



What Painting Is

James Elkins

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What Painting Is

How to Think about
Oil Painting,
Using the
Language of
Alchemy



James Elkins

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To my father
with thanks for:

Cornus, Tyrranus, Catocala, Lamnia,
Polistes, Bombus, Spirogyra, Acer, Salix,
Carya, Fraxinus, Quercus, Boletus, Coprinus,
Lycopodium, Ranunculus, Rudbeckia,
Samia, Culex, Argiope, Photinus, and all the
Ichneumonidæ.

Wer lange lebt, hat viel erfahren,
nichts Neues kann für ihn auf dieser Welt
geschehn.
Ich habe schon, in meinen Wanderjahren,
kristallisiertes Menschevolk gesehn.

(There is nothing new on earth
For a person who lives long and experiences
much.
In my years of youthful wandering
I have seen crystallized people.)

—Goethe, *Faust* II. ii. 36 (6861–6864)

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Introduction

WATER AND STONES. Those are the unpromising ingredients of two very different endeavors. The first is painting, because artists' pigments are made from fluids (these days, usually petroleum products and plant oils) mixed together with powdered stones to give color. All oil paints, watercolors, gouaches, and acrylics are made that way, and so are more solid concoctions including pastels, ink blocks, crayons, and charcoal. They differ only in the proportions of water and stone—or to put it more accurately, medium and pigment. To make oil paint, for example, it is only necessary to buy powdered rock and mix it with a medium, say linseed oil, so that it can be spread with a brush. Very little more is involved in any pigment, and the same observations apply to other visual arts. Ceramics begins with the careful mixing of tap water and clay, and the wet clay slip is itself a dense mixture of stone and water. Watery mud is the medium of ceramists, just as oily mud is the medium of painters. Mural painting uses water and stone, and tempera uses egg and stone. Even a medium like bronze casting relies on the capacity of "stone"—that is, the mixture of tin, lead, copper, zinc, and other metals—to become a river of bright orange fluid.

So painting and other visual arts are one example of negotiations between water and stone, and the other is alchemy. In alchemy, the Stone (with a capital S) is the ultimate goal, and one of the purposes of alchemy is to turn something as liquid as water into a substance as firm and unmeltable as stone. As in painting, the means are liquid and the ends are solid. And as in painting, most of alchemy does not have to do with either pure water or hard stones, but with mixtures of the two. Alchemists worked with viscid stews, with tacky drying films, with brittle

skins of slag: in short, they were concerned with the same range of half-fluids as painters and other artists.

That is the first point of similarity between alchemy and painting. There is a second similarity that runs even deeper, and gives me the impetus to explain painting in such a strange way. In alchemy as in painting, there are people who prefer to live antiseptically, and think about the work instead of laboring over it. In alchemy, those are the “spiritual” or “meditative” alchemists, the ones who read about alchemy and ponder its meaning but try not to go near a laboratory; and in painting they are the critics and art historians who rarely venture close enough to a studio to feel the pull of paint on their fingers.¹ Perhaps because they are uncomfortable with paint, art historians prefer meanings that are not intimately dependent on the ways the paintings were made. Consider, for instance, the first of the color plates in this book (COLOR PLATE 1). An historian looking at this painting might recognize Sassetta, a fourteenth-century painter from Siena. Sassetta is known to art history as a late medieval artist who slowly adjusted his work to the emerging sensibility of the Florentine Renaissance. He knew about the important new works that were being made in Florence, and there are echoes and hints of them in his paintings, though in the end he remained faithful to the conservative Siennese ways.² We know a little about his life, and about his patrons and commissions; and we can guess at his friends, and the places he visited. Pictures can have many meanings of those kinds, and art history is a rich and complex field. But a painting is a painting, and not words describing the artist or the place it was made or the people who commissioned it. A painting is made of paint—of fluids and stone—and paint has its own logic, and its own meanings even before it is shaped into the head of a madonna. To an artist, a picture is both a sum of ideas and a blurry memory of “pushing paint,” breathing fumes, dripping oils and wiping brushes, smearing and diluting and mixing. Bleary preverbal thoughts are intermixed with the namable concepts, figures and forms that are being represented. The material memories are not usually part of what is said about a picture, and that is a fault in interpretation because every painting captures a certain resistance of paint, a prodding gesture of the brush, a speed and insistence in the face of mindless matter: and it does so at the same

moment, and in the same thought, as it captures the expression of a face.

In Sassetta's painting little brushstrokes form the face: they are delicate light touches that fall like lines of rain over the skin, coming down at a slight angle over the temples and next to the mouth. Brighter marks spread from the top of the forehead, crisscrossing the canted strokes over the temple. There are larger milky dapples just under the pink of the cheek—almost like downy hair—and curling marks that come around the neck and congregate on the collar bone. Sassetta has clasped three bright rings of sharp white (they are called Venus's collars) around the neck. The sum of brushstrokes is the evidence of the artist's manual devotion to his image: for Sassetta painting was the slow, pleasurable, careful and repetitious building of a face from minuscule droplets of pigment. The initial strokes were darker and more watery, and as the contours began to emerge he used whiter paint, and put more on his tiny brush, until he finally built up the forehead to a brilliant alabaster. This is a tempera painting, and in its period many painters used the medium as a way of showing devotion. Sassetta's lingering patience and fastidious attention remain fixed in the painting for everyone to see: they are a meaning of the method itself.³

Recently, some art historians have become more interested in what paint can say. They suggest that since art history and criticism are so adept at thinking about what paint represents (that is, the stories and subjects, and the artists and their patrons), then it should also be possible to write something about the paint itself. What kinds of problems, and what kinds of meanings, happen *in* the paint? Or as one historian puts it, What is thinking in painting, as opposed to thinking about painting?⁴ These are important questions, and they are very hard to answer using the language of art history.

This is where alchemy can help, because it is the most developed language for thinking *in* substances and processes. For a "spiritual" alchemist, whatever happens in the furnace is an allegory of what takes place in the alchemist's mind or soul. The fetid water that begins the process is like the darkened spirit, confused and halfrotten. As the substances mingle and fuse, they become purer, stronger, and more valuable, just as the soul becomes more holy. The philosopher's stone is the sign of the mind's perfection, the almost transcendent state where all

impurities have been killed, burned, melted away, or fused, and the soul is bright and calm. Alchemists paid close attention to their crucibles, watching substances mingle and separate, always in some degree thinking of the struggles and contaminations of earthly life, and ultimately wondering about their own souls and minds.

It was the psychologist Carl Jung who first emphasized this aspect of alchemy, and since then everyone who has studied alchemy has either followed the outline of his interpretation, or rebelled against him.⁵ I am not a follower of Jung, and I do not agree with his singleminded pursuit of spiritual allegories, or with his theories of the psyche. But to me what is wrong with Jung is not the basic idea that some alchemists saw their souls in their crucibles, but the fact that he made alchemy virtually independent of the laboratory. There is much more to the experimental side of alchemy than Jung thought; alchemical procedures vary from routine formulas for soap to ecstatic visions of God. Even today there are recipes using straightforward ingredients that are so intricate they cannot be reliably duplicated by chemists.⁶ What mattered to all but a very few purely spiritual alchemists was the laboratory itself, and the manipulation of actual substances. The laboratory made their ideas real, and had a grip on the imagination that no speculative philosophy could hope for. Jung's reading slights the everyday alchemists who imagined they were making medicines or becoming rich: they were just as much enthralled, and took just as much of the meaning of their lives from their crucibles, as the spiritual alchemists who wrote so beautifully about darkness and redemption.⁷

The moral I take from this is that neither alchemy nor painting is done with clean hands. Book-learning is a weak substitute for the stench and frustration of the laboratory, just as art history is a meager reading of pictures unless it is based on actual work in the studio. To a nonpainter, oil paint is uninteresting and faintly unpleasant. To a painter, it is the life's blood: a substance so utterly entrancing, infuriating, and ravishingly beautiful that it makes it worthwhile to go back into the studio every morning, year after year, for an entire lifetime. As the decades go by, a painter's life becomes a life lived with oil paint, a story told in the thicknesses of oil. Any history of painting that does not take that obsession seriously is incomplete.

So this is not a book about paintings, but about the act of painting, and the kinds of thought that are taken to be embedded in paint itself. Paint records the most delicate gesture and the most tense. It tells whether the painter sat or stood or crouched in front of the canvas. Paint is a cast made of the painter's movements, a portrait of the painter's body and thoughts. The muddy moods of oil paints are the painter's muddy humors, and its brilliant transformations are the painter's unexpected discoveries. Painting is an unspoken and largely uncognized dialogue, where paint speaks silently in masses and colors and the artist responds in moods. All those meanings are intact in the paintings that hang in museums: they preserve the memory of the tired bodies that made them, the quick jabs, the exhausted truces, the careful nourishing gestures. Painters can sense those motions in the paint even before they notice what the paintings are about. Paint is water and stone, and it is also liquid thought. That is an essential fact that art history misses, and alchemical ideas can demonstrate how it can happen.

It may seem odd to write a book about the experience of oil painting, and even odder to explain it by appealing to a subject as dubious as alchemy. I would not deny that this book is eccentric, with its alchemical signs strewn among the English words, and its descriptions of outlandish laboratory experiments. It is not a book I could have imagined myself writing even two years ago, when I was thinking about these problems from the more sober perspective of art history. But necessity forced the issue. According to the Library of Congress there are over 7,400 books on the history and criticism of painting, enough for several lifetimes of reading. Another 1,500 books cover painters' techniques—most of them popular artists' manuals describing how color wheels work, or how to paint birds and flowers. In all that torrent of words I have found less than a halfdozen books that address paint itself, and try to explain why it has such a powerful attraction *before* it is trained to mimic some object, *before* the painting is framed, hung, sold, exhibited, and interpreted.⁸ But I know how strong the attraction of paint can be, and how wrong people are who assume painters merely put up with paint as a way to make pictures. I was a painter before I trained to be an art historian, and I know from experience how utterly hypnotic the act of painting can be, and how completely it can overwhelm the mind with its smells and colors, and by the

rhythmic motions of the brush. Having felt that, I knew something was wrong with the delicate erudition of art history, but for several years I wasn't sure how to fit words to those memories.

When a subject appears nearly impossible to understand, and when all the ordinary principles of explanation fall short, authors are compelled to experiment and to seize on the most powerful explanation no matter how remote it seems. There is a long history of books that make disparate connections, linking two subjects that are utter strangers in an effort to say something new. Even Homer supposedly wrote a book about a battle of frogs and mice, in order to be able to talk freely about how he thought the gods were getting along.⁹ Closer to the subject of this book, several writers have linked alchemy with very different subjects: Jung used it to explain psychology, and Paracelsus, the Renaissance physician, used it to explain medicine.¹⁰ I take some inspiration from those examples, though they differ from my purpose here. The best precedent for this book, and the one that is closest to its tenor, is Harold Bloom's *Kabbalah and Criticism*.¹¹ Bloom is a literary critic, who for a while despaired of explaining poetry by means of the usual philosophy. He turned to kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, and wrote a strange book introducing literary critics to the obscure medieval Hebrew words for the ineffable states of God. Part of the joy of *Kabbalah and Criticism* is seeing familiar names like Tennyson and Blake in the same sentence with words like *hochmah* and *binah*. One reviewer complained it was a shame Bloom had to reach so far to explain something so common, but I think he might have answered the way I do for this book: that what seemed common, poetry, was almost entirely misunderstood, and that kabbalah was the best recourse he had.¹²

Alchemy may never recover from its tainted reputation. It may always seem like a wrong-headed, moth-eaten precursor to proper chemistry, a whimsical and arcane pursuit that has lost whatever allure it may once have had. In a sense Jung has buried it even more deeply by lavishing his suspect psychology on it and making it appear as a font of wisdom about the depths of the human soul. Alchemy is neither.¹³ It is an encounter with the substances in the world around us, an encounter that is not veiled by science. Despite all its bad press, and its association with quackery and nonsense, alchemy is the best and most eloquent

way to understand how paint can *mean*: how it can be so entrancing, so utterly addictive, so replete with expressive force, that it can keep hold of an artist's attention for an entire lifetime. Alchemists had immediate, intuitive knowledge of waters and stones, and their obscure books can help give voice to the ongoing fascination of painting.

And one last note: all the color photographs of paintings (except **COLOR PLATE 8**) were taken in the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC. Most are tiny details nestled in the paintings, and for the most part I have deliberately kept silent about how they fit in their places and serve the paintings as wholes. After you have read the book, you might want to visit the paintings and see for yourself how alchemical and painterly ideas work hand in hand.

James Elkins
Baltimore, March 1995—Chicago, January 1998

1

A short course in forgetting chemistry

PAINTING is *alchemy*. Its materials are worked without knowledge of their properties, by blind experiment, by the feel of the paint. A painter knows what to do by the tug of the brush as it pulls through a mixture of oils, and by the look of colored slurries on the palette. Drawing is a matter of touch: the pressure of the charcoal on the slightly yielding paper, the sticky slip of the oil crayon between the fingers. Artists become expert in distinguishing between degrees of gloss and wetness—and they do so without knowing how they do it, or how chemicals create their effects.

Monet's paintings are a case in point. They seem especially simple to many people, as if Monet were the master of certain moods—of moist bluish twilight or candent yellow beaches—but nothing more: as if he had no sense that painting could be anything but a method for fixing light onto canvas. In his singleminded pursuit of the grain and feel of light, he seems to forget who he is, and who he is painting. He has only a weak attachment to people, and he treats the figures who stray into his pictures as if they were colored dolls instead of friends and relatives.¹ Instead, his attention is riveted to the blurry shapes that come forward through the imperfect atmosphere, and on the shifting tints of light that somehow congeal into meadows and oceans and haystacks. In that respect Monet's paintings are masterpieces of repression, keeping every thought quiet in order to concentrate on light: in order to pretend that there is nothing in the world—to borrow a phrase of Philip Larkin's—but the wordless play of "any-angled light," congregating endlessly on shadowed cliffs and ocean waves.²

Recently, art historians have learned to see that more is happening, and that Monet tried to give his paintings the sense

of freedom and civility that he thought was appropriate to bourgeois society. He painted contemporary scenes, recent technology such as steamboats, and the life of leisure that he valued most. But still the idea persists that Monet is “just an eye,” as Cézanne said, and for good reason: his paintings are ravishing, even for people who don’t particularly like glaring multicolored sunlight or soggy green gardens. These days, art historians are apt to be a little indifferent to Monet’s eye, and the Impressionists can easily seem less interesting than the generations before them, who were tortured by history and the pressure of great painting, or the generations that followed, with their pseudoscientific and mystical preoccupations. A large part of that lack of engagement on the part of historians comes from Monet’s technique itself: the paintings seem so obviously daubed, as if his only thought for the canvas was to cover it with paint as efficiently as possible. It can look as if he allowed one stroke for a leaf, another for a flower, and so on, building up meadows and forests through a tedious repetition. Often there is not much variety in the marks—no difference between thin and thick passages, no places where the canvas is suddenly bare, no contrasts between flat areas and corrugated impasto. Everything has a monotonous texture, like a commercial shag rug. In the later paintings, his technique only seems to get rougher and less controlled, until finally he ends up making lily pads and flowers out of swarms of haphazard brushstrokes, flailed over the canvas as if he didn’t care. The paintings look easy, and even more childlike than the Abstract Expressionist paintings that used to be maligned for their supposedly childish technique.

But as I learned by trying to copy Monet’s paintings, that idea is completely mistaken (COLOR PLATE 2). It is not possible to reproduce the effect of a Monet painting by jousting mechanically with the canvas, jabbing a dot of paint here and planting another one there, until the surface is uniformly puckered in Monet’s signature texture. A painter who does that will end up with a picture that looks soft and uninteresting, with a dull pattern of swirling circles like the ones left by some electric rug cleaners. A brush that’s loaded with paint and then pushed onto the canvas makes a circle, more or less, but Monet’s pictures do not have any circles in them. There is only one slightly rounded mark in this detail from one of his garden paintings—

the blue patch at the lower right—and it's *rectangular*, not circular at all.

Nor does it help to make the usual sideways swipes at the canvas, because then the picture turns into a rainstorm of oval droplets, all falling in one direction. Some second-rate painters of Monet's generation tried to paint that way, and the result is pictures that have a windswept effect, as if they were greasy surfaces smeared by a cleaning cloth. (Sassetta's Madonna has the windswept effect in miniature, since he painted by slight flexes of his thumb and index finger, each time bringing the brush a few millimeters down and to the left.) But Monet's pictures have no direction: they are perfectly balanced, and marks go in all directions equally. Would it be possible to tell which way is up in this detail? It is omnidirectional, with no sign of the diagonal fall of brushmarks that is the sure sign of an ordinary painter. To a nonpainter, it may sound like an easy matter to make marks in all directions: after all, an artist could try painting with both hands, or experiment with rotating the canvas. But getting real directionlessness is immensely difficult: repeated gestures naturally fall into line with one another, and artists have to work hard against their own anatomy to make sure that one kind of mark does not over-whelm the others.

Not all painters want the effect Monet achieved: many prefer the energy that directed brushstrokes give, and they work *with* the marks as Sassetta did, leading them up and down figures, and around contours. Painters who prefer to hide the signs of their brushwork normally do so by smearing their brushstrokes into uniform areas, or else miniaturizing their brushstrokes so they fall below the threshold of normal vision. (Sassetta almost does that: in the original, the Madonna's head is quite small.) But for Monet and other Impressionists those strategies wouldn't have seemed right. They wanted something painterly, where the brushmarks show, and they wanted a more exacting lack of directional motion, something like the inhuman stasis that nature itself seems to have. A distant landscape might shimmer and sparkle in the sunlight, but it will not show any sign of running diagonally up or down. It merely exists: it's not going anywhere, it doesn't move from place to place. To achieve stasis in a painting, it turns out that it is not enough to make marks equally in all orientations as if they were scattered matchsticks. Such a painting will be a flurry of crisscrossing lines. To do what Monet

did in this painting, it is necessary to make marks that have no set orientation *and* no uniform shape, so they can never congregate into herds and begin to march up and down like Seurat's dots sometimes do. Each mark has to be different from each other mark: if one slants downward, the next has to go up. If one is straight, the next must be arcuate. Lancet strokes must follow rounded ones, zigzags must be cut across by ellipses, thickened strokes must be gouged by thin scrapes. Any pattern has to be defeated before it grows large enough to be seen by a casual eye.

And even this is too simple. An ordinary square inch in a Monet painting is a chaos, a scruffy mess of shapeless glints and tangles. His marks are so irregular, and so varied, and there are so many of them, that it is commonly impossible to tell how the surface was laid down. There is a zoo of marks in this detail that defy any simple description. At the top right is a bizarre boat-shaped trough, made by gouging wet paint with the brush handle, and then pulling back in perfect symmetry. A pool of Yellow Ochre has been dropped just to its left, and it ran slightly over the lip of the trough before it congealed. To the left of that, a streak of Vermilion or Indian Red comes down, leaving an irregular trail over a layer of Cerulean Blue and Lead White. The Japanese call this technique "flying white," because a partly dry inkbrush will leave flashes of white as it drags across the silk. In the West, there is no such poetic name, and drybrush technique is normally just called scumbling (a word that can mean many other things as well). At the far upper left, some Ochre has just barely skimmed the surface of the canvas, depositing little yellow buds at each intersection of the weave. None of those marks have names: they are all irregular and none is like any other. And there are even more unclassifiable examples even in this little detail: a double, snaking mark of deep Ultramarine Blue enters the scene at the left center, scratches and skims its way to the right, skips a few centimeters, and then hooks left and doubles back. It's a scumbled stroke, not a continuous brushstroke but a trail of shimmering vertical marks, like specters walking in a parade.

Twenty years ago, the art historian Robert Herbert noticed that it is often possible to see a pattern of brushstrokes that is actually underneath the painted scene, as if Monet painted on top of a rolling landscape of brushstrokes.³ If the paintings are lit from one