

On Painting

Every hand-painted picture is not a painting. A picture may be an illustration, a rendering or a decoration. The artists who make these have the finished picture in mind before they begin. These artists know what they want to do. Beginning a painting is entirely different. When you begin a painting you have no idea what the finished painting will look like. The reason for painting is to find out. All you have is a way of proceeding. You follow the way to where it leads you. To paint is to go on a voyage of discovery. How? I sit still. My hand holds a brush, but my arm and back muscles move the brush, smearing paint, and my eyes are surprised by what I see. It's simple. To find a way of proceeding you watch your accidents. The paint teaches you. Books say that mixing yellow and blue makes green. The first time I accidentally mixed yellow and black tempera and made green I was amazed. No book tells you to mix yellow and black paint to make green. I was so happy. I had made a discovery. Green is dark yellow.

Seeing is a learned skill. On television, I watched a man who, blind since birth, had gained sight. He could see, but he didn't know what he was looking at. Everything confused him. He walked past a shadow on the sidewalk, stopped and walked around it, trying to decide whether or not the shadow was a real thing. Learning to see never ends. Every time you see something new, you have to learn to recognize it. A baby learns what a face is, then learns to recognize the family faces. The differences between noses are tiny, measured in millimeters. Eye muscles learn to make these measurements. To draw, hand and arm muscles learn to move in proportion to eye muscle movements.

I had always liked to draw. In Brooklyn, Jenny Smith, my high school art teacher said, "You have to draw all the time." I drew other people on the subway going to the sketch class in Manhattan, where I drew the naked model. A student sketchbook, eighteen by twenty, four inches, would get me into places where I absolutely did not belong. I sat drawing in Alexandra Danilova's advanced ballet class at the School of American Ballet. Madame Danilova ended the class by dancing a little solo. We all applauded. It was happiness.

Dover Books reprinted *The Craftsman's Handbook*, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, written in the 14th century by Cennino Cennini. It tells you everything you need to know to be a 14th century artist. He tells you how to make the blue that's in all Italian Renaissance painting, from Giotto to the Sistine Chapel. You take a pound of lapis lazuli, a semi-precious blue stone, pound it to powder, mix it with pine resin, gum mastic and wax and knead it with warm lye to make Fra Angelico's blue. I had to do it! The next day sanity set in. A pound of semi-precious stone? The raw material cost a fortune. I lay on the couch until I was calm. Renaissance painters worked for the Church. Only the Church could afford blue paint. Making it was also a lot of hard work.

You begin a painting with an idea that gives you a way of proceeding. I wanted to make paintings that were explosions of brilliant light and color. A painting is done when you've done all you can with it. Titanium white is the most brilliant white. Ivory black is a brilliant black. The rainbow colors are blue, green, yellow, orange and red. No pigment is a pure color like the rainbow. Every pigment leans toward the color on one side of it in the rainbow, or the other. Lapis lazuli and ultramarine blue are

purplish. Cerulean and cobalt blue are greenish. Cadmium yellow light is greenish. Cadmium yellow deep is orangey. Alizarin Crimson is blueish. Cadmium red light is orangey. I bought them all. Viridian is the most brilliant color. The chromium compound that is its green also colors emeralds, Viridian will take over a painting. All the other colors become a dull background for the green. Brilliance can be overdone, I stopped using viridian. I mixed greens on new paintings. I painted my memories - people, places.

You walk up a very wide, very tall staircase to come into the big marble lobby of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Ancient Egypt is to your right, Greece and Rome are to your left. Directly ahead is another very wide, very tall, very impressive staircase that raises you to what, in the museum, is above everything else - the rooms of old masters, the northern European painters. Why? So that daylight from the big skylights can wash down over Memling, Van Eyck, Rubens, Rembrandt, Gainsborough. The paintings were wonderful - such deep rich colors. All I could do was draw. I wanted to be a great painter too. I knew I had no clue about how to paint as they did. I saw that my brilliant paints were far too bright, garish, completely wrong.

Artists starved. I could paint on weekends. After architecture school I worked for Sam Glaberson. Bob Schwartz made renderings for a lot of New York architects then. The tempera rendering showed the client what the building project would look like when it was built. Tempera paint with gum arabic thins with water and dries hard in a few minutes. Linseed oil paint takes a week to dry; longer if it's thick. Schwartz used white, black and only three colors, cobalt blue, raw sienna, a darkish red.

The three dull colors combined harmoniously. I got rid of cadmium yellow deep and cadmium red light. Raw sienna was such a dark yellow that it was a light brown. It was not for me.

About 1950, the Museum of Modern Art got a water lily painting that Claude Monet made when he was very old, in his eighties. It was very big, five feet high, sixteen feet long, on unstretched canvas, a big rag with no drawing, only big spots of color, dark greens sprinkled with light blue flowers. It was magnificent, an explosion of light and color. It glowed, not because the colors were so bright - they weren't - but because of their placement, the contrast of greens and blue, dark and light spots next to each other.

I married, we moved to Vermont, found jobs. In the evening I took a painting class. Autumn in Vermont is brilliant. Trees turn red and yellow. I painted a landscape in white, black, cadmium yellow light, ultramarine blue and alizarin crimson. Then I painted a naked man and woman swimming in water. A little old lady only painted very small watercolor autumn landscapes. As the months passed, she found she could get all the effects she wanted using only two tubes of paint, burnt sienna and ultramarine blue. I had never used burnt sienna. It's a natural earth, raw sienna, dug out of the earth, then roasted and ground into powder. It was a really dark brown color in the tube. Diluted, with more and more water, on the white paper, the dark brown became light brown, then red, then orange - not brilliant colors, but usable. A lot of color came out of one tube. It became hills, roads, trees, sunsets. The blue was sky, water and far mountains, but mixed with full strength burnt sienna, the color was almost black, very usable. She was so happy.

She had made a discovery. I was impressed.

Two years later we moved to San Francisco, bought three Japanese prints and a book about Hokusai, a Japanese great painter. He wrote this:

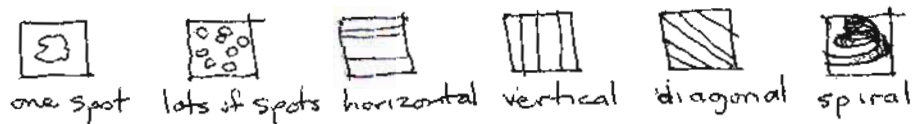
- Since the age of six I have felt a desire to paint everything I see around me. By the time I was fifty I had already made public countless paintings, but I wasn't content with my work. Only now, at the age of seventy-three, have I partially understood the real shape and character of birds, fishes and plants. At the age of eighty I shall make further progress. When I am ninety years old I shall penetrate to the very essence of all things. When I am a hundred years old I shall reach a high degree of perfection and at the age of hundred and ten everything I shall create, every point and every line I draw will be life itself.

He was so happy - and, I was sure, very drunk as well. Nonetheless, happiness is an important part of painting. If I painted when I was unhappy, all I did was to make a mess. All the accidents were disasters. I learned to wait until I was ready to paint - was happy - before picking up a brush. What can unhappy painters do? Get a roller. Repaint the kitchen.

There is a lot to think about in painting. First are colors. There are a lot to choose from. Every great painter has his own colors. I was still hunting. Second there is drawing style. You look at a painting you've never seen before and recognize whose hand made it. Third, brushstroke. Every great painter's hand has its own way of applying paint. Drawing and brushstroke are parts of handwriting. Everybody's loops and squiggles are different from everybody else's loops and squiggles. I had my own big, loose style of drawing. I didn't have my own brushstroke. Fourth are subjects. Thanks to the Mesopotamians, the ancient Egyptians, the

European cave painters, the Greeks and Romans, there are scenes of real life: imaginary scenes: portraits of people, animals: nudes: flowers, food, pots, dishes: landscapes: landscapes with figures and buildings: seascapes. It's a short list, but thinking up something new is hard. For a thousand years painters were busy inventing Christian pictures. After that, they made history paintings until the movies took that over. Both are imaginary scenes. I have no ideas. Fifth and last, we come to composition - the arrangement of the subject on the painted flat surface, which brings us to the flat surface.

How can anyone look at a portrait, painted or photographed, and say, "O that looks just like me," or "That doesn't look like me at all,"? IT'S FLAT. Nobody is flat. Yet the eye accepts the flatness. WHY? Reality is a picture pasted on the outside surface of the lens. Of course, that's NOT TRUE. So what? It's the appearance that reality has. It's how we see. All painting straddles truth and falsehood, showing us how we see. That is the usefulness of painting. That's the best it can do nowadays.



There are not a lot of ways to arrange shapes on a painting, but they can be combined, rotated and overlapped to make an infinity of different-looking compositions. One spot in the middle is the most used composition. The spot can be any shape, any subject. It can be a portrait or a crowd of people, a mouse or a mountain, anything you want to paint.

There is no painting without a subject. Franz Kline made white

paintings with a few rough black lines on them, nothing more. Their subject is composition itself. The paintings are a search for a new composition. If black lines could make a new arrangement, all the old subjects could be painted in the new composition. Franz Kline was ambitious and brave. It didn't happen. It was too difficult. When you choose a problem to work on, choose one that can be solved.

Jackson Pollock made paintings that were covered with nothing but squiggles of paint. Making squiggles was a way of proceeding that felt right to him. He pursued it. He didn't have to know why it was right: inside your eyeballs are tiny protein lumps floating in a thick liquid. We see them, but we ignore them. We pretend they don't exist, and focus on the world outside. To see them, look into a lit lightbulb for a while. You see them squiggling around the light. Pollock's paintings show us the inside of our eyeballs, a scene of real life, what we actually see, and deny. He made a big discovery. That's great painting.

I was tired of making paintings two feet wide and three feet high. I wanted to move freely when I painted. The big event of my childhood was the Passover seder when all my aunts and uncles sat around a big table and I stayed up late. Everybody knows what they want to put in the middle of a painting. The Problem of Composition in painting comes down to What Do I Put In The Corners? We have empty corners because the paintings are rectangles, while we see through a circular lens, without corners. If I didn't have a rectangle, I'd have no corners. I drew a seder scene six feet wide and four feet high on wrapping paper. A cabinet maker cut the shapes out of wood. I nailed them

together, hung the wood on the wall, painted it with two coats of the very best oil-based housepaint, giving myself a white surface on which to smear burnt sienna and ultramarine blue, both of them thinned to transparency with lots of linseed oil. Transparency is natural to oil paint. The water in tempera and watercolor disappears into the air, leaving one layer of pigment on the painting. The oil stays in dried oil paint, so you see through the top layer to the layer of pigment dried below, and to the layer dried below that. It's called glazing, books say, and that it's what the old masters did. That's all books say. It's slow, I've learned. Each layer takes a week to dry. The burnt sienna orangey glaze is a good skin color, just like Memling's. It's very rich looking. It has depth because it actually does have depth, a microscopic distance, but real. There are no books that tell you this. You smear paint and one day, there it is. You have to be able to recognize it. You wanted Memling. You got Memling. Hello, Memling.

I was very happy with the painting. It was just impossible to have a wet oil painting in the house with two small children running around. I stopped painting. We took trips.

Fifteen years later, forty-four years old, in another house, in another state, both my kids in high school, freshly divorced, living on child support payments from the kids' father, I could paint. I didn't like the seder painting. The irregular cut-out shape was too cute, too self-conscious, too noticeable. It took too much attention from the painting surface. We see through a round lens. Paint a round painting. A cabinet maker cut two four-foot-diameter circles from a four

foot by eight foot sheet of pressed wood chip hardboard. Years passed. While I made round paintings, the colors taught me about themselves.

In the middle of a large orange shape I had to paint a very small gray shape. I mixed white and black to make gray. On the painting, it was blue. If I bent so close my nose almost touched it, I saw gray. As I pulled my head back, the orange around it turned the gray to blue. In a novel written by one of the Mitford sisters, she has a character bemoan the difficulty of reproducing Velazquez's pink tones. It's easy. Mix white with burnt sienna and there they are. Burnt sienna is a wonderful pigment. I bought the other earth colors, raw sienna, raw umber, burnt umber. The earth colors are the cheapest paints you can buy. Raw umber is a dark greenish brown. Burnt umber is a dark reddish brown. Seen next to the umbers, burnt sienna glazes, it appears, to a bright red, and raw sienna glazes, it appears, to a light yellow. All the brilliant colors in the art store were first made in the nineteenth century. They didn't exist when the old masters painted. I had found the colors of the old masters. I had found my colors. They were white, black and four shades of brown. I never would have guessed. Never.

You could make a whole painting with white, black and burnt sienna only, and many 16th, 17th and 18th century painters had done it. Rembrandt's *S^t Peter Denying Christ* does it. On a white ground, you draw outlines in a thin burnt sienna glaze. Use burnt sienna, in glazes or opaque, with white or black, for people, clothes, the pet dog. Burnt sienna mixed with black looks just like burnt umber, dark brown, good for hair, shoes, shadows and the corners of the painting. Blue eyes are not a problem. Larry

Rivers is a living painter who used only black, white and burnt sienna to paint a string quartet. The musical instruments are burnt sienna glazes. It's a wonderful modern painting in the Brooklyn Museum. On television, a man wondered how Stradivarius, in the 17th century, made the red color of his violins, and held one up. He said nobody knew. I knew. Stradivarius added a pinch of burnt sienna pigment to the varnish. My brother showed me some drawings he made. I said "This is how Michelangelo drew. How did you do it?" He said, "It's only a drawing style."

I wanted to paint bigger. Hardboard cut into two pieces, one of them five feet long, left me with a three foot long piece to cover. Painting life size is easiest. You don't have to think about size, just about everything else. What you see is what you paint. I hated painting the tiny, fussy miniatures in the background on a small board. The Democrats wanted a sign for their headquarters, asked me to make it and paid for the materials. I ordered plywood and lumber cut to size, nailed it together and used housepaint to turn it red and blue with big white letters. After the election nobody would take it. It ended up in my house. It was twelve feet long, four feet high and eight inches thick. I painted it white, and using only white, black and raw sienna, made a painting from a newspaper photograph of a fireman rescuing a child. Whacking a brush around for the three months it took, I was so happy. On a big painting, you have freedom. If a brushstroke doesn't define a shape, you can whack on another one, and another, until it does. And the next morning, or two days later, if you hate the way it looks, with oil paint, you just take a rag, wipe it all off and think about it. I wiped a lot. I could think about one brushstroke for two weeks.

Where should it start, where should it end, how wide should it be at the top, how wide at the bottom? At least, on a big painting, it could be a sizable brushstroke. Then I had a happy accident. Over a dried black shape I smeared a little white paint. I had just wanted to vary the black. I felt like scrubbing the white into a very thin layer over the black, and did it. I'd made blue. I had to figure out how it happened. It's the same way that the sky makes blue. The thin white layer of nitrogen and oxygen, the air, is lit by the sun, covering the black night sky, so we see daytime blue. Blue is a constructed color. The blue vein on my arm is dark red covered by a thin layer of pale skin. Lapis lazuli and the other blue pigments must have the same arrangement of light-reflecting over light-absorbing atoms.

You can say that the eye accommodates itself to what is around it, or you can say the eye is easy to fool. They are exactly the same statement. When there's no burnt sienna to compare it with, raw sienna glazes can appear orange. A painting done only in white, black and raw sienna has warm skin tones. It's convincing. That's all you want. Frans Hals painted mainly in white, black and raw sienna. The Regentesses of the Old Men's Almhouse were in color, but much reduced in size in the book. On the next page, the head of the Regentesses' society lady was life size, printed only in black on white paper. She's an elegant old woman who sees the world clearly, but knows you can't do anything about it.

On a small board I painted her the same way that Frans Hals had painted her. On a dry white surface I drew the head with a very thin raw sienna glaze and let it dry. A week passed. With raw sienna glaze I modeled the face; very thin glaze on the lighted spots, heavier glaze on shadowed

areas, nothing on the sides of the cheeks, and let it dry. A week passed. With a thin burnt sienna glaze I gave the woman pink lips and cheeks. Black paint absorbs a lot of oil. I mixed black paint with a lot of oil so it would dry shiny and painted her eyes and hat. To please myself I painted a few random brushstrokes in burnt sienna and black on her collar. I mixed raw sienna and black to make a scumbled brown background around her. A week passed. The underpainting was dry.

Now Hals could begin to paint. I mixed raw sienna and white together and covered the raw sienna glazes with a basic skin tone. The underpainting showed through the almost opaque overpainting making a pink-orangey skin color. Good. A week passed. With a thin black glaze, I scrubbed black thinly on the shadows: at the temple and cheek, around the eyes, around the nose, on one lip and below her jaw. A week passed. I mixed white with a little oil to make a white glaze and hit the high spots with it: the upper forehead, the nose, the upper cheeks. The big collar got a coat of white paint. The collar underpainting came through the white as pink and blue shadows. She got a little pink paint - burnt sienna and white - on her lower lip. Hals painted her dress black. I gave her a white one, instead. It was more cheerful. A week passed.

Now fearless Frans had fun, adding a black bow to the collar, then on the face, putting black glazes on the shadows, inventing new shadows, putting white glazes on the lighted parts, finding new lights and putting red glazes on the cheeks. You could still see through the glazes but the basic skin tone was almost completely painted over. He laughed every time he looked at her. She wasn't there. The sittings were long over. Both eyes, the lower lip and the pearl earrings got dabs of white paint. I wondered, How much

more paint can I put on her before she becomes a circus clown? Living dangerously, he added glazes, let them dry, then added more, more, stopping one hair short of overdoing it. He knew exactly when to stop.

Knowing when to stop is an important part of painting. When I was young, a painting would be going well and then I would regularly overdo it, ending up with a mess. Once a painting is begun you're always watching for the last brushstroke, the time to stop. Have you seen the Mona Lisa in the Louvre? The painting is very strange looking. Da Vinci kept adding raw sienna glaze over raw sienna glaze so the poor girl has bright orange skin. She's normal looking in reproductions of the painting. They lie.

I painted in a room whose doorway was on the long living room wall, halfway between the front door at one end and the kitchen at the other. Light came into the studio from windows on the left side of the doorway so that light washed the painting from the left side. The painting faced the doorway. One day, at dusk, alone at home, I walked from the front door to the kitchen, and stopped. Someone was in the studio! I walked back and looked through the studio doorway. My copy of Frans Hals' lady sat on her easel. By chance, the room had the same window arrangement that you see over and over again in Dutch and Flemish paintings where light comes from windows on the left side of the paintings. In the dim light, the brown background had merged into the surrounding dusk in the room, and disappeared. Light from the left side entered the oil layers on the painting, were reflected off the white ground, out to me. The oil layers reflected light exactly as the oil layers that compose the cell membranes in skin reflect light. The flat painting had, from a distance of twelve feet, become a three-dimensional person. Why were

the old masters above everything in the Metropolitan? Now I knew. You never could see that in the museum. There, the central skylights and the electric light over each painting wash light down over the surface of every painting, flattening it forever. The light entering the painting has to come from the side and be reflected out the front. Then the painting comes alive. Alive! What a sensation that must have caused. Oil paintings were amazing! If they were properly hung and lit they would still be amazing. Oil painting conferred an immortality. People continued to live on, in their paintings, after they died. There is a lot of dim light in northern Europe. We once stayed in northern England where, in the winter, dusk fell at 2:30 in the afternoon. Two hours later, it was full starry night. Even in daylight, the winter sky is overcast most of the time. In summer, light lasts. I would watch the sun set at 10:30 at night and then go to bed. Old master oil paintings regularly performed winter miracles. I'd had a similar experience before. Madame Tussaud's wax museum is brightly lit, full of real people looking at wax people. Wax is a thick oil that reflects light exactly as skin does. Distinguishing the living from the dead in those rooms was tiring. I did a bad thing. I stuck my forefinger into the chest of a man, standing still in a guard's gray uniform, and asked, "Are you alive?" He nodded. I felt better.

Frans Hals invented modern painting - by accident, of course. Everyone knows that paintings have to be understood. A picture has to be read just as letters do. Ancient Egyptians painted faces, arms and legs in side view and shoulders and trunks in front view so that each body part would be clearly shown, easy to read. Seen from the side, shoulders hardly exist. The Cretans followed the Egyptian conventions, but to Greek painters, the twisted body looked worse than the lost shoulders. Greek viewers read the whole painted body and

inferred they had shoulders. Over centuries, people became good at reading odd views of body parts, looking down on them, looking up at them. Paintings are made of brushstrokes, but in all those centuries of painting, the painter was always careful to blend the brushstrokes together so that they disappeared and only the painted shape remained. After thirty-five centuries of self-effacing painters and serious or smiling painted faces, Frans Hals the Fearless painted an open-mouthed laughing girl. You can't take three months to paint a laugh. It's there. It's moving all the time and you've got five minutes, if you're lucky. So you see the face and every brushstroke that made it, and the brushstrokes don't quite fit together and that tells you the face is moving, and the brushstroke includes the painter's hand in the painting, starting here, stopping there, a new presence. Why let the painter in? As the viewer's eyes ride the brushstrokes, the viewer recreates the act of painting, becomes the painter. Looking becomes a more active act. The brushstroke is what makes modern painting. To paint is to take part in a continuous conversation with some clever people that's been going on for forty centuries. Now the problem in painting is to know all that's been done and go on from there, putting the whole conversation down in every brushstroke.

My son and I had carried the twelve foot long painting out the front door, into the garage. I painted on an eight foot long sheet of hardboard, but it was only four feet high. I wanted to paint bigger still, but big paintings are monsters to keep. I was fifty-one years old. The kids had finished high school, then moved far away to attend other schools and lead adult lives. I got a cook's job and rented an apartment. Because of its large, empty white walls, I offered the twelve foot long painting to the University library. They didn't want it. Wilbert Curry moved my furniture and accepted the twelve foot long

painting. He had a barn.

I wasn't copying a Rubens painting. I was smearing away on that eight foot long sheet of hardboard with Rubens' pigments when I saw it happening in front of me. I'd seen the Rubens sketches in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. He underpainted people in burnt sienna glaze. In the Metropolitan, I saw that he overpainted in pink made with burnt sienna and white, adding a final coat of raw sienna and white on the body's high spots. Nobody knew how Rubens made the mother of pearl flesh tones that were his alone. With burnt sienna and white mixed to pink, I smeared paint over a dried burnt sienna glaze and saw it turn blue (of course!) where it was pulled thin over a dark glaze, rose where it was not so thin over a not so dark glaze, and pink where the glaze didn't show through - mother of pearl, so complicated looking, so easy to do.

Turned on its end, the hardboard sheet touched the ceiling and was floppy because it was only a quarter of an inch thick. The lumber yard cut four hardboard sheets to six and a half feet. They weren't floppy. They would go through any doorway, lean against the wall and give me a painting surface sixteen feet long and a foot taller than I was, just what I wanted. Best of all, they would stack against a wall, only four feet wide, one inch deep.

I was painting a beach scene and on the last panel, on the far right, her feet in shallow water, I copied Rembrandt's A Woman Bathing. Rembrandt had worked on an eighteen by twenty four inch brown painted panel and showed a woman standing in shallow water, lifting her nightgown so you see her thighs. I can imagine how the painting happened. It's early morning. The tin tub in the kitchen has just been filled with hot water. Hendrickje, lifting her nightgown, has stepped into the tub and is going to take a bath. Looking for something to eat, Rembrandt

comes into the kitchen, and says, "Hendie, that shadow on your leg! Please, please don't move! I'll be right back!" He runs into the studio grabbing what he can, a student-size panel from the pile that the apprentices prepared for their own paintings, scoops of white and raw sienna paint onto a palette, a couple of small brushes, and Hendrickje hasn't moved. He says, "Look down," mixes raw sienna and white, paints a forehead, nose, one cheek and a spot of chin. He takes more paint, paints from one shoulder down diagonally across her chest, one forearm and its hand holding the gown. He takes more paint to make parts of both thighs and the upper parts of both calves. Then he jams the other brush into white paint and smashes a vertical zigzag of the nightgown folds, breathes deeply and says, "I have it." Hendrickje says, "You mean I can sit down?" "Yes, yes," is the answer as Rembrandt leaves. Hendrickje removes the gown, sits, and says to the empty room, "The water's cold." It isn't fun, being the inspiration of a great man. It is worth the trouble. When the painting was dry, he added touches here and there, all over. He painted uncontained water below her, rocks behind her on which rest red cloth and gold brocade at the entrance to a dark cave. He fussed with the details for months. It is a painting about shadows on which the shadows are not painted. The shadows are the brown of the dried burnt umber ground tone. The shadow of the lifted gown over the upper thighs reads like the entrance into the dark cave inside her. Men have always tried to paint sex. Pornography is pathetic. Painted naked bodies are sealed surfaces. They come out of the painting toward you. Only Rembrandt has painted penetration. What does the penetrating? The body's most sexually sensitive organ -- the eye, the eye!

I talked to my daughter-in-law about how different the effect of painting on a brown ground is. "The ground color almost comes through the skin tone. You think there is something below the surface." She smiled and slowly

said, "It brings mystery." She was so right. I was amazed. Mystery is so much more than a coat of paint.

The Jewish Bride is Rembrandt's other sexy painting. When Rembrandt told the elaborately dressed couple that he should caress her breast with his hand and she should lay her hand over his, they both objected. Rembrandt begged, "I'm so happy. It's your wedding picture! You must let me do it my way. No one will ever see this painting but us," so they did it. The man in the painting is Titus, Rembrandt's son. How do I know? Titus died the year after he married. From the time he was a teenager Titus painted self portraits because his father told him to. When Rembrandt died he had piles of Titus' work, and today they hang in museums all over the world, labeled Rembrandt Van Rijn. You recognize Titus by his face. The Polish Rider in the Frick is a teenage Titus on horseback, an ambitious effort, very stiff. In the Metropolitan there is a Rembrandt Portrait of a Man in a Red Cloak that shows the same long-faced, long-haired man who in The Jewish Bride stretches his big yellow sleeve (a subliminal penis) across his painted body above the brilliant red burnt sienna glazed skirt (the subliminal vagina) of his wife, Magdalena Van Loos, the daughter of a silversmith. The Jewish Bride isn't, and should properly be called Titus and Magdalena. They both look doubtful. Magdalena lived, married and had two children she named Rembrandt and Saskia. The Rijksmuseum is a church built for the worship of Rembrandt as Amsterdam's apology for the rotten way he'd been treated in his lifetime. The Night Watch is its altarpiece. The Jewish Bride hangs far away in a back gallery. He's still being treated badly. "Jewish" hah!

Ⓜ In St. Peter Denying Christ, the white ground shines through the burnt sienna glazes on St. Peter's Cap. He is lit from within, in contrast to the opaque paint, which only reflects light from outside, on the woman who challenges him. After you've looked at most great paintings fifty times, you know them. They have nothing more to tell you. Not the Rembrandt self portrait in the Frick. After painting his own face all his life, he finally got it right. "I'm alive," he challenges, "Are you?" including all the different ways of being in the word "alive." It is endless, the

best painting ever made. In a painting, every effect is technical. Mystery comes from the umber ground tone. Seriousness comes from the horizontal lines formed by the eyes, the mouth. When Rembrandt wants to make someone appear to be thinking, as in the portraits of himself, Jan Six and David Before Saul, he paints a light spot on the lower forehead, just above the nose. It works. That's all I know.

On the wall opposite The Polish Rider there's a big Turner painting of Venice. Turner died in 1835. His paintings were hung in the Tate Gallery and Monet saw them when he went to London in 1872. Monet was trying to find a new way of painting, and when he saw the Turners, found it. Turner invented impressionism - what the unfocused eye actually sees - although Monet gets all the credit for it. Everybody used white and the earth colors. You don't need black. Full strength burnt umber is dark enough if there's no black on the painting.

On the same wall as the Turner, there's a Corot landscape without any green paint on it. Raw sienna does what green should. It works. It's wonderfully clever. Along the horizon, raw sienna paint is covered with a thin white glaze, making the violet color in Corot's paintings. There's not much drawing in a landscape. Corot painted such daring patterns of light and dark on his portraits of women that Braque had reproductions of them to study in his studio. Their noses are peculiar. Their nostrils are wrong. Corot is unusual, a great painter who couldn't draw.

It took me four years to finish painting my kids, their spouses, my grandkids on the beach panels. I was tired when I got home from work. Surrounded by sand painted with raw sienna glazes, the raw umber seaweed in the foreground looked green. It worked. Raw umber next to raw sienna looks green if you're very very careful to keep the paint layers very very thin. All the earth colors are colorless sand discolored by iron oxide, rust. Roasting raw sienna and raw umber removes

water, so the molecules are closer together, a deeper color. Umber contains, beside its iron oxide, a little manganese dioxide that darkens it. Iron oxide makes the red in blood, the green in leaves, the colors in fruits and veggies. I wanted to have an iron oxide green pigment so that, instead of worrying about green, I could just use it.

The Night Watch is the big painting of Rembrandt's adulthood. He was 36. "See how much I know!" it proclaims. The Conspiracy of Julius Civilis is the big painting of his maturity. He was 55, and painted it to hang in the new Amsterdam Town Hall. It was refused. It's in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. There is a delicate orange glaze underlying the goblet and the man on the far right, the two men in the center foreground and Julius Civilis, himself. Burnt umber surrounds the group of men agreeing to kill Romans. The table that stretches horizontally across the painting is covered with a line of lighted white tablecloth whose paint stands out from the canvas as thick as my finger. Rembrandt's white paint is poisonous lead carbonate, applied here with a trowel. You can see the trowel marks. I can figure out how he did everything except for the orange glaze. It has to be burnt sienna, but it has no brush mark, no hint of how it got there.

I'd primed new panels with white paint. I was going to paint a small landscape from Hieronymus Bosch and a big rock with the words History of Painting on it. I would have a cave woman pounding raw and burnt sienna into pigment while another cave woman painted a bison. Their black paint and mine were also identical, animal bones burned to carbon. They didn't have white paint. Titanium white gets pulled off a painted surface by the atmosphere. Zinc white doesn't fall off, it just turns yellow with age. I use them both. They're not poisonous.

On a sheet of 8½ by 11 inch typing paper, I drew four panels, each one 2¾ inches wide and 4½ inches high, the scale 11 inches equals 16 feet, and the

women on them. I enlarged the women onto the hardboard by drawing squares on the typing paper and dots, a foot apart, on the hardboard panels. I would make a clothed, bald Rembrandt painting a portrait of a man wearing a hat and a big collar, with the seated man, himself, wearing a hat, a big collar, and nothing else. A portrait is an exposure. I was in a hurry to cover the primed white panels with a ground tone of thin burnt sienna glaze. The brush was too slow! Enough brush! I lay a rag over my hand, grabbed a big lump of paint with the rag on my hand and wiped my rag-covered hand over a panel, scrubbing the color thin. I stopped. I was looking at the orange glaze on Rembrandt's Conspiracy. I laughed. For one minute, scrubbing away, I had become him. That's conversation! There are only a few ways to put paint on a painting. You can use a brush. You can use a palette knife. You can use your fingers. You can use a rag or a trowel. A roller is only for priming panels with ^{water-based} house paint. Brush and palette knife are basic. I've done a lot of finger painting. Fingers are so handy, I've never used a trowel. Sandpaper erases dried paint. You can always remove what you no longer like.

My sister and I spent an afternoon at the Museum of Modern Art. The unstretched Monet waterlily painting hung on the wall above an escalator. It had died. The green paint (whatever it was) had turned dull black. It didn't glow any more. It was a dead canvas. Alizarin crimson isn't a popular red anymore, either. It turns black too. There are lots of new pigments in the art store that, in time, will turn black. The earth colors are permanent, good for 4,000 years so far. What do I have that the ancient Egyptians, the old masters would envy? Only masking tape, so I can snap 16 foot long straight lines, all by myself.

I used Grumbacher paints, made in New Jersey. The information operator gave me Grumbacher's phone number. I called it, asked to speak to the Laboratory and told the man what I wanted. He told me to call Kremer Pigments in New York and gave me the numbers. "They specialize in antique pigments," he told me. "They have orpiment!" I didn't want a medieval arsenic yellow, but I loved George Stegmeir's enthusiasm. Dr Kremer quietly said, "We have an iron-based green." I thought, Wow, it exists! The Bohemian Green Earth came in a plastic bag as big as my fist and cost 15 dollars for 100 grams, a reasonable price. All I had to do was mix it with oil. It's a dull green. Good. Kremer's catalog had lapis lazuli blue. It was very expensive, 150 dollars for five grams of pigment.

Years passed. I was making a very long painting. On new panels I continued the history of art on a city street. The sign over the store on the street corner said Art's Elongated Images. In the store windows are a Giacometti thin man, a classic Greek charioteer, Sargent's Madame X, Breughal's Mad Meg, and a Hindu Siva. El Greco's Cardinal Guevara looks out of a tenement window above the store at an Osiris statue on the sidewalk and at El Greco's Laocoon writhing in the road. I had fun. Even Breughal, who painted peasants, elongated them to look more graceful. People are more squat than they've been painted. Many panels later the street, filled with squat, dumpy people, became an imaginary countryside that, later, turned into whatever I was thinking about. There are lots of stream of consciousness novels. I was making a stream of consciousness painting. All painting is literature.

Kremer's catalog had lapis lazuli blue, I wanted it. Five grams came in a little bottle. It was almost a teaspoonful of pigment. I mixed it with oil and brushed it

on Frans Hals' society lady's sleeve and bodice. She's accustomed to expensive dresses. The blue color was exactly the color Fra Angelico used on the small pictures he painted on the walls, one in each cell, in his monastery in Florence. The only northern European painter who used lapis lazuli blue was Hieronymus Bosch. He married a rich woman who owned a farm. She is the naked lady who stands, front and center, in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights. Bosch had all the red and blue paint he wanted. Red paint was vermilion, mercury sulphide, another poisonous color. I didn't want it. Rembrandt never had any blue pigment. Once in his life he painted with vermilion. Jan Six was Rembrandt's rich friend. When Rembrandt painted Six's portrait, Rembrandt, out of his mind with joy, smeared the red, color without detail, between the rows of buttons, over the front of Six's coat. All the pigments that have ever existed are very expensive, or poisonous, or impermanent — or they are the iron oxide colors and carbon black. All the old masters used the same colors, but each one handled them a little differently to get his own effects. Me too.

I was sixty-two years old, retired from work, living on social security payments that appeared every month in my bank account and painted four panels in four months. Stacked against my bedroom wall, the panels filled a space four feet wide and five inches deep. I could revisit what I'd done by unfolding my long preliminary sketch on typing paper sheets pasted together, then stretching it out along the living room baseboard. I reread Hokusai and was amazed. He wasn't drunk. He told the plain truth. Every thing I painted before fifty was student stuff. At fifty I became a good painter. At sixty I became a very good painter. And when I am a hundred and ten ...


To get the effect of brilliance with my five dull earth colors, I alternated light

and dark strokes, one next to the other, using contrast instead of color to shock the eye. White and black are my brilliant colors. I'd found my brushstroke. They are small. They break up every shape and make the shapes harder to read. Good. Sometimes one stroke is the edge of a shape and sometimes the stroke next to it is the edge. The viewer, myself, has more choices. I had made every possible combination of every possible composition I could imagine except the spiral. It was all there was left to do. I buy linseed oil and brushes, made in Germany, from Kremer, but now I use Schmincke oil paints, made in Germany, because they make all my colors in tubes including Bohemian Green Earth.

Spirals have not been done much. Breughel painted the Tower of Babel, a big spot in the middle of a painting, a spiral masonry wedding cake on a table-flat landscape. The Louvre has the set of big paintings that Rubens made for Marie de Medici on which spirals formed by overlapping people wind from the bottom of the paintings to the top. That's all that's been done. I paint sixteen feet wide flat spirals that form overlapping populated loops that bring odd combinations together, like people and a ten foot long, six foot tall mosquito. Odd combinations have been painted. The ancient Egyptians painted Anubis with a jackal's head and a human body because a strange-looking god is easy to recognize. Bosch painted the man who is an empty shell, as a man whose face looks at you, whose body is a broken, empty eggshell and whose arms are tree branches. It was a painted literary metaphor. Dali took the image together with Bosch's painting style to make modern surrealism - imaginary scenes.

There has always been a hierarchy of importance in painting. What's important is big. What's unimportant is small. After the invention of perspective, that hierarchy changed to What's important is big and in front, What's unimportant is small and in back. Hierarchy is political, an imagined power order. It's

unrealistic. In reality, everything happens at once, together, and everything is equally important. The mosquito hovering at your eyelash looks longer than the car you also see, out in the road. You are thinking, Kill! The mosquito is thinking, Lunch! It's a meeting of equals. In the encounter, either one, or neither, could be successful. A mosquito has an immense amount of surface anatomical detail, much more than a human. To paint them both in equal detail the mosquito has to be ten feet long and six feet tall. Is non-hierarchical painting a new subject? Could be. It is certainly a way of proceeding.

I simplify the spirals into long interlocking curves,  the pattern of space of a falling spiral. Is this a new composition? Could be. It is certainly a way of proceeding. What do I say to myself, over and over, as I paint? Use less paint, use less paint. Then the varying thicknesses of paint appear to hover above or below the surface of the board. After fifty years I've learned that explosions of brilliant light and color come from using earth pigments and less paint.

My painted panels rest in two stacks against my bedroom wall, each one four feet wide and ten inches thick, not taking much space. They would be a painting 300 feet long if I could ever see them stretched out. My unfolded typing paper sketch leans against two walls of my living room. After I turned 70, it was months before I noticed that I didn't agonize, worry or even think about brushstrokes any more. Now I waded until I felt like smearing paint, then I did it and what I saw made me happy. It was a major change. I never imagined that would happen.

Everything I did before 50 was student stuff. At 50 I became a good painter. At 60 I became a very good painter. At 70 I became a great painter.

I have my drawing style.

I have my brushstroke

I have my colors.

I have my subject.

I have my composition.

I can begin to paint.

Until now I wondered what Hokusai meant by "...and at the age of a hundred and ten everything I shall create, every point and every line I draw will be life itself." He didn't expect his points and lines to dance off the page, but what did he expect? The dots and lines that define living things are a related group of curves that happens over and over again in nature so that the curve of an apple and the curve of a child's cheek are identical. If this group of dots and lines come out of every gesture of your arms, then everything you draw will have the shape of life, will be alive. That's all.

Eleanor Karp