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Water-Color Painting.

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SOME FACTS AND AUTHORITIES IN
RELATION TO ITS DURABILITY.

Printed by the
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1868

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THE formation, during the past year, of the American Society of Painters in Water-Colors, in the City of New York, is a new and an important movement among the Artists; and the spirit with which it has been carried forward may justly be regarded as a sign of great promise of future excellence in this beautiful department of Art. The enthusiasm with which this step has been greeted by a large number of our painters; the unquestioned success of the first exhibition of water-colors on the walls of the National Academy, and the favor which the public has shown in the notice bestowed upon the paintings, as well as in the purchase of many of them, are certainly encouraging facts to which it behooves the Artists and the public to give a good deal of thought and attention.

Of the advantages that water-color painting in some respects possesses over oil, it may be well here to say a few words. No Artist pretends that it can ever take the place of oil-painting. The masters of water-color, however, maintain, with much reason, that for certain luminous qualities, for purity of tint and tone, for delicate gradations, especially in skies and distances, their favorite style of painting has decided advantages over oil.

Professor AARON PENLEY, of England, a distinguished authority, in his great folio work entitled "The English School of Painting in Water-Colors," says: "The great charm of water-colors is principally in the air tones, so beautifully adapted are they for the representation of atmosphere under every condition. The reason of this is very apparent, from the paper shining through the several transparent tints washed upon it. To obtain depth and power in the lightest tones for finished works, a mere single wash is insufficient. It is necessary to repeat the washings-on and washings-off in order that the tints may partake of the granular surface of the paper. It is from this peculiar grain, this alternation of hill and dale, as it were, of the surface, that the eye rather looks into than upon it, and carries the impression of space more than of definite distance. In this respect it has a decided advantage over oil-painting, where the extreme lights of skies and distances are invariably impasted. Everything loses quality of surface from distance, and ought, to all appearance, to be free from an over-charge of color. Now this is especially the case in water-color painting. If, therefore, in skies and the extreme distances the forms are correctly drawn, and the several gradations of tone and tint faithfully rendered, then does it stand pre-eminently beautiful in the representation of nature. Nothing can be more exquisitely refined. I have said *if*, because in case of failure the fault will assuredly arise from an *inability in the Artist*, and *not* the *material* employed.

“For middle distances also, water-colors are equally successful in competing with oil.” * * * *

“A mind that leaves nothing to chance, but whose every touch is a thought expressive of some intended result—to such a mind, water-color art offers every advantage; it will accomplish all required of it; indeed, there is no effect of which it is not capable, whether for power or for delicacy, whether for intensity of color or for purity of daylight. Being equally excellent for figure and for landscape painting, it will faithfully fulfil the dictates of the Artist’s will, and present to the world an *instructive, perfect and permanent* work.”

JOHN BURNET, another eminent authority, in his *Practical Essays on various branches of the fine arts*, says: “The characteristic beauties of water-color are in the pearly lights, and in those flat washes unattainable in oil-color, without giving an inferior look to the whole work. This absence of heaviness, peculiar to water-color, is found in a very high degree in the works of Michael Angelo, also in the frescoes of Raphael and Fra Bartolomeo, but whose oil pictures are hard, dry, and often feebly drawn.” * * * “Whoever has contemplated an oil picture with a water-color drawing as the shades of evening set in, must have remarked the gradual darkening of the oil-color, while the drawing continued to the last in a mass of broad light. The power, then, of retaining and giving back light, is the peculiar property of water-color, or rather of the paper, which ought, therefore, to be preserved at any sacrifice, as the artist has not

the rich, pulpy and unctuous glazings, to give in compensation for its absence." * * * "Those who have contemplated the pure and indescribable colors of the frescoes of Italy, must look with horror on the oily black landscapes that disfigure the staircase in the British Museum, or the painted monsters on that of Hampton Court. Fresco is the great mine from whence the invaluable properties of water-color must be dug, and he who neglects these for the sake of competing with the peculiarities of oil-painting, throws aside the best means of representing nature."

It is hardly necessary, however, in this article, to dwell further upon the peculiar characteristics and merits of this branch of art, to quote further authorities, or draw comparisons between the respective advantages of water-color and of oil-painting. Each of these departments has its place. Each has its peculiar capabilities, and there is no danger of either interfering with the other. The public will judge of them both, and assign to each that rank it deserves.

The practice of water-color, however, and the public exhibitions and sales of water-color paintings, are comparatively new in America; and there are a good many people who, while they acknowledge the beauty of the paintings, and their desirability as additions to collections of pictures, often ask anxiously, "Are the colors permanent? Can we depend upon their not fading, or changing, as we can in our solid oil-paintings?" Then, a piece of paper, though pro-

ected by a glass and a wooden back seems to them, somehow, to possess less durability than canvas. The paper may burn up—the glass may crack, whereas oil-paintings may be knocked about, sent from exhibition to exhibition, packed away in a closet, laid on a shelf, &c., &c.

It is our purpose to show that all such prejudices are unfounded, and to present good authorities proving that water-color paintings are not only as permanent as oil-paintings, but even more so.

“Is water-color permanent?” writes Penley. “How frequently is this question put to artists by those lovers of art who have it in their power to form collections that shall comprise the works of our leading men.

“It is unfortunately a most serious question, proceeding as it does from fear and an established prejudice against the art. If this fear could be dispelled, and the mind of the public convinced of the error, there would, without doubt, be a far more extended and liberal patronage bestowed upon water-color painting than there is at the present day.

“There are many, very many, who are kept from indulging in this beautiful art, from the idea of its being fugitive, a feeling that however exquisite it may be in effect, yet for permanency and primitive condition, it is not to be depended upon. Surely this is a fallacy, and one that should not be suffered to exist, proving as it does, such a hindrance to the well-being of the art in general.

“*Painting* in water-colors in the present day is altogether different from the tinted and washed drawings of the earlier practitioners. The color no longer lies simply upon the surface of the paper, but in many instances is so saturated into its very pores, as really to become a part of it. Instead of *drawing* in water-colors, it has attained the higher term of *painting*. The amount of color employed for finished pictures is truly surprising.

“Every possible assistance has been given to it by the most distinguished men in chemical science. No talent has been permitted to lie dormant, that could be of any service in producing colors that are permanent in themselves, apart from any vehicle that might be employed in their use. Instead of preparations from lead that were liable to change from an infinitude of causes, we are furnished with preparations from zinc, that remain unaltered. Many new colors of most desirable hues have been of late years added to the palette, the permanency of which has been put to the severest test, so as to leave no uncertainty with regard to their adoption. Indeed, it is a matter of congratulation that the table of really permanent colors is so large as to afford the artist considerable scope in the selection of those most suited to his purposes.

“In reply to the question as to the permanency of water-color painting, we unhesitatingly answer: It is permanent, and that in the strictest sense of the term. I believe it to be pre-eminent in this quality over every other kind of painting, provided care be taken to employ those colors *only* that are acknowledged to be durable.

“Taking it for granted, therefore, that the coloring matter is unexceptionable in this respect, it is evident that water can have no power of producing change so far as time is concerned. Water is a chemical agent, its action is immediate, and whatever effect it may have upon the color by way of alteration, it has at once, and soon ceases by evaporation. Thus, then, we are enabled to complete our picture without providing for (what is always done in oil-painting) toning down, or mellowing from age. This is no mean gratification to the artist, and it cheers him on his path, from a feeling that his work will not be for his day alone, but that it is also to be for future ages.

“Apart from the permanency of colors, and the impossibility of their being affected by the medium (water), all paintings hanging on walls are secured from external injury by glass, and protected at the back by boards, which, being pasted together, are rendered air-tight, another important feature in their favor.

“Of course, paper is affected by *damp*, and *what* is not? Yet this is remediable as damage done to oil-painting. There are means by which it can be restored, and the work reinstated; it is, however, seldom needed. Pictures that are really beautiful, are not likely to run the chance of damage by neglect. As a matter of investment alone, it would be imprudent to risk their injury; at least quite as much so as it would be for oil-paintings. Works that are valuable have little fear of being laid aside, or subjected to unfair usage; and indeed, their very delicacy

would insure for them additional care ; so that, all things taken into consideration, we may pronounce *painting in water-colors* to be *permanent*, and, as such, honestly recommend its adoption." * * *

"It is not an opinion hastily formed, but, on the contrary, it is based upon the experience of many years' careful investigation, by closely noting the progress of chemical science, with every improvement that has taken place. I have never failed in obtaining every new agent introduced, and in testing its qualities in every possible way before taking it into use."

The same writer remarks (p. 20): "The once celebrated teacher of drawing, Payne, produced a grey principally formed of indigo, with which the whole drawing was finished, so far as light, shadow and touch were concerned. Upon this the several local colors were washed, and the drawing completed; this, and this only constituted water-color art at its earlier stage of practice.

"Such drawings were only tinted, and hence the origin of the term 'tinted drawings.' It is a matter of much regret that this term is still extant, and that the opinion held of their fading deters many who would be delighted to form collections of our now beautiful paintings in water-color, from regarding them as permanent works."

FIELDING, in his work on water-color (p. 75), says: "The oldest paintings in oil are not of higher date than the time of John Van Eyck, or about 450 years; and of those there are only a small number to be found; and they will not bear any comparison as to condition with

the *miniatures* and other ornaments still existing in missals not much less than a thousand years old." * * *

"We cannot but fear that there is some lurking vice in oil-painting, not yet entirely got rid of." * * * *

"Nor is it in our opinion presuming too much to say that the water-colors of the present day in which water only is used as a solvent, may, and most probably will, endure much longer than works done in oil, according to our present mode—when the requisite care is given to them."

GEORGE BARRET, one of the founders of the English Water-color Society, says: "If that which is termed color be put on thinly, it will probably, in the course of time, be so changed by the action of the light, or from other causes, as to lose the power of returning the colored rays to the eye: and then it is said that the color has flown and the picture faded. This will account for the failure of many drawings made in the old way with Indian Ink, and sometimes with grey, by the addition of Indigo Blue to it, which, when finished, have the appearance of a print meagrely tinted; consequently the scanty means by which these tints were produced became wasted, and the effect of color lost. And from this circumstance many persons imagine that water-colors are not permanent. They are, on the contrary, *perfectly durable when properly applied with a liberal supply of the material*, and without any previous preparation of grey. To prove this position I am able to state that I have many studies which were painted immediately from nature, with water-colors, by my father, more than seventy years ago, and

that now they are as fresh in color as if only done yesterday. I must also observe that the cartoons of Raphael have existed for a period exceeding three hundred years, although but little care, I believe, was taken at one time, to preserve them; and these, as is well known, are water-color pictures. Ancient illuminated manuscripts also prove the durability of water-colors, when a sufficient body of color has been applied."

An English artist residing among us, speaking of the popular notion that water-colors are apt to fade—writes: "Now this is entirely a mistake. Water-color has a great advantage over oil, in its *purity*, there being no oils, varnishes or vehicles of any kind to come to the surface and mar the original purity of the tint. One of the most striking instances of this fact, is the frescoes (water-color) of Giotto in the Campo Santo of Pisa. Exposed as they are to the open air, and the general decay so great, that the very walls on which they are painted are crumbling away, they stand apparently as fresh in color as the day they were painted—while beside them hang oil pictures painted a century or more after, that are one undistinguishable blur from corner to corner. To say nothing of the majority of Sir Joshua Reynold's works, and thousands of other ill-fated oil pictures painted almost within our own day with nothing left of them but a mass of cracked discolored paint." * * "I saw not long since a folio of Turner's early drawings that had received for many years very bad usage—ground against one another on a dusty table, and of

course exposed to all manner of lights and temperatures, and with all these disadvantages, they were as fresh and beautiful as one could desire." * * "There are instances where a faintly *tinted* sketch, if unfairly used, hung in the sun for any length of time, for instance, may fade somewhat—but not a carefully painted picture." * * * "The very fact of many of the greatest artists of our day taking it as their medium of expression (men who desire their works to live after them), should be sufficient argument to satisfy any reasonable people."

Another artist writes: "I have in my possession two drawings which were made at the house in which my father served his apprenticeship (London). They must be at least eighty years old. With the exception of the paper losing its whiteness,* they seem to me to be as fresh in color as the day they were painted. As to my own work I cannot perceive any deterioration. I have in my possession drawings painted over forty years ago."

THOS. NYE, of New Bedford, has a water-color drawing made in England ninety years ago—an old ship running by Land's End, which is quite fresh in color.

If the experience of one of this committee can add any weight to the testimonies already given, we may say that in some seventy water-color drawings from Italian Costume models made in Rome twenty years ago, the colors (with the exception of some touches of *white lead* foolishly used, and which of course blackened,) are as

* The change in the whiteness of paper is owing to its exposure to the air, which is avoided by the glass over it. We believe our dry American climate to be particularly favorable to durability of tints and colors.

fresh as of yesterday ; and this in spite of their having been unprotected by glass, exposed to all sorts of climates, and subjected to any amount of careless usage.

In fine, we have no doubt that every water-colorist may adduce similar testimony gathered from his own experience.

In all that has been said of the durability of water-colors, it is implied that there has been a conscientious use of such pigments as are well tested, and are generally acknowledged to be not fugitive.

Many persons may be under the impression that the pigments used in water-color are different from those used in oil. This would be a wholly unfounded idea. *The colors used in water-color painting are mainly the same colors that are used in oils.* The only difference is in the *vehicle*, or medium used. Now what vehicle can be purer than simple water? It is certainly less objectionable than any kind of oil, for oil will in the course of time darken somewhat. The point we insist upon is, that the *color* is independent of the *medium*. In oil-painting the oil has no more to do with fixing the color, than water has in water-color. The same pigments are used in both departments, and therefore, other things being equal, the durability should be the same.

Nor need the public be assured that in Europe, and especially in England, where the practice of water-color is of very old date, and where the permanence of colors has long been well tested, both by artists and chemists,

no pains have been spared to bring to perfection the preparation of the pigments used. We believe that Windsor and Newton's colors, for instance, are so thoroughly known and tested, that no painter hesitates for a moment to use them; or doubts that when properly used, they will last at least as long as colors mixed with oil.

As to the relative durability of paper and canvas, a few words will suffice. That canvas is just as destructible as paper, no one will dispute. Our own experience is that it is more liable to injury from carelessness and accident. A piece of canvas painting often cracks from being rolled up, or even moved about in a portfolio. An oil-painting on paper very rarely suffers, if the paper be good. And a water-color painting is still less liable to injury, and the paper will last for centuries, as any one may be convinced by looking at the drawings by the old masters in the Louvre, in the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice, and other galleries of Europe. But if protected by a glass in front and a board behind, the insurance is ten-fold greater. In England, where water-color painting is more practiced and patronized than anywhere else, all the important works in the exhibitions are like solid pieces of wood, the paper being carefully lined, and then pasted upon a well seasoned panel, becoming a firm, durable mass.

We have thus shown from good authority, that water-color painting is even more durable than oil-painting; and we trust that if any prejudice on this score exists

among the American public, the foregoing pages may do something toward dispelling it, and may conduce to the encouragement and growth of a branch of art which has so many beauties and advantages in its favor.



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