

An exhibition at the Florence Griswold Museum  
February 2 – April 27, 2008

# THE FINISHING TOUCH

UNDERSTANDING THE TECHNIQUES OF  
AMERICAN IMPRESSIONIST AND TONALIST PAINTERS





Childe Hassam painting outdoors in Old Lyme, 1904. Florence Griswold Museum, Lyme Historical Society Archives.

(Facing page) Palettes for painting, from *Winsor & Newton's Catalogue of Colours and Materials for Oil and Water Colour Painting*, 1913.

(Cover) Paint brushes, from Daniel Burleigh Parkhurst, *The Painter in Oil, A Complete Treatise on the Principles and Technique Necessary to the Painting of Pictures in Oil Colors*, 1898.



In recent decades, conservators and curators have come to appreciate the degree to which subtle differences in the materials used by artists can have important effects on the way their paintings look. This exhibition grew out of our interest in that fundamental connection. As conservators who have spent much of the last five years writing a book about American painters' techniques, we have found that studying artists' notebooks, diaries, letters, supply catalogues, and instruction manuals can lead to a much deeper understanding of how paintings were made. Differences between Impressionist and Tonalist methods are in some cases obvious. While Impressionist painters applied distinct dabs of color that seemed shockingly bright to eyes unaccustomed to the new style, Tonalists preferred a muted range of tones, often created by modifying underlayers with thin, translucent glazes. Some American Tonalists believed that time would "mellow" and "ripen" their paintings, while American Impressionists feared that aging would dim the brightness of their colors.

Other important differences between Impressionist and Tonalist techniques revolve around the question of varnishing. Some Americans who came under the influence of French Impressionists



Henry Ward Ranger, *Autumn Woodlands*, 1902. Oil on canvas, 28 x 36 in.  
Florence Griswold Museum, Gift of Mr. Israel Liverant, 1961.2.

adopted the radical idea that a painting should not be varnished after it was completed, preferring matte surfaces that looked very different from the shiny surfaces of varnished paintings. By way of contrast, the Tonalist painter Henry Ward Ranger, founder of the Lyme Art Colony, continued to be a vigorous proponent of varnishing. The intentions of both French and American Impressionist painters were sometimes misunderstood or disregarded in subsequent years, and paintings were varnished contrary to their makers' wishes. Removing an inappropriately applied varnish can often make subtle but significant improvements in the appearance of a painting, including the ways in which the recession of space functions to produce an illusion of three-dimensionality.

Although written evidence about non-varnishing remains scarce, Ranger was one of the few artists to discuss the topic at any length. He referred disparagingly to the fashion for “flat” surfaces in imitation of Claude Monet and other French painters that began

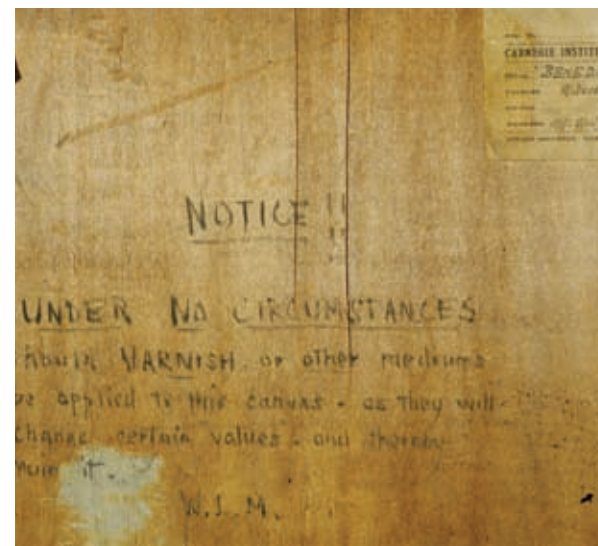
in the 1880s: “Following the theory that a ‘flat’ surface gave the effect of more air than a shiny one, there came a desire on the part of some painters to make their pictures look like pastels.” Ranger described the use of absorbent grounds and the practice of squeezing oil paint out on blotting paper to extract excess oil, both of which would enhance the matteness of an unvarnished painting. John Henry Twachtman’s preference for matte, unvarnished surfaces in the latter part of his career has been documented by his son and by the testimony of an early biographer who knew the artist. Theodore Robinson, a friend of Twachtman and Monet, left no evidence in his own words about his preferences, but a biographer who interviewed the artist’s associates after his death wrote: “No picture by Robinson should be varnished.” Willard Metcalf is a rare example of an artist who did make his opinions known—he wrote instructions on the backs of at least four of his paintings that they never be varnished.



John Henry Twachtman, *Horseneck Falls, Greenwich*, ca. 1890–1900.  
Oil on canvas, 25 ¼ x 25 ¼ in. Florence Griswold Museum,  
Gift of The Hartford Steam Boiler Inspection and Insurance Company, 2002.1.145.

Our research also shows that non-varnishing was by no means a unanimous choice — some American Impressionist painters (including Childe Hassam) chose to varnish their paintings, while other artists had conflicted or ambiguous views about varnishing. The Tonalist painter Dwight Tryon varnished some paintings, but on the back of at least one painting he wrote: “Do not varnish this picture.” Other artists began to believe that a thin layer of varnish was more aesthetically pleasing than a heavy layer; an article on varnishing in an American journal in 1892 summed up the situation as follows: “On this point artists differ much.”

One might ask why so many paintings were varnished at a later time in spite of their makers’ wishes. Ranger believed that a coating of varnish would protect a painting, and used this argument when he advocated varnishing *every* painting, including canvases by Monet that Ranger knew Monet intended to remain unvarnished. (This theory made more sense in an era of coal-fired furnaces and factories, and in fact some painters chose the alternative of framing their paintings behind glass, especially when exhibiting in polluted industrial cities.) Other artists disagreed with Ranger, arguing that the preservative function of a varnish was counteracted by negative visual effects. Some Impressionists feared that the inevitable discoloration of a varnish layer would distort their light, cool color schemes. Others had more complex reasons, as Metcalf did when he wrote on the back of one of his paintings that varnishing would “change certain ‘values’ — and thereby ruin it.” Varnish increases the contrast of values (the range of tones from light to dark) in a painting, and can make colors brighter. Dealers in the past — and in more recent times as well — might have believed that greater contrasts and brighter colors would attract a customer, even though this apparent “improvement” might disturb the proper relationship of the parts of a painting and the appearance of the work as a whole.



Willard Metcalf’s inscription on the back of his painting, *Benediction*, 1920.  
Private collection.

Conservators often advocated the protective function of a varnish layer, but they might also have been eager to produce a dramatic change in a painting’s appearance.

Controversies over varnishing are not confined to the works of the Impressionists. One of the most exciting trends in conservation in recent years has been the reexamination of the question of varnishing, and conservators around the world have been addressing past mistakes by removing varnishes that had been inappropriately applied to Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, Cubist, and other modern paintings. Their efforts, supported by careful research, can restore these works to an appearance much closer to that originally envisioned by their creators.

*Lance Mayer and Gay Myers*  
GUEST CURATORS



Henry Rankin Poore, *The Fox Chase* (detail), 1901–05. Oil on wood.  
Florence Griswold Museum, 1941.39.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Bell, Ralcy Husted, *Art-Talks with Ranger* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1914)

Bomford, David, Jo Kirby, John Leighton and Ashok Roy, with contributions by Raymond White and Louise Williams, *Art in the Making: Impressionism* (London: The National Gallery, 1990)

Callen, Anthea, *Techniques of the Impressionists* (Chartwell Books, Inc.: Edison, New Jersey, 1982)

Callen, Anthea, *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique & the Making of Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000)

Mayer, Lance and Gay Myers, "Understanding the Techniques of American Tonalist and Impressionist Painters." *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Summer 1993), pp. 129–139

Mayer, Lance and Gay Myers, "The Colour-Charm of the Tone-Picture: Ranger, Glazes and Tonalist Technique," in Jack Becker, *Henry Ward Ranger and the Humanized Landscape* (Old Lyme, Connecticut: Florence Griswold Museum, 1999), pp. 35–43

Mayer, Lance and Gay Myers, "American Impressionism, Matteness, and Varnishing." *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2004), pp. 237–254

Richardson, John, "Crimes Against the Cubists." *New York Review of Books*, vol. 30 (June 16, 1983), pp. 32–34

Swicklik, Michael, "French Painting and the Use of Varnish, 1750–1900," in *Conservation Research: Studies in the History of Art* 41, Monograph Series II (Hanover, New Hampshire and London: National Gallery of Art, 1993)

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