

BOOK REVIEW

ARIE WALLERT, ERMA HERMENS and MARJA PEEK, editors, *Historical Painting Techniques, Materials, and Studio Practice* (preprints of a symposium at the University of Leiden, 26-29 June 1995), The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles (1995), ix+204pp. ISBN 0-89236-322-3.

ERMA HERMENS, editor, *Looking Through Paintings: The Study of Painting Techniques and Materials in Support of Art Historical Research*, Uitgeverij de Prom & Archetype Publications (1998), 519pp ISBN (de Prom) 90-6801-575-3, (Archetype) 1-873132-56-5.

It is not normal practice for reviews of preprints to be published in *Studies in Conservation*, but there are good reasons for including this one. The symposium for which *Historical Painting Techniques, Materials, and Studio Practice* are the preprints was the second in a series on the subject that has become known informally as 'technical art history', and was held in the University of Leiden in 1995. The first symposium was held in Prague in 1993 and concentrated on the 'Technology of Art Works from the Central European Region' [1]. The third was IIC's own 1998 congress held in Dublin, and readers of the IIC contributions [2] may be interested to refer to what has gone before.

The second reason for including the review of the Leiden preprints is that the book *Looking Through Paintings*, which was produced at the invitation of the Trustees of the Leiden Art Historical Yearbook, is devoted to the theme of the symposium. However, in spite of the one being the inspiration for the other, the two publications stand in their own right and are entirely complementary. Although there is a major overlap in area of interest, there is no overlap in content, since the authors who are represented in both volumes have either chosen to write on different topics or have enlarged a theme that was mentioned in passing in earlier work. The formats both lend themselves to the subject but serve their purpose in different ways. The preprints restrict length to approximately 3500 words per paper, whereas the chapters in the book vary greatly and the authors have been able to write at whatever length is appropriate for their work, which has served many of them very well.

Historical Painting Techniques, Materials, and Studio Practice has been well produced by the Getty Conservation Institute. There is a short Foreword

by Miguel Angel Corzo followed by a Preface by the three editors. There are 20 pages of colour plates at the beginning of the volume, separated from the text. Black-and-white illustrations are contained within the text. The 27 contributions range from studies of mediaeval paintings at Winchester cathedral (Helen Howard) and the polychromy of Exeter and Salisbury cathedrals (Eddie Sinclair), oriental painting—Tibetan thangkas (Kate Duffy and Jacki Elgar), European painting from the renaissance to the nineteenth century, and into the twentieth century with a study of painting on a photographic substrate (John Gayer). At least with the last paper some of the artists are still alive and are able to explain what they are doing and why.

The same themes run through most of the papers. The reading of documentary sources combined with technical examination of the paintings offers insights into the artists' working practices. One paper, on Coptic panel paintings in the Nile Valley (Zuzana Skalova), draws attention not only to workshop practice but also to the significance of religious beliefs. The wood used is sycamore, which is said to have been the tree climbed by Zachaeus in his eagerness to see Christ, although the author points out that the sycamore is so common that one of the names of Egypt was the 'Land of the Sycamore'. In a paper by an author who calls herself a generalist (Josephine Darrah), the advantages of working in a museum where a wide range of materials and objects is analyzed are demonstrated, enabling connections to be made between different countries linked by trade routes and different crafts linked by industrial development. The clutch of papers on European painting techniques offers a real contribution to our understanding of the subject, and many of the authors of these papers were invited to expand their contributions in the book *Looking Through Paintings*.

It should not be a luxury to read a book that has colour illustrations throughout, but it still feels like that when reading technical books. *Looking Through Paintings* is generously scattered with colour. Erma Hermens has written a short Preface, followed by an Introduction by David Bomford and three 'keynote' papers by a scientist (J.R.J. van Asperen de Boer), a conservator (Leslie Carlyle) and an art historian (John Leighton). Eighteen chapters follow, of which half are contributed by authors who also contributed to the Leiden preprints. Each chapter has a number of pages of notes at the end, leading

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readers to the literary sources. The selection of subjects is excellent and demonstrates the usefulness of publishing what amounts to a postprint of a successful symposium. It is invidious to pick on any single chapter, but Ann Massing's long contribution on 'French painting technique in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', which includes a transcript of de la Fontaine's *Academie de la Peinture*, demonstrates how an author can expand on her subject to great effect. This research, carried out during a British Academy Research Readership, represents the first stage of studying source books dealing with painting methods and materials. This information still needs to be connected to the paintings of the period and the difficulties that they represent in the conservation studio. When complete, there may be enough material to fill a book, but how useful to have a preview at this stage,

along with so many other papers reporting research that follows the same methodology.

For those readers who are interested in the techniques, materials and practice of easel painting, both of these books are 'musts' for the library shelf—alongside, of course, the IIC Dublin Congress contributions.

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References

- 1 *Technologia Artis* (Archives of Art Technology, Prague) 3 (1993).
- 2 *Painting Techniques: History, Materials and Studio Practice*, IIC, London (1998).