

THE BRUSH STROKE

The mere matter of putting on paint.

The power of a brush stroke.

There is a certain kind of brush stroke that is both bold and bad.

There are timid, halting brush strokes.

Strokes that started bravely but don't know where to go. Sometimes they bump into and spoil something else, or they may just wander about, or fade into doubtfulness.

There are strokes in the background which come up against the head and turn to get out of the way.

Strokes which look like brush strokes and bring us back to paint.

There are other strokes which inspire a sense of vigor, direction, speed, fullness and all the varying sensations an artist may wish to express.

The mere brush stroke itself must speak. It counts whether you will or not. It is meaningful or it is empty. It is on the canvas and it tells its tale. It is showy, shallow, mean, meagre, selfish, has the skimp of a miser; is rich, full, generous, alive and knows what is going on.

When the brush stroke is visible on the canvas it has a size, covers a certain area, has its own texture. Its tiny but very expressive ridges catch light in their own way. It has its speed and its direction. There is a lot it has of itself, and the strokes tell their tale in harmony with or in opposition to the motive of the picture.

On account of the shiny character of paint it is necessary to adhere to a general movement in brush direction to avoid a stroke which will shine even though the picture hangs in its proper light.

It sometimes happens that drawing dictates a sweep in a certain direction while to avoid the “shine” the opposite direction must be taken. Here is where one’s ingenuity and skill is brought into play. It is like walking well walking backward. It’s a feat one has to accomplish.

We often hear, “If somebody would only invent an oil paint that would not shine!” Few want to give up *oil* paint, but all have distressing moments over the technical avoidances of a destroying shine.

Sometimes the stroke may be made in the direction *drawing* dictates, and the shine can be killed by a very delicate and skillful blending stroke with a clean brush; thus breaking down the light-catching ridges of the original strokes. This is difficult to accomplish without a resultant weakening or softening of the original stroke.

Sometimes this blending or flattening stroke can be made at once. Other times better to do it later when the paint is more set.

In this latter case where the shine is not removed at once the artist will be bothered by the falseness of the note, due

to the presence of the reflected light, and he will be much troubled, for he must consider it as it is to appear when flattened, not as it is with the shine on it, and he must work accordingly.

There are few outsiders who have any dream of the difficulties an artist has to meet in the mere putting on of his paint.

There are strokes which depress whole canvases with a down-grade movement and a down-grade feeling as a result.

Some backgrounds which should give a rising sense seep downward with thin paint and strokes which seem to be weeping.

There are the attenuated strokes.

Strokes which seem to stretch the paint in an effort to make it cover.

Miserly strokes.

There are rich, fluent, abundant strokes.

Strokes that come from brushes which seem full charged, as though they were filled to the hilt and had plenty to give.

Strokes which mount, carry up, rise.
See Greco's pictures.

Strokes which are placid.

An evening scene by Hiroshigi.
The horizontal.

The stroke of the eyebrow as it rises in surprise.

A stroke in the ear which connects with the activities of the other features.

A stroke which gives the indolence, voluptuousness, caress, fullness, illusiveness, vital energy, vigor, rest and flow of hair.

Strokes which end too soon.

Dull strokes and confused strokes on youthful, spirited faces.

The stroke of highlight in the eye. Much meaning in whether it is horizontal, pointing up, pointing down, or high or low on the pupil.

Bad strokes which are bad because a brush or condition of paint was chosen which could not render them.

For things which require a greater steadiness of hand than you can command, use a maul stick.

Strokes carry a message whether you will it or not. The stroke is just like the artist at the time he makes it. All the certainties, all the uncertainties, all the bigness of his spirit and all the littlenesses are in it.

Look at the stroke of a Chinese master. Sung period.

There are strokes which comprehend a shape.

There are strokes which are doubtful of shape.

The stroke which marks the path of a rocket into the sky may be only a few inches long, but the spirit of the artist has traveled a thousand feet at the moment he made that stroke.

There are whole canvases that are but a multitude of parsimonious, mean little touches.

There are strokes which laugh, and there are strokes which bind laughter, which freeze the face into a set immovable grimace.

Strokes which carry the observer with exact degrees of speed.

Strokes which increase their speed, or decrease it.

Strokes with one sharp defining edge carrying on its other side its complement, soft, merging.

It is wonderful how much steadiness can be commanded by will, by intense desire.

Use a maul stick—use anything when you *have* to.

Don't use them except when you have to.

If possible, transmit through your free body and hand.

Whatever feeling, whatever state you have at the time of the stroke will register in the stroke.

Many a canvas carries on its face the artist's thought of the cost of paint. And many a picture has fallen short of its original intention by the obtrusion of this idea.

It is not necessarily the poor who think of the cost of paint. Many an artist has starved his stomach and remained a spendthrift in paint.

The reverse is also true.

Strokes with too much or too little medium.

The stroke in itself; in its own texture, that is, the texture it has of itself apart from the texture it is intended to reproduce, is a thing on the canvas, is an idea in itself, and it must correlate with the ideas of the picture.

The stroke may make or it may destroy the integrity of the forms.

There is a fine substance to flesh. "Just any kind" of a stroke won't render it.

A brush may be charged with more than one color and the single stroke may render a complete form in very wonderful

variation and blend of color. Not easy by any means and often abused.

There are good reasons for all the varying shapes, sizes, lengths, and general details of brushes. Some artists have special brushes made for special purposes and sometimes they modify brushes, and all who are wise take wonderful care of their brushes.

Varnish will somewhat lessen the shine of brush marks, because it fills the interstices and flattens the surface. But varnish has its drawbacks, and just enough and no more than enough to lock up the picture should be the limit of its use.

Every student should acquaint himself with the qualities and uses of varnish by reading and comparing the books which deal specifically with the chemistry of painting.

The sweep of a brush should be so skilled that it will make the background behind a head seem to pass behind the head—not up to it—and make one know that there is atmosphere all around it.

The stroke that gives the spring of an eyelid or the flare of a nostril is wonderful because of its simplicity and certainty of intention.

There are brittle and scratchy strokes, lazy, maudlin, fatly made and phlegmatic strokes.

One of the worst is the miserly stroke.

Get the full swing of your body into the stroke.

Painting should be done from the floor up, not from the seat of a comfortable chair.

Have both hands free. One for the brush and the other for reserve brushes and a rag.

Rag is just as essential as anything else. Choose it well and have plenty of it in stock, cut to the right size.

In having the best use of your two hands the thumb palette is eliminated. Have a table, glass top, white or buff paper under the glass. Have a brush cleaner. Make it yourself. The things sold in shops are toys.

Get the habit of cleaning your brush constantly as you work. The rag to wipe it. Thus the brush can hold the kind of paint you need for the stroke.

Great results are attained by the pressure, force or delicacy with which the stroke is made.

The choice of brushes is a personal affair to be determined by experience.

Too many brushes, or too many sorts of brushes cause confusion. Have a broad stock, but don't use them all at once.

It is remarkable how many functions one brush can perform.

Use not too many, but use enough.

Some painters use their fingers. Look out for poison. Some pigments are dangerous—any lead white, for instance.

Silk runs, is fluent, has speed, almost screams at times.

Cloth is slower, thicker, the stroke is slower, heavier.

Velvet is rich, caressing, its depths are mysterious, obscure. The stroke loses itself, not a sign of it is visible. So also the shadows in hair.

Strokes which move in unison, rhythms, continuities throughout the work; that interplay, that slightly or fully complement each other.

See pictures by Renoir.

Effects of perspective are made or defeated by sizes of strokes, or by their tonalities.

There are brush handlings which declare more about the painter than he declares about his subject. Such as say plainly: “See what vigor I have. Bang!” “Am I not graceful?” “See how painfully serious I am!” “I’m a devil of a dashing painter—watch this!”

Velasquez and Franz Hals made a dozen strokes reveal more than most other painters could accomplish in a thousand.

Compare a painting by Ingres with one by Manet and note the difference of stroke in these two very different men. The stroke is like the man. I prefer Manet of the two. But that is a personal matter. Both were very great artists.

Compare the paintings if they are within your reach, if not compare reproductions. Compare also Ingres' drawings with those of Rembrandt.

Manet's stroke was ample, full, and flowed with a gracious continuity, was never flip or clever. His "Olympia" has a supreme elegance.

Icy, cold, hard, brittle, timid, fearsome, apologetic, pale, negative, vulgar, lazy, common, puritanical, smart, evasive, glib, to add to the list and repeat a few. Strokes of the brush may be divided into many families with many members in each family. A big field to draw from and an abundant series of complements and harmonies among them; to use as units in the stress and strain of picture construction. Perhaps there is not a brush mark made that would not be beautiful if in its proper place, and it is the artist's business to find the stroke that is needed in the place. When it is in its proper place, even though it bore one of the hateful names I have given some of them, it is transformed, and it has become gracious or strong and must be renamed.

THE PICTURE THAT LOOKS AS IF it were done without an effort may have been a perfect battlefield in its making.

A thing is beautiful when it is strong in its kind.

What beautiful designs a fruit vendor makes with his piles of oranges and apples. He takes much trouble and I am sure has great pleasure in arranging them so that you can see them at their best.

A millionaire will own wonderful pictures and hang them in a light where you can't half see them. Some are even proud of the report, "Why, he has Corots in the kitchen—Daubignys in the cellar!"

If it is up to the artist to make the best pictures he can possibly make, it is up to the owners to present them to the very best advantage.

The good things grow better. There is always a new surprise each time you see them.

The man who has something very definite to say and tries to force the medium to say it will learn how to draw.

ORIGINALITY: Don't worry about your originality. You could not get rid of it even if you wanted to. It will stick to you and show you up for better or worse in spite of all you or anyone else can do.