

Studio Craft: Reverse Engineering a Work of Art By Appearance



Ask the Experts: “The last trip I took to a museum, I found myself trying to figure out how each painting was done. Some were easy, but others were really hard to pick apart. How much can you really tell about how a painting was done from looking at it?”

A: An experienced artist can often tell a lot about how a painting was constructed by examining colors, surfaces, brush strokes and the support. If there is documentation about the artist’s processes, the story becomes even clearer.

If the goal is to emulate the technique of a historical artist, keep an open mind in terms of what supplies would be necessary. Especially when extinct or obscure materials are involved (which is sometimes the case with historical artists from centuries past), it may not be possible to learn for certain what an artist used, or how they used it, to achieve a particular effect. This doesn’t mean, however, that a similar or even identical effect couldn’t be achieved with modern materials, using a similar approach.

Start with the Obvious

Start with the type of material used, including the support. It should be apparent whether the painting was done on a rigid or flexible support, on wood, metal, cloth or paper, even if, as is the case with many antique works of art, the original was later transferred to a different support.

Examine the Paint

Try to identify the physical properties of the paint and how it was applied. As you observe, try to describe the paint and application in terms of:

- Absorbent or resistant
- Additive or subtractive (piled up or scraped away; wiped thin)
- Stiff or fluid
- Thin or thick
- Layered (indirect) or alla prima (direct)
- Wet-in-wet or wet-over-dry

Look for some logic in the technique of application. Are certain materials rendered differently than others? If some colors are applied more thickly than others, is that done consistently with nature or physics, like direct light on the subject? Traditional painting systems often advocate using white paint more thickly in passages representing direct light, and handling darker areas more thinly. In the French Impressionist style, however, paint application is driven more by effects of color, agnostic of the physical properties of the subject matter.

Try to discern the sequence of paint application. Look for traces of a drawing or transferred design. See if you can tell whether thinner paint was applied first, followed by thicker material, or if the entire work was executed in one layer. Are earth colors applied first, followed by brighter ones, or is a full palette used throughout?

Search for documentation and literature

Depending on the artist, there may be written documentation of materials and processes. If the artist themselves kept a journal or notes, or corresponded with others about their methods, this may have been published or cited in books. Students or apprentices may also have preserved some information about the master’s work. 19th century French artist Charles Moreau-Vauthier, for instance, detailed information about the studio of Jean-Léon Gérôme in his book, “The Technique of Painting”. 16th century physician Sir Theodore de Mayerne recorded information about the processes of artists whose work interested him, including the Gentileschi family. Artists inspired by Georges Braque recorded some details of his processes and listed items observed in his studio.

A Grain of Salt

There's a huge difference between an artist seeking insight into another artist's process and a scientific, scholarly study of a work of art. Conservation scientists strive to determine the true nature of the materials used in a work of art and how the object was constructed, using microscopy, x-ray imaging, chemical analysis, written records and any other evidence that can objectively reveal the truth. Artists, on the other hand, know through experience what motivations drive the creative process and may be able to intuit how an effect was achieved, without factual verification.

In studying a work of art from the perspective of an artist, it's important to keep in mind that pictorial objectives are ultimately more important than using period-specific supplies. If you are able to achieve the authentic look of a historical artist's work using newer materials, that is itself a significant accomplishment, even if you may not be able to absolutely prove that you have duplicated the authentic technique.

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