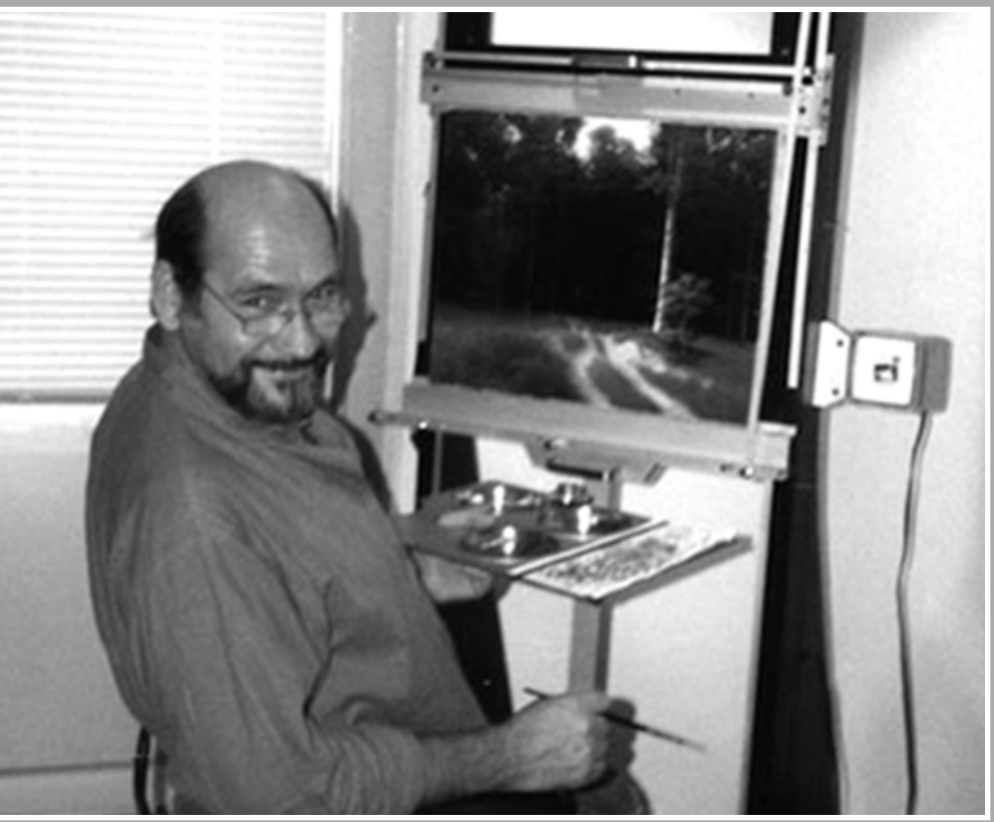
Ernst Redl – The concept of multi-layered painting

Introduction



REDL.

The concept of multi-layered painting

IUnlike today's painting in which an image is to a large extent spontaneously painted in seemingly one brush stroke all at once, earlier paintings were created through several separate design steps. Because of initial need to compromise on costs and later to allow certain colours to prevail, individual sections were repainted several times so that a finished effect would not be achieved until later. Different painters and schools developed different techniques of painting. But all followed the concept of reasonable division of labor to compose each image in several layers.

The origin of what one today terms as multi-layered painting is generally ascribed to Jan van Eyck (ca. 1430). Van Eyck worked with a mixing technique in which oil and egg-tempered paints were used. These enabled him to achieve a brilliance and beauty of colour that had not previously existed. Virtually all of the great paintings of long ago, completed before him, were using these painting techniques, either in a modified form, or painters later on fine-tuned them to fit their own personal style and painting techniques. These works have not lost their affect and fascination over the centuries.

Multi-layered painting is undoubtedly the high form of painting. Its basic tenets are still valid today, the result of a long developmental phase, countless attempts and discoveries from generations of painters, while the colour creation of a painting culminates to the highest level of colour possible. It is only through multi-layered painting that one can achieve extraordinary plasticity and colour variety, which distinguish the great works of art of the past from those of today.

We may learn much about the symbolism and the origin of such

images from art books. If we observe an original masterpiece in a museum, we may wonder why a painting fascinates us as much as it does. Is it the art of the painter who is able to represent something so realistic and seemingly tangible or are we sometimes impressed by the extent of detail or the large size of a work? Maybe it is the story a picture tells or the imagination of the artist who puts things before our eyes which we have never seen. All of these are certainly important considerations. There is however another, perhaps even subconscious reason that speaks to our sensibilities: the enormous vibrancy of the painting and its fascinating beauty of colour.
I attempt in my works to bring to fruition the beauty of colour, the appeal of light and shadow and the depth and plasticity admired in the art of the Old Masters. It is not so much the motif of the painting that captures the observer's attention and pulls him/her in, but rather the impact of the colours. Only multi-layered painting creates these colours which cannot be achieved by any other technique. For reasons which I will discuss later, it is only a few painters who employ this painting technique at all and if so, they do so only sparingly. It is laboriously time consuming and it significantly limits an artist's creativity, though what it compromises in terms of spontaneity is more often than not compensated by its greatly enhanced visual effect.

I would like to explain this colouring technique which is so important for the manner of painting:
Normally one imagines a painter first mixing the paint on his colour palette to achieve the desired shade or hue. Afterwards, the essentially finished mixed paint is brought to canvas. This is mostly true in impressionistic and in modern painting where the paint is applied

relatively thickly. Though this is not the case with the masterworks of classic painters in which the paint is not mixed at all or only lightly mixed. Instead, the paints are applied relatively "purely" on top of one another in more or less transparent layers of colour. Incomparable, more beautiful and visually appealing shades of colour appear more richly than those created by mixing them on the palette.
A yellow transparent foil placed over a blue underground yields green, red and green yield brown, red and blue yield purple, as with mixing paint. If the particles of pigments are held in position when paints are mixed directly, they form more or less a homogeneous mass. They sometimes, but not always, lose intensity and luminance. Layers of paint on top of one another remain clear and brilliant. Oil paints require ancillary colour mixing. One can of course also layer water colour or acrylic paints, though the effect is more often than not the opposite. Overpainting compromises colour, whilst ancillary colour mixing only improves the quality of oil paints.

This application of paint is a mystery of the Old Masters. My research has shown, though, that not everything in books or accepted as common knowledge is correct. These methods often do not yield the wonderful colour we admire in such paintings. Although I have used this technique in the last forty years, I have despite numerous attempts been able to solve only part of this mystery. One can figure out the essential characteristics of this technique through research and experimentation and maybe even understand its basic tenets. I maintain, however, that some masters may have kept important criteria to themselves. Perhaps they wanted to mislead students or buyers on purpose, so that they could retain their high professional or so-

cial status and keep their expertise prominent. This becomes extremely critical to the contingency that regards white as a colour. Even the slightest deviation from the optimal quantity destroys the colour. A painting created by an Old Master who employed this technique consists of several layers of colour lain on top of one another. Tizian spoke of more than forty such layers, which, according to whichever affect the artist wants to convey, can vary from a very thick to a razor thin application from each dried layer underneath it.
If we observe an impressionistic artist at work, we are able to see how the largely finished image ensues piece by piece. In my work, as with that of an Old Master, one would see nothing of the sort. At best, one could see at the onset of "painting" on the canvas whatever it is that the painting is supposed to show, though more often than not it does not even show that. With each additional coat and drying the rendering gradually takes shape. Only after many coats and a long time the "finished" image can be seen. This would always still contain "poor" or even "wrong" shades of colour, which would have to be either changed or fine tuned little by little, with many additional layers. In doing so, step by step, layer by layer, the image would gradually become perfect. One essentially does not paint only one image, but rather series of images, which lay on top of one another and, in part, show highly interesting "modern" colour combinations, which appear as if each image had been painted on its own individual canvas.

Why all this effort? With one-layered painting, also known as prima painting, a preferred Impressionist technique, the paint limits colour effect more so than the colour intensity each pigment carries and thus cannot be brought onto the image. For this reason, Van Gogh presu-

mably applied paint extremely thickly in order to achieve the greatest colour effect possible.

Multi-layered painting, however, allows colour and colour shades to intensify many times over prima painting which allows colour to appear stronger and more brilliant. It is not only colour that can be improved this way. There is an entire series of additional optical effects that can be achieved only by this painting technique. This is why such affects are not found in modern painting. Particularly the illusion of light and shadows is incomparably more impressive. Because sections of light and shadow, not to be confused with light and dark areas of a painting, have a completely different colour composition, the image assumes extraordinary vibrancy and authenticity. Caravaggio was a master of this. This affect was instrumental to the impact of the great works of the Old Masters since the connection between stylized figures and landscapes is very attractive in an extremely realistic "light".

The opportunities for colour expression in this painting technique are manifold, so that one could correctly say that colour in painting did not begin until multi-layered painting first appeared. It is absolutely impossible to achieve Ingres' unprecedented finely differentiated colour play of flesh-tones, Rembrandt's black or Varonese's brilliant green any other way. It is this beauty of colour, the optimal appeal of finest nuancing combined with brilliant luminance and all of their dark shades, to which the Old Masters can attribute the incomparable lure of their paintings.
The "colour" of a multi-layered painted masterpiece, as I mentioned earlier, has little to do with the pigment in the tube. This is easily seen.

If we hold a flower blossom or a leaf toward the sun, the colour radiates brilliantly many times over. If we however let the sun shine on it, the colour is dull and weak. Regardless of how "brilliant" a colour appears, its transparence is always even more brilliant. This principle plus additive paint mixing make multi-layered painting unique. Light emanates through the thin upper layers and is reflected back to the surface by the layers of light lying underneath. The colour is illuminated from "below", giving the image the appearance of it radiating from the inside.

The colour red, for example, depending on how light the underground is held, can be manipulated from very dull to brilliantly clear without the need to change the actual colour. In this example, the red is held thinly over the ground. If one varies the underlayer not only from light to dark, but also injects it with different colour and paints the transparent upper layer both monochromatically, and varies this as well, the two existing layers generate a large number of highly varying colour nuances. These could not be mixed on a palette nor brought to canvas so closely together any other way.
A multi-layered picture, as implied by the name, consists not only of two layers, but of many complex layers on top of one another. As previously mentioned, these are seen in many of the works of the Old Masters, which leads to an unimaginable large number of colour hues. All of these layers generate an extremely variable "internal illumination" comprised of the most varied chromacity and brilliance. The unbelievably rich colour play that ensues greatly exceeds that found in actual reality. The coexistence of so many nuances of colour so similar to one another as we see, for example, in Vermeer's paintings, cannot

be found in reality. However, one has to look very closely to become aware of these colour gradations.

An alternation between filtered and directly reflected light found in nature as per this principle occurs only in semi-transparent materials such as marble. Its crystalline structure reflects light from not only its surface, but from crystals as well. These crystals lie in the depth of the material just beneath the surface. The "beauty" of the polished stone has far less to do with its colour or structure than "mixed light" which creates semi-transparency in the material. It is precisely this effect, only incomparably more manifold and beautiful, that multi-layered painting achieves. A surface appears as marble or pearlised. A multi-layered masterpiece can for all intents and purposes exceed the visual appeal of that found in nature. The magic of such images, their mysterious and enigmatic inner glow and unprecedented appealing vibrancy comprise truly great art.

An essential factor in, and another reason for our fascination with such images is the large extent to which the array of colour variances is extremely subtle. A Rembrandt is not colourful; many of his images are kept in one hue and appear virtually a monochromatic golden brown. The variations of this brownish hue are virtually infinite. These range from the lightest yellowish white to numerous flesh-tones, and extend to a wide range of dark hues. The majority of these are hardly visible. It however seems as if we could still somehow see these virtually invisible shade and colour variations. It is precisely this which stimulates the most basic threshold of our perceptivity and sparks our fascination with them.

A photograph or a printed image cannot represent colour such as these. Not only does the variety of the finest colour hues get lost, the brilliance of a colour reproduced in such a way becomes uniform. It shows a constant and unchanging luminance that undifferentiated white paper with semitransparent colour pigments evokes. A photograph or a print cannot optically convey the important contrast between brilliant and dull colour, which are also essential to the colour elements of my painting. Colours such as these cannot be reproduced photo-mechanically, not those found in nature and certainly not those found on an outstanding painting using multi-layered painting technique.

Multi-layered painting found in the paintings of the Old Masters is hardly used any more today. Because of the Impressionists' increasingly stronger influence at the dawn of the twentieth century, this has been supplanted by the need for spontaneously imminent painting. Although multi-layered painting is clearly superior to a single-layered image in terms of colour quality, it has one critical disadvantage, assuming of course that the potential this technique provides is actually exploited. Even in its simplest form, it is far more laborious and time-consuming than purely prima painting. It is also a "studio-centered" kind of painting that seemed highly unsuitable to the Impressionists, who tried to hastily conform in their works to the constantly alternating colour play of nature. Ignorant of its basic tenets, it was referred to as "layer painting" and was regarded as being both backward and outmoded.
Another factor is that multi-layered painting shows its full effect mainly in naturalistic, representational images. For this reason alone

it is deemed insignificant in twentieth century painting. A qualitative high-grade multi-layered painting represents the absolute apex of colour effect that can be achieved. A higher quality is impossible. Just as the perfect pitch of a superbly tuned musical instrument cannot be improved upon or substituted for another, the "pitch" of a beautiful colour or its optical appeal simply cannot be outdone.

A high level of colour expression is not found automatically and not in all the works of the Old Masters. Difficulties are so daunting that the great painters in the history of the art world could not master these until often late in their careers. Compare the colour quality of earlier paintings of Velasquez, for example "Water seller of Seville" to that of his later images such as "Las Meninas". It was only at an advanced age that truly perfected works of art could come into being. Also, not every Old Master was a great colourist and some were concerned with aspects other than superior colour, as was, for instance, El Greco. But presumably everyone was familiar with the concept of multi-layered painting. It was improved upon throughout the centuries. It has achieved its highest value in terms of what can be created with colour pigments to yield maximum optical effect.

This development in painting is one of the great achievements of Western-European culture. For it is not so much the discovery of additional pigments which resulted in completely new effects in classical European painting. Mainly the extraordinary liveliness of the colour that could be achieved by using multi-layered painting were unique and impressive. It is my concern to sustain this important artistic means of expression. And it is joy and challenge to implement it in my own works.

With each additional coat of paint one achieves only a minimal often negligible improvement in the completion of a picture. In light of the enormous expenditure of time, one is often tempted to save oneself the effort. Who would notice a somewhat more flat colour, an insignificant weaker light or a somewhat lesser brilliance? Is it not good enough? As with the Old Masters, just how far one goes with this line of reasoning has to do with many factors. Theoretically, one can fine tune, improve and correct for a long time. Vermeer, who according to oral tradition only painted 34 pictures in his entire life, perfected this concept: here a trace of brilliance, there a trace of dullness, another shade of a flesh-tone, a slight increase of light, yet another dark glaze, a section that is not entirely satisfactory. At some point, one has to stop otherwise the picture will never get done.

It might be a matter of approach, or one of economics or perseverance as to when one finally puts down the paintbrush and regards his work as being finished. It is always a difficult decision. Long ago, it was most likely the buyers who set such deadlines or even the painter himself, who at a given point in time had simply had enough. The culmination, and that is actually the most important consideration here, can continue for a very long time. The improvements one could achieve in many hundreds of hours become less and less apparent, even insignificant until they at some point begin to detract from the image. That is when one really needs to stop.

Presumably, some will ask themselves how much effort involved in creating a better colour for example, is too much of a good thing, incidental "padding" that misses the point. Maybe. To carry something to its absolute highest apex possible is an exhausting undertaking. If

something is already good, it becomes very difficult to improve upon it. One can, of course, wonder if such a slight improvement really justifies the enormous commitment necessary for it. What difference does such a slight adjustment make? It would be like a violinist selling his Stradivarius and instead devoting his virtuosity to a beginner's instrument, on which only an expert could hear a difference. The music would remain just as it was before.

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