to realize that many museum visitors are not familiar with the language of their somewhat rarefied professions, including many terms derived from foreign languages; this book will aid museum-goers who want to understand more fully the information presented in catalogues or on wall labels.

Owing to the confines of space, the terms included in this glossary are limited to those that are primarily technical in nature and thus are essential to discussions of the physical appearance of a painting. Terms that apply to broader, interpretative aspects of works of art (such as schools or styles of painting) are necessarily omitted. While this book includes paintings of the twentieth century, a much longer volume would be required to do justice to the myriad of materials and techniques that have been introduced since 1900.

Some of the terms in this book may also be found in the other *Guides to Technical Terms* published in this series. The term *watercolor*, for example, is defined in the volume that deals with prints, drawings, and watercolors; the term is also applicable to paintings, so it has been included in the present volume as well.

We are indebted to Andrea P. A. Belloli of Getty Trust Publications for her guidance and advice in the development of the original list of terms and to John Harris for his editing of the manuscript. Mary Vernon (Chairman of the Department of Fine Arts, Southern Methodist University, Dallas), Joseph Fronek (Conservator of Paintings at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art), and Lindsay Stainton (Assistant Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum) provided many insightful comments. We have also benefited from the support and constructive comments provided by the Paintings and Paintings Conservation departments at the Getty Museum.



ACRYLIC

David Hockney (British, b. 1937). *A Bigger Splash*, 1967.

Acrylic on canvas, 243.8×243.8 cm (96×96 in.). London, Tate Gallery. Photo: Art Resource, N.Y.

ACADEMIC

This adjective may refer to art, artists, or ideas influenced or formed by the principles of one of the academies established since the beginning of the sixteenth century. These principles include drawing from the model, studying favored art of the past (especially the antique), using drawings to prepare for painting, and applying theoretical rules of design (which have varied with the sanctioned style of the time). Academies were also responsible for establishing a strict hierarchy of types of painting. History painting—or pictures with lofty subjects from biblical, mythological, or historical sources—was always held in the highest regard. Portraiture followed, with landscape, still life, and genre painting near the bottom of the list. *Academic* is widely employed today to characterize work lacking originality. The use of this word in a pejorative sense began in the late nineteenth century, when artists rebelled against the idea that art could be made and governed by a set of rules.

ACRYLIC

In its truest sense, the term *acrylic* refers to a group of synthetic polymers manufactured from compounds containing an acrylic acid group in their chemical structure. However, the term has come to include a variety of synthetic materials, many of which have been used as substitutes for OIL-based paints.

Acrylic paints are commonly manufactured in an emulsified form, which means that the synthetic resin is suspended as tiny drops in water (the resultant mixture is called an EMULSION). For this reason, the paints can be diluted with water. Once the paint has been applied to a surface, the water evaporates, leaving behind the synthetic resin (and PIGMENT), which is no longer water soluble. The water-based nature of acrylic paints allows for easy application and rapid drying time: acrylic paints dry in a matter of minutes, as opposed to the many months required for oil-based paints.

Note Words printed in SMALL CAPITALS refer to other entries in the book.

Acrylic paints were introduced as early as 1936, but they did

not become widely used until later. Visually, acrylic-based paints can appear to be very similar to oil-based paints, but they cannot rival the rich, translucent nature of oils.

AERIAL PERSPECTIVE

See PERSPECTIVE.

AFTER

See ATTRIBUTION.

ALLA PRIMA

An Italian term meaning “at first,” used to describe a method of oil painting in which the final effect is achieved in a single, direct application of paint to a GROUND. In contrast to layering the paint with UNDERPAINTING and GLAZING, this technique challenges the painter to create effects of ILLUSIONISM with the greatest economy of means, often emphasizing eloquent BRUSHWORK. Not necessarily an independent technique, it is often used adjacent to areas with a complex layering of paint. While this type of painting was initiated in the sixteenth century, it was not practiced widely until the middle of the nineteenth century, when painters sought to create the impression of immediacy in their works. The synonymous French term *au premier coup* is more precisely applied to paintings of this period, while the term *direct painting* describes the spontaneous techniques of twentieth-century painters.

ALLA PRIMA

Jacopo Tintoretto
(Italian, 1518–1594).
*Portrait of Vincenzo
Morosini*, c. 1585. Oil on
canvas, 84.5 × 51.5 cm
(33¼ × 20¾ in.).
NGL, 4004.

The folds of the robe and
much of the landscape at
right are painted *alla
prima*.



ASCRIBED TO

See **ATtribution**.

**ATMOSPHERIC
PERSPECTIVE**

See **PERSPECTIVE**.

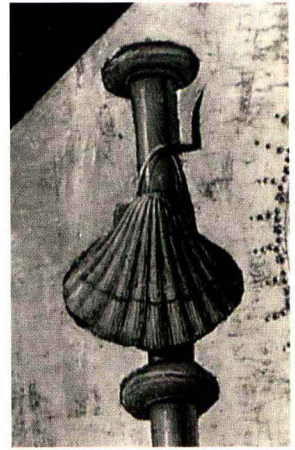
ATTRIBUTE

An object traditionally used by artists to identify a person, office, or concept. As portraitists sometimes depict sitters with the tools of their trade, mythological and allegorical figures as well as saints are often identifiable by symbols long associated with their powers, dominions, or martyrdoms. In order to insure comprehension, the complex language of attributes has been somewhat standardized in manuals compiled and printed beginning in the sixteenth century.

ATTRIBUTE

Bartolomeo Vivarini
(Italian, c. 1432–1499).
Saint James the Greater,
1490. Tempera on panel,
144 × 56 cm (56¾ × 22 in.).
Central panel from a
polyptych. JPGM,
71.PB.30.

The attributes of Saint James the Greater are the pilgrim's staff and the scallop shell (seen in the detail) derived from the distinctive badge worn by pilgrims to the saint's shrine at Santiago de Compostela in Spain.



ATTRIBUTION

The assignment of a painting of uncertain authorship to a particular artist, to his or her followers, or to an unknown artist. (In the latter case, the so-called “school of” a painting is usually specified, such as “Venetian, sixteenth century.”) Employing CONNOISSEURSHIP, art historians and critics make attributions by comparing stylistic traits in unattributed paintings to those found in works securely assigned to an individual or characteristic of a certain place at a certain time. External evidence from contemporary descriptions, contracts, and inventories can also be employed. Even with well-known artists, attribution can be highly subjective, and experts often disagree and change their minds. Opinions as to the authenticity of a painting can also be controversial because of their effect on the work’s monetary value.

The terminology used in connection with attribution is hardly exact but generally follows a pattern of diminishing contact with the artist. A painting is called *autograph* when it is thought to be entirely the work of an artist. *Attributed to* signifies less certainty that the work is wholly by the individual. Virtually synonymous, *ascribed to* sometimes implies a slightly greater degree of doubt or an old attribution used for the sake of convenience. *Studio of* or *workshop of* is used with paintings made by an unknown assistant or assistants in the artist’s shop, perhaps under the artist’s direct supervision. *Circle of* and *style of* designate an unknown hand influenced by the artist and working in about the same period, while *follower of* and *manner of* usually indicate a later date. *After* generally indicates a copy of a known work made at any date. See also ORIGINAL.

AU PREMIER COUP

See ALLA PRIMA.

AUTOGRAPH

See ATTRIBUTION.

AUTOGRAPH COPY

See ORIGINAL.

AUTOGRAPH REPLICA

See ORIGINAL.

BITUMEN

Sometimes referred to as asphaltum, bitumen is a naturally occurring tar-like substance that produces a deep, warm, brown-black color. It has been used since ancient times and can be found in the GROUNDS and paint films of European and American paintings of many periods, although its usage is most commonly associated with English painters of the eighteenth century.

Bitumen is mixed with linseed OIL in order to create a painting material. Unfortunately, bituminous paint films rarely dry properly; when bitumen is used as an UNDERPAINT, a faster-drying

paint applied on top of the slower-drying bitumen will literally slide across the surface of the wet bituminous layer as it dries, resulting in the development of large shrinkage cracks (see CRAQUELURE). Paintings that contain bitumen are also easily damaged during cleaning (see CONSERVATION) as a result of the soft, soluble nature of the material.

BODY COLOR

When associated with prints, drawings, or WATERCOLORS, the term *body color* refers to a water-based, opaque painting MEDIUM (such as GOUACHE or TEMPERA). However, in broader usage, body color can refer to a PIGMENT that is naturally opaque (such as opaque chromium-oxide green), as opposed to one that is naturally transparent (such as transparent chromium-oxide green, called viridian). Body colors can be used as opaque MIDDLE TONES when creating the illusion of form; shadows are added with transparent darker GLAZES, highlights created with opaque lighter SCUMBLES.

BOLE

A clay material that is used as the preparatory layer for application of very thin layers of gold or silver (called leaf). Bole is prepared by mixing colored clay with a water-based adhesive (such as rabbit-skin glue). Although traditional boles are usually dark red in color, many variations can be found, ranging from white to light yellow to deep violet. Because metal leaf is very thin, the color of the bole has a substantial effect upon the appearance of the GILDING. In pictures that have suffered from cracks or abrasions in gilt areas, the bole can often be seen in areas where the metal leaf is missing.

In classic water-gilding, the bole mixture is applied to the area to be gilded and allowed to dry. A smooth piece of agate may be used to burnish the surface of the colored clay. The bole is then re-wetted in order to activate the adhesive, and the metal leaf is applied.

BOZZETTO

See OIL SKETCH.

BRUSH

The basic tool used to apply not only paint but VARNISHES and metal leaf as well. Brushes are made from a wide variety of materials and come in a nearly infinite array of shapes and sizes. In ancient times, brushes may have been made from tufts of animal hair tied in small bundles to a reed handle. Cennino Cennini, writing in the fifteenth century, described delicate brushes made from miniver fur and mounted on quill handles, as well as larger brushes made from hog hairs and attached to wooden sticks. In

BRUSHWORK

Pierre-Auguste Renoir
(French, 1841–1919).

La Promenade, 1870.

Oil on canvas,

81.3 × 65 cm

(32 × 25½ in.).

JPGM, 89.PA.41.



the nineteenth century, metal ferrules were introduced as a means of holding the brush hairs together. The size and shape of the ferrule were dictated by the desired size (wide or narrow) and shape (flat or round) of the brush. In modern times, brushes of the highest quality are most frequently made with sable hair. Coarser animal hairs are still used to make bristle brushes, and a number of synthetic fibers have been introduced.

BRUSHWORK

Brushwork consists of textures and impressions within a painting created by the workings of the artist's BRUSH. Because it is, in essence, a direct reflection of the pressure and movement of the artist's hand across the surface of the painting, brushwork is one of the most intimate links that we, as viewers, have with the artist's mind at work.

Brushwork can be as varied as the types of brushes used to create a painting. Characterizations of brushstrokes include such



Renoir's vibrant brushwork captures the impression of light falling across the surfaces of the figures.

divergent descriptive terms as broad and fluid (sometimes referred to as painterly) or tight and controlled. Brushwork may not even be immediately apparent: in early Italian egg-TEMPERA paintings, for example, the fact that the image is composed of a pattern of overlapping short brushstrokes only becomes apparent upon very close inspection.

The term *stippling* refers to the technique of making repeated applications of paint by holding a stiff brush directly perpendicular to the surface of the painting.

CANVAS

This term literally refers to a piece of cloth woven from flax, hemp, or cotton fibers. However, the word has generally come to refer to any piece of fabric used as a SUPPORT for painting.

Use of canvas supports can be traced back to ancient times, but our traditional understanding of its development stems from the practice in early Italian Renaissance painting of gluing a piece of linen to a wooden PANEL prior to application of a GESSO

CANVAS

Dieric Bouts (Flemish,
active c. 1445–d. 1475).
The Annunciation, c. 1450/55.
Glue tempera on
canvas, 90 × 74.5 cm
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