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THE TRANSITION FROM EGG TEMPERA TO OIL



The transition from tempera to oil in the 1400s is often explained as a sudden technical innovation: Egg tempera was the only paint option for many centuries, and art was constrained by the limitations inherent to tempera. Then, in the 15th c., oil paints were suddenly invented. (Single-handedly by Jan Van Eyck, according to the 16th c. historian Vasari.) As soon as artists switched to the more malleable, superior medium of oil, painting became increasingly realistic. In short, a new paint changed art, and changed it for the better.

Oil painting, however, was not a sudden innovation. The use of oils can be traced back to a long, gradual development. The book *On Divers Arts* by Theophilus (c. 1070-1125) gives instructions for working in oil, and crudely refined oils were used for protective coatings and decorative work throughout the Middle Ages. Several 13th c. northern European paintings, such as the Westminster Retable, were rendered exclusively in oil with considerable skill. Oil glazes were applied over certain pigments and gilded areas of 14th c. Italian tempera paintings. Oil paint, in fact, had been around for centuries – it just wasn't widely used.

Cennino Cennini (c.1370-1440) said that the purpose of art “was to paint other worlds, not this world”. Tempera paint is water-based and thin. It has an incorporeal, ethereal quality. It is applied in a gradual, meditative way. It's difficult to render robustly three-dimensional form because darks aren't as saturated and deep as in oil, highlights can't be painted impasto, and smooth transitions are difficult to achieve. These so-called “limitations” of tempera perhaps made it ideally suited to medieval thinking and imagery. One can imagine that oil paint might have felt uncomfortably viscous and overtly material to a 12th c. painter!



There was a pronounced shift in western consciousness in the 15th century. People became less focused on the heavens and increasingly interested in the physical world. As soon as the culture had the desire for greater realism in art, oil painting quickly developed into a sophisticated, well-understood medium. (At the same time and equally quickly, mathematical linear perspective, which creates convincing three-dimensional space, was codified; anatomical studies entered into artists training; and more naturalistic light and shadow effects became the norm – not coincidentally, I would say.) About a single generation separates the Wilton Diptych, c.1395 (above left), painted in egg tempera, and Van Eyck's oil masterpieces, such as the Arnolfini Portrait, 1434 (above right). From this perspective art wasn't influenced by an innovation in paint. Instead the culture evolved toward a different understanding of what is “real” (i.e. physical matter versus spirit). This new way of seeing the world was reflected in art and led to a new medium and different type of painting. It was natural for 15th c. painters to be drawn to oil. Oil is a more material medium that is slightly better than egg tempera at representing physical matter, and Renaissance artists were within, as well as creating, a culture that was increasing interested in the material world.

It's interesting to look at artists' choice of medium during this transitional period. Fra Angelico, a deeply devout man, stayed with egg tempera and fresco painting. Botticelli was drawn to both humanism and intense religiosity, with subject matter that ranged from Greek mythology to mysticism. He began as a tempera painter but later alternated between egg tempera, tempera grassa, and oil. Piero della Francesca, a renown mathematician and forward thinker, switched from tempera to oil early on and never looked back.

Egg tempera is a less corporal paint than oil. However I believe some of the commonly stated limitations of tempera are not inherent to the medium, but rather aesthetic choices carried over from the late Gothic, early Renaissance period in which it flourished; eras when there was less desire or expectation of “realism” in art. I revel in egg tempera's ethereal qualities but also try to extract from it a bit more material realism, reflective of the age in which I live. My goal is to link two worlds, the material and immaterial, within my paintings.