2.2

Painting

When most of us think of art, painting is the medium that most often comes to mind. Perhaps this is not surprising, since artists have painted surfaces of many kinds for tens of thousands of years. In prehistoric times, artists painted on the walls of caves. The temples of ancient Greece and Mexico were painted in bright colors that look, to our contemporary tastes, garish. Modern muralists and graffiti artists also paint on walls. Of course, artists also paint on a much smaller and more intimate scale, on a stretched canvas or a sheet of paper. The artistic possibilities paint offers are almost limitless, and the effects achieved are often amazing.

There are many kinds of paints, suitable for different purposes, but they all share the same components. Paint in its most basic form is composed of pigment suspended in a liquid binder that dries after it has been applied. Pigment gives paint its color. Traditionally, pigments have been extracted from minerals, soils, vegetable matter, and animal by-products. The color umber, for example, originated from the brown clay soil of the Umbria region in Italy. Ultramarine—from the Latin ultramarinus, beyond the sea—is the deep, luxurious blue favored for the sky color in some Renaissance painting; it was ground from lapis lazuli, a blue stone found in Afghanistan. In recent times, pigments have been manufactured by chemical processes. The bright cadmium reds and yellows, for instance, are by-products of zinc extraction.

Pigments by themselves do not stick to a surface. They need a liquid binder, a substance that allows the paint to be applied and then dries, leaving the pigment permanently attached. Just as there are many kinds of pigments, there are many binders, traditionally beeswax, egg yolk, vegetable oils and gums, and water; in modern times, art-supply manufacturers have developed such complex chemical substances as polymers. Painters also use solvents for different reasons, for example adding turpentine to oil paint to make it thinner.

Artists use many kinds of tools to help them paint. Although historically brushes have been the most popular, some artists have used compressed air to spray paint on to their chosen surface; others have spread it around with a palette knife as if they were buttering toast. Sometimes they have poured it from buckets, or have ridden across the canvas on a bicycle the wheels of which were covered in it; others have dipped their fingers, hands, or entire body in it so they can make their marks.

Paint is an attractive and versatile material that has been used to create artworks ever since prehistoric people first applied pigment to the walls of their caves. This chapter will survey its most common forms, and the methods and tools used in the painting process. It will also introduce some notable painters and paintings.

Encaustic

Encaustic is an attractively semi-transparent paint medium that was used by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and which continues to be chosen by some artists today. To use encaustic an artist must mix pigments with hot wax and then apply the mixture quickly. He or she can use
Support: the material on which painting is done

Naturalism (adjective naturalistic): a very realistic or lifelike style of making images

Encaustic portraits from this era are referred to as Fayum portraits after the Fayum Oasis in Egypt where many of them were found.

### Tempera

If you have ever scrubbed dried egg off a plate while washing dishes, you know how surprisingly durable it can be. Painters who use egg tempera have different ideas about what parts of the egg work best for tempera painting, but artists during the Renaissance preferred the yolk. Despite its rich yellow color, egg yolk does not greatly affect the color of pigment; instead, it gives a transparent soft glow. Tempera is best mixed fresh for each painting session.

As in many Italian paintings of the fifteenth century, the paint of *The Virgin and Child with Angels* (2.24, by an unknown artist) consists of pigment and egg yolk. It also incorporates oil and gold leaf, a common combination at this time.

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2.22 Palette knife, a tool that can be used by the painter for mixing and applying paint

Ancient Roman painters showed great ability in controlling encaustic paint and produced beautiful results. The image of a boy in 2.23 was made by an anonymous artist during the second century CE in Roman Egypt. This type of portrait would have been used as a funerary adornment that was placed over the face of the mummified deceased or on the outside of the sarcophagus in the face position. The artist took great care to create a lifelike image and probably captured a fairly naturalistic image of the deceased boy.

2.23 Portrait of a boy, c. 100–150 CE. Encaustic on wood, 15 3/8 x 7 1/2". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

2.24 The Virgin and Child with Angels, Ferrarese School, c. 1470–80. Tempera, oil, and gold on panel, 23 x 17 3/4". National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

2.22 Palette knife, a tool that can be used by the painter for mixing and applying paint

2.23 Portrait of a boy, c. 100–150 CE. Encaustic on wood, 15 3/8 x 7 1/2". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
The image has been painted onto a wood panel, but the artist has chosen to paint an illusionistic frame that makes us think we are looking at the back of a damaged canvas. The tattered cloth and tacked binding—even the fly in the lower left-hand corner—are painted with careful attention to texture and realistic appearance. Tempera is normally painted with short thin strokes and lends itself to such careful detail.

Tempera is usually applied with a brush and dries almost immediately. The earliest examples of egg tempera have been found in Egyptian tombs. From the fifth century CE onward, painters of icons (stylized images of Jesus and saints) in modern-day Greece and Turkey perfected the use of the medium and transmitted the technique to early Renaissance painters in Europe and the Middle East. Islamic artists enjoyed the sensitive detail that can be achieved with tempera, and some used tempera with gold leaf to create rich images for the ruling class. In Two Lovers by the Persian miniaturist Riza Abbasi (1565–1635) we see the rich gold-leaf finish combined with the high detail of tempera (2.25). Riza, who worked for Shah Abbas the Great, has used the transparency of the medium to make the plant life look delicate and wispy. The intertwined lovers stand out proudly from the softness of the plants in the background.

The appeal of tempera painting continues today. It has been used to create some of the most recognizable works in American art. Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009), loved by Americans for his sense of realism and high detail, chose tempera to

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**Illusionism** (adjective illusionistic): the artistic skill or trick of making something look real

**Stylized:** art that represents objects in an exaggerated way to emphasize certain aspects of the object

**Background:** the part of a work depicted as furthest from the viewer’s space, often behind the main subject matter
create works that provide a glimpse into American life in the mid-twentieth century. The subject of Christina’s World (2.26) is a neighbor of Wyeth’s in Maine who had suffered from polio and could not walk. Wyeth has chosen to place her in a setting that expresses (in Wyeth’s words) her “extraordinary conquest of life.” The scene appears placid and bright, reflecting Wyeth’s great admiration for her. The high degree of detail gives a sense of mystery that stimulates our imagination.

**Fresco**

Fresco is a painting technique in which the artist paints onto freshly applied plaster. The earliest examples of the fresco method come from Crete in the Mediterranean (the palace at Knossos and other sites) and date to c. 1600–1500 BCE. Frescoes were also used later, to decorate the inside of Egyptian tombs. The technique was used extensively in the Roman world for the decoration of interiors, and its use was revived during the Italian Renaissance. The pigment is not mixed into a binder, as it is in other painting techniques. Instead, pigment mixed with water is applied to a lime-plaster surface. The plaster absorbs the color and the pigment binds to the lime as it sets. Once this chemical reaction is complete the color is very durable, making fresco a very permanent painting medium.

There are two methods of fresco painting: buon fresco (Italian for good fresco) and fresco secco (dry fresco). When artists work with buon fresco they must prepare the wall surface by rendering undercoats of rough plaster containing sand, gravel, cement, and lime. The artist adds a further (but not final) layer of plaster and allows it to dry for several days; he or she then transfers onto it the design from a full-scale drawing (referred to as a cartoon) in preparation for the final painting. Next, the artist applies the last finishing layer of plaster, re-transferring onto it the required part of the cartoon. Onto this he or she will paint pigment suspended in water. Because there are only a few hours before the lime plaster sets, only a portion of the wall is freshly plastered each day. If the artist makes a mistake, the plaster must be chiseled away and the procedure repeated. These technical challenges are offset by the brilliance of color for which fresco is renowned.

Many of the Renaissance fresco paintings were made to decorate the interiors of churches. The Italian artist Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) used the buon fresco method to decorate the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. For this monumental undertaking, requiring four years to complete, Michelangelo needed to craft a strategic approach in order to disguise the seams between separate days’ work. For example, in one section called the Libyan Sibyl he only plastered the area where the leg in the foreground was to be painted (2.27). This was probably a day’s work, and the seam of the plaster could be camouflaged because the surrounding edges (the purple drapery in particular) change color and value.

If an artist cannot finish painting a section within a day of plastering, or needs to retouch a damaged fresco, he or she employs the dry fresco method. Wet rags moisten the lime plaster that create works that provide a glimpse into American life in the mid-twentieth century. The subject of Christina’s World (2.26) is a neighbor of Wyeth’s in Maine who had suffered from polio and could not walk. Wyeth has chosen to place her in a setting that expresses (in Wyeth’s words) her “extraordinary conquest of life.” The scene appears placid and bright, reflecting Wyeth’s great admiration for her. The high degree of detail gives a sense of mystery that stimulates our imagination.

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During the twentieth century, Mexican mural artists painted the walls of public buildings with works that expressed their aspirations for social justice and freedom. The Mexican painter Melchor Peredo (b. c. 1929) studied with the great mural painters and has painted murals throughout Europe and North America. Here he explains how the revolutionary traditions of his country inspired a mural at Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia.

For more than thirty years Porfirio Díaz ruled Mexico as a dictator. This was a time of injustice and great divisions between the powerful rich and the poor masses. In 1911, the Mexican people rebelled and forced Diaz to resign. For
ten years revolutionary groups led the fight for social justice.

In the 1920s a group of artists decided to champion the struggles of ordinary Mexicans and express the ideals of the Mexican Revolution by reviving the art of fresco painting. Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Juan O’Gorman, and others covered the walls of public buildings with murals that were painted as a gift that could be enjoyed by all the people of Mexico. The mural painters were political radicals who were influenced by the ideas of socialist and communist leaders. The Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky was exiled to Mexico and lived in the home of Diego Rivera.

When I was a student at La Esmeralda art school in Mexico, I went to the National Palace in downtown Mexico City where Diego Rivera was painting murals, to invite him to give a lecture at our school. Rivera seemed disturbed by my interruption and came down off the scaffold, looking at me with his protruding eyes. “Yes, I will go,” he said, “because that is a revolutionary school.”

One of Rivera’s works I admire is Sugar Cane (2.28). It portrays the exploitation of workers on the large sugar farms in Morelos, south of Mexico City. Rivera painted this work at the Palace of Cortés (the Spanish conqueror of Mexico) in Cuernavaca. He also made a portable version in 1931 to be exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

In 1999 I completed Remembrance Fresco at Southern Arkansas University (2.29). I began by making a drawing. The design focuses on important historical figures and local folklore, based on ideas given to me by students and members of the local community. This is a portable fresco, like Rivera’s, painted on a large wooden container mounted on the wall, so next I layered cement, sand, gravel, and lime plaster on the wooden support, adding more lime with each application. When I reached the second-last layer, using a perch (a long stick), I drew the images from my sketch onto the wall. After applying a final thin, slick layer of plaster over the drawings I painted the final colors for the mural. The work still hangs at the Harton Theater on the campus.
Because it is so flexible, oil paint readily adheres to a cloth support (usually canvas or linen)—unlike encaustic, which is usually painted onto a stiff panel. Painters like oil paint because its transparency allows the use of thin layers of color called glazes. In the hands of such artists as van Eyck, glazes attain a rich luminosity, as though lit from within. Because oil paint is slow drying, artists can blend it and make changes days after the initial paint has been applied, thereby achieving smooth effects and a high level of detail.

Modern and contemporary artists have used oils to achieve quite different expressive effects. The San Francisco artist Joan Brown (1938–90) used oil in an impasto (thickly painted) fashion (2.31). Because oil paint is normally thick enough to hold its shape when applied to a surface, the paint can pile up, giving Brown’s work a three-dimensional presence.

The Chinese-born artist Hung Liu (b. 1948), who grew up in Communist China before emigrating to the United States, utilizes the different qualities of oil paint to achieve her own unique style. Hung’s images express her Chinese roots. Her work Interregnum juxtaposes images and styles (2.32). The traditional Chinese style is reflected in the idyllic figures in the upper part of...
Gateway to Art: Gentileschi, *Judith Decapitating Holofernes*

Paintings as Personal Statements

At a time when there were very few women working as professional artists, Italian Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–c. 1656) earned a reputation as a talented and accomplished painter. Women were not allowed to follow the traditional avenues of apprenticeship to complete their training as painters, but Gentileschi was the daughter of an artist, and her talent was recognized and fostered by her father. Unlike her male contemporaries, Gentileschi often depicted strong female figures with emotion, intensity, and power, as exemplified in *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* (2.33); but she also painted many portraits, some of which were in oil paint, including the self-portrait shown here (2.34).

Artists have always made self-portraits to show off their skill and define themselves as they wish others to see them. In *Allegory of Painting*—“allegory” here meaning an image of a person that represents an idea or abstract quality—Gentileschi depicts herself at the moment she begins to paint, holding a brush in one hand and her palette in the other. The mask pendant around her neck signifies that painting is an illusion only an inspired master can produce. She shows painting as a physical, energetic act; she is about to be inspired to paint upon the blank canvas before her. Just as *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* portrays strong female figures, Gentileschi’s self-portrait shows her succeeding in the male-dominated world of the professional artist.

2.33 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Decapitating Holofernes*, c. 1620. Oil on canvas, 6'63/8" × 5'3/4". Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

the work, in contrast with the back-breaking hard reality of life under the Communist leader Mao Zedong in the lower part. Hung’s work shows the discontinuity between reality and the ideal.

### Acrylic

Acrylic paints are composed of pigments suspended in an acrylic polymer resin. They dry quickly and can be cleaned up with relative ease. Latex house paint is made of acrylic polymer. These paints have only been in use since about 1950. Unlike oil paints, which dissolve only in turpentine or white spirit, acrylics can be cleaned up with water. When dry, however, they have similar characteristics to those of oil paint.

Many professional artists, including the contemporary Japanese-American artist Roger Shimomura (b. 1939), prefer acrylics as their primary painting medium. Shimomura uses them to create works that investigate the relationships between cultures. He merges traditional Japanese imagery, such as a shogun warrior, with popular culture and typically American subjects, such as Superman. This combination of styles reflects the mixing of cultures resulting from communication and contact between nations. In *Untitled (2.35)* Shimomura refers to the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. The painting explores the effects of conflict between two cultures.

### Watercolor and Gouache

Watercolor and gouache suspend pigment in water with a sticky binder, usually gum arabic (honey is used for French watercolor), which helps the pigment adhere to the surface of the paper when dry. Watercolor is transparent, but an additive (often chalk) in gouache makes the paint opaque. Usually watercolor and gouache are painted on paper because the fibers of the paper help to hold the suspended pigments in place. The portability of watercolor (all the artist needs is brushes, small tubes or cakes of paint, and paper) has made it vastly appealing.

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Watercolor’s ease of use poses one inherent challenge. Watercolor is transparent, but there is no white transparent pigment; any white area in a watercolor is simply unpainted paper. If an artist paints a white area by mistake, one solution is to paint it over with opaque white gouache.

The watercolors of the German Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) are noted for their masterful naturalism. Dürer’s works, such as *A Young Hare*, reflect direct observation of a natural subject (2.36). Above all, the artist conveys a sense of the creature’s soft, striped fur through a combination of watercolor with opaque white heightening.

French artist Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979), the first woman to have her work shown at the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, during her lifetime, mastered the art of watercolor. *Prose of the Trans-Siberian Railway and of Little Jehanne of France* (2.37), an artist’s book, was part of a collaboration with the poet Blaise Cendrars (1887–1916). If all 150 copies of the first edition were placed end to end, it was intended they would stretch the height of the Eiffel Tower. The book was also meant to be folded like a roadmap, and it recounts a trip from Russia to Paris. Delaunay’s work is a “simultaneous book” in which her watercolor illustration on the left is set next to the Cendrars poem on the right. She used the bright colors that watercolor affords to create an illustration that progressively changes as the reader advances down the page.

**Ink Painting**

Although artists often use ink with a pen on paper, they also use it for painting. Different surfaces require differences in ink. If you are drawing on a surface that is not fibrous enough, you need to modify the ink. Ink is commonly used on paper because the fibers hold the pigment, but a slicker surface needs an additional binder. Painting inks
are slightly different from drawing inks because they have a binder, usually gum arabic, rather than simply being suspended in water. Ink can be painted in much the same way as watercolor; artists sometimes incorporate it into their watercolor paintings to give extra richness and darker values.

Japanese artist Suzuki Shōnen (1849–1918) makes good use of the expressive rich blackness of ink in his *Fireflies at Uji River* (2.38). The luscious darkness of the ink on silk scroll supports the retelling of a night scene from the eleventh-century Japanese novel *The Tale of Genji*, when a young man tries to overhear the conversation of two young women. The rushing waters of the Uji obscure their words from the eager ears of the would-be suitor. The artist emphasizes the power of the rushing water with strong brushstrokes and powerful diagonals.

### Spray Paint and Wall Art

Believe it or not, spray painting is one of the oldest painting techniques. Researchers have discovered that some images on the cave walls of Lascaux, France, were applied by blowing a saliva-and-pigment solution through a small tube. Although today’s spray paint comes in a can, the technique is essentially the same as it was 16,000 years ago. Because the spray spreads out in a fine mist, the ancient spray-paint artist, like today’s spray painters, would mask out areas to create hard edges. Ancient artists may even have done this with the edge of their hand, covering the wall where they did not want the paint to fall.

**Mask:** in spray painting or silkscreen printing, a barrier the shape of which blocks the paint or ink from passing through

**Stencil:** a perforated template allowing ink or paint to pass through to print a design

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2.38 Suzuki Shōnen, *Fireflies at Uji River*, Meiji period, 1868–1912. Ink, color, and gold on silk; hanging scroll, 13 3/4 × 50”. Clark Family Collection

Rat ironically juxtaposes an image of Michelangelo’s famous statue *David* with a superimposed machine gun (2.40). Blek le Rat is considered an artist/activist whose work is part of a larger movement, called culture jamming, that draws attention to social or political issues. This unauthorized rendering was spray painted on a building in support of Israel and was not well received by the European public, who hold a wide array of opinions regarding the relationship between Israeli Jews and the Palestinians.

**Conclusion**

In the 18,000 years between the spray painters of the Lascaux caves and their graffiti counterparts today, painters have continued to turn to the spectacular effects of different kinds of paint. The wax of encaustic, the egg of tempera, and the wet plaster of fresco have all offered artists technically demanding ways of combining pigment with a binder to depict subjects in durable and vivid color. Additionally, the invention of oil paint helped Renaissance artists achieve astonishing naturalism and luminosity of light effects. The strength, flexibility, and versatility of oil paint have continued to make it a favorite medium for artists right through to the present day. Its modern variant, acrylic, is a water-based medium and gives similar results, and artists can simply clean their brushes under the faucet. Watercolor, gouache, and inks are other kinds of water-based paint. Watercolor needs the minimum of equipment, and so has long been popular with professionals and amateurs alike, particularly for direct observation of nature outside of the studio.

By selecting a paint suitable for the chosen support, an artist can make images on areas as large as a wall or even an entire building, or at a much smaller scale, such as on a canvas or sheet of paper. Artists achieve many kinds of visual effects by changing the consistency of the paint with solvents or by working creatively with a variety of tools. Yet paint is actually a quite simple medium that for thousands of years has provided artists with a versatile means for communicating their thoughts, dreams, feelings, ideas, and experiences.