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book review of

American Painters on Technique: The Colonial Period to 1860 by
Lance Mayer and Gay Myers

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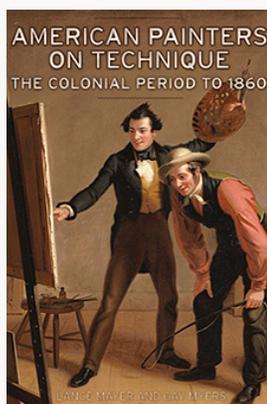
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Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, *American Painters on Technique: The Colonial Period to 1860*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011. 260 pp.; 19 color illus.; bibliography; index. \$50.00 (Hardcover) ISBN 978-1-60606-077-3

Any preconceived notion that *American Painters on Technique: The Colonial Period to 1860* is a dry, jargon-riddled handbook should be abandoned now. In the first installment of a two-part project, conservators Lance Mayer and Gay Myers present a wealth of technical information amid amusing anecdotes and eccentric artistic profiles. Relying on primary sources, they uncover the creative processes and wide-ranging materials used by renowned American artists such as Benjamin West and Rembrandt Peale. Mayer and Myers thoughtfully organized the book in a way that suggests a narrative, evolutionary course for American artists and their methods. The book is presented in four parts, each with three or four chapters that broadly illustrate American artists' relationship with their British counterparts, their quest for artistic relevance, and their eventual artistic maturity. The attitude toward Old Master techniques is a focus of much of the book's first half, as the authors explore artists' attempts to uncover long-lost secrets. The second half illustrates the scientific vigor with which nineteenth-century American painters experimented. Most important, however, is what unites each painter from Benjamin West to William Sidney Mount: their desire to ensure their work's longevity and permanence. Whether it was a rediscovered Venetian varnish recipe or a clever canvas support method, each advancement reflected the artists' concern with their paintings' ultimate legacies.

Interestingly, ensuring paintings' longevity was the impetus for this book, as the project emerged from Mayer and Myers's conservation research. As the authors rightly acknowledge in their introduction, there is a dearth of thorough art historical publications focusing on American artists' techniques and materials. However, as evidenced by the Spring 2012 issue of *American Art*, the field of technical art history is growing. In one of the journal's essays, conservator Joyce Hill Stoner defines technical art history as a combination of "traditional documentary evidence like the circumstances and details of the painter's life and the reception and stylistic development of the artwork with the technical findings from optical and scientific methods including x-rays, IRR, and paint analysis."¹¹ Several art historians and conservators recently teamed up to produce collaborative exhibition catalogues, utilizing the approaches

and technologies Stoner described, such as *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light* by Martha Tedeschi and Kristi Dahm and *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit* edited by Anna O. Marley with a technical essay by Brian Baade, Amber Kerr-Allison, and Jennifer Giacci.^[2] Though Mayer and Myers's book focuses more on the materials and techniques described in artists' accounts, as opposed to modern-day scientific analyses of individual objects, their contribution sheds light on historically significant artistic methods and the circumstances from which they emerged. They divided the book primarily into single-artist chapters, emphasizing artistic networking as an important theme, with various artists making cameo appearances in the chapters of others, to exchange advice or criticism. An overall spirit of innovation prevails as each artist attempts to perfect his technique with new or 'rediscovered' materials and processes.

In *American Painters on Technique*, Mayer and Myers balance pertinent biographical information with detailed technical observations gathered from correspondence, journals, advertisements, published and unpublished treatises, and other primary sources. Each chapter could certainly stand on its own as an informative reading for undergraduates, graduates, and anyone interested in, or researching, a particular artist's materials and methods. The chapter on Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828), for example, is just under twenty pages, but addresses everything from his purposefully limited color palette to his opinions on varnishing, while relating, with detectable suspicion, the many anecdotes of the legendary "First American Old Master" and his techniques. Similarly, the chapters that address broader themes, such as "Store Bought Supplies and New Materials in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s," serve as strong introductions to the climate and culture of nineteenth-century American art. The authors devoted individual in-depth chapters to Thomas Sully, John Neagle, and Rembrandt Peale, but these figures reappear in almost every other chapter due to the abundant paper trails left by each, which usefully chronicle their own techniques as well as the techniques of others.

The book opens with the chapter "Provincial Painters and European Connections," which explores the origins of painting as a fine art in the North American colonies and introduces the important networks between American and British artists. Mayer and Myers begin their discussion by illustrating how limited artistic resources were, and the ways in which these resources began appearing in American shops. Vendors who once sold house painting supplies began advertising materials for "face painting," referring to portraiture, by the mid-eighteenth century, and would later include lists of the various pigments they could provide. Mayer and Myers identified how many artists desired fine quality materials, or "the best that can be got," as in John Singleton Copley's case (3). However, these materials were often difficult to come by, especially in more rural areas. Some artists, like Sully and Peale, exchanged rare materials imported from abroad, such as copal and dammar varnishes, illustrating the infrequency with which the shipments arrived in the United States. Mayer and Myers reveal the necessity of these networks for obtaining quality materials, participating in mentorship, and learning valuable techniques.

Benjamin West (1738–1820) is the prevailing example of a successful American artist living abroad at this time, and serves as the subject for the book's second chapter, "Benjamin West and His Influence." The authors highlight West in their discussion of technique, especially because of his professional success and teaching legacy. Like many aspiring American painters, West went to Europe in order to study the work of the Old Masters firsthand and was fascinated by the

works of Titian, Paolo Veronese, and other Venetian masters. He was especially intrigued by the presumably “lost” techniques of these painters. West spent considerable time attempting to rediscover the right “megilp,” a mixture that makes oil pigments more workable and quicker to dry, which he and many of his contemporaries believed to be one of the Old Masters’ secrets. Mayer and Myers pieced together information about West’s methods by studying accounts from various students and visiting artists, including John Singleton Copley and Charles Wilson Peale. In this chapter, the reader also encounters the first of many bizarre, but reportedly factual anecdotes that make *American Painters on Technique* as much fun as it is informative. After describing some of West’s techniques for painting with glazes, Mayer and Myers add that he was especially fond of a color called “mummy,” which they define as “a pigment made from ground-up Egyptian mummies” that supposedly produced a pleasing deep brown that was favored by painters as early as the sixteenth-century (15).

Throughout West’s constant search for techniques that would evoke the finesse of the Old Masters and ensure his paintings’ longevity, the experience of the much admired painter, Sir Joshua Reynolds, looms as a cautionary tale. In spite of being an American living in London after the Revolution, West succeeded Reynolds as President of the Royal Academy of Arts where the two had worked closely for years. Mayer and Myers describe how Reynolds’s similar quest for forgotten techniques and unconventional materials caused many of his paintings to suffer from cracking and other problems. Though the authors assert that West’s paintings have held up better than Reynolds’s, West’s nostalgia-driven endeavors also serve as a contrast to the more scientific and empirical ventures of artists in later chapters.

The book’s second section, which contains chapters on Gilbert Stuart (1755–1828) and Washington Allston (1779–1843), focuses on the techniques of these two artists in a way that emphasizes their innovative spirits. For both artists, a reliance on European mentorship and a fascination with lost techniques was still strong. Stuart, according to several accounts, surpassed West at a young age with his seemingly spontaneous brushstrokes and use of fewer mixed ingredients. A significant challenge for Mayer and Myers was weighing the truthfulness of the many anecdotes that surfaced about Stuart and his methods. As is the case with much of the book, the authors relayed the recipes and descriptions found in various journals and letters, but were not able to definitively verify the accuracy of the recipes. This often seems due to contradictory accounts, such as those that describe Stuart’s preference for absorbent grounds and others that refute it.

Mayer and Myers dedicate chapters 9 and 10 in the book’s third section to the techniques and opinions of John Neagle (1796–1865) and Rembrandt Peale (1778–1860) who shared a strong professional relationship. The authors make it clear that by the mid-nineteenth century, most European and American artists had moved from searching for lost painting secrets to experimenting on their own. They credit the increase in medical and scientific study in the United States as an influence on the more methodical investigations performed by these artists and identify a discernible pride in the ingenuity and inventiveness found in much of the writing about American painting experiments. For example, Rembrandt Peale likened a painter’s dexterity with his materials to that of a mechanic with his tools “in the production of watches and Steam Engines,” both of which served as examples of American technical innovation for Peale (92). However, Mayer and Myers warn against the impulse of modern readers to connect such spirited experimentation with an idea of “American-ness,” as these endeavors were

probably the product of a similar European interest. Mayer and Myers describe Rembrandt Peale in a dynamic way that highlights his clever achievements and reveals his financial savvy, while also including some of his failed experiments and lesser-known follies. The entrepreneurial Peale often charged other artists for sharing his findings on pigment mixtures and megilp recipes.

While artists' concern with the passage of time and its effects on a painting is a repeated theme throughout the book, it is best illustrated in Neagle's chapter, where the authors describe the artist returning to his notes years later to update them on the condition of his works. Neagle's precision, attention to detail, and analytical methods of experimentation contrast sharply with West's pursuit of old secrets just a few decades earlier. The authors discerned a uniquely scientific language and approach in Neagle's notes, where, for example, he was concerned about the chemical reactions of layered paints and the best method for purifying oils by using charcoal as a filter.

In chapter 11, "Store-Bought Supplies and New Materials in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s," Mayer and Myers compiled an impressive amount of information regarding increased interest in the arts and the "colormen": the creators, importers, or vendors of artistic materials who emerged at this time. This chapter stands out as one of the strongest for those interested broadly in American painters, materials, and techniques of the nineteenth century. The authors begin by asserting that New York City became the center for prepared and readily available art materials, and describe how, by mid-century, artists were less inclined to grind and mix paints themselves. Numerous vendors also appeared in Philadelphia and Boston, and as the trend for prepared materials increased, smaller towns began seeing these developments. In more rural areas, many shops did not carry artists' supplies exclusively, but did offer a wide selection of materials that would be of use to artists, such as fine pigments, varnishes and smaller brushes that would have been useful for painting fine details. The authors organized this dense chapter principally by material, such as sections on "Paints," "Varnishing," and "Supports," which were then broken down into smaller sections. The section on paints is especially interesting in its discussion of paint in tubes. Mayer and Myers traced this development as colormen stopped selling paint held in "bladders made from animal membranes" and began providing paint in tin tubes that "could be made to extrude the paint by carefully pushing a cork plunger" and had a screw cap to prevent bursting (160–61). They also note that artists were perhaps more interested in the tubes because it made it easier to paint outdoors and the collapsible tubes were generally more convenient. In addition to these material innovations, the colormen brought greater quantities of first-rate European products, such as the celebrated pigments from Winsor & Newton. The greater accessibility, wider variety and improved quality of the colormen's materials signaled the growing interest in fine art practices in America.

The chapter on store-bought materials and colormen indicates something of the rationale behind Mayer and Myers' choice to end the book at 1860, when vendors of prepared materials were quickly outnumbering the artists who experimented. At the very end of their last chapter, they hint at the importance of the Civil War for artists and promise a second book chronicling the materials and technical developments of the late-nineteenth century. The second installment might benefit from some more object-based analyses, given the authors' vast experience with firsthand observations of many important American paintings. In *American Painters on Technique: The Colonial Period to 1860*, Mayer and Myers usually point to well-known

paintings as quick examples of certain technical issues, but an in-depth investigation of a notable painting or two might be valuable for grounding some of these central material-based discussions. However, if their second book contains nearly as much rich technical information complimented by as many entertaining anecdotes as *The Colonial Period to 1860*, then Mayer and Myers will have provided the field with a solid introductory guide to the technical side of American painting.

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Notes

[1] Joyce Hill Stoner, "Turning Points in Technical Art History in American Art," *American Art* 26:1 (Spring 2012), 3.

[2] Martha Tedeschi, Kristi Dahm, *Watercolors By Winslow Homer: The Color of Light* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2008); Anna O. Marley, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 2012).