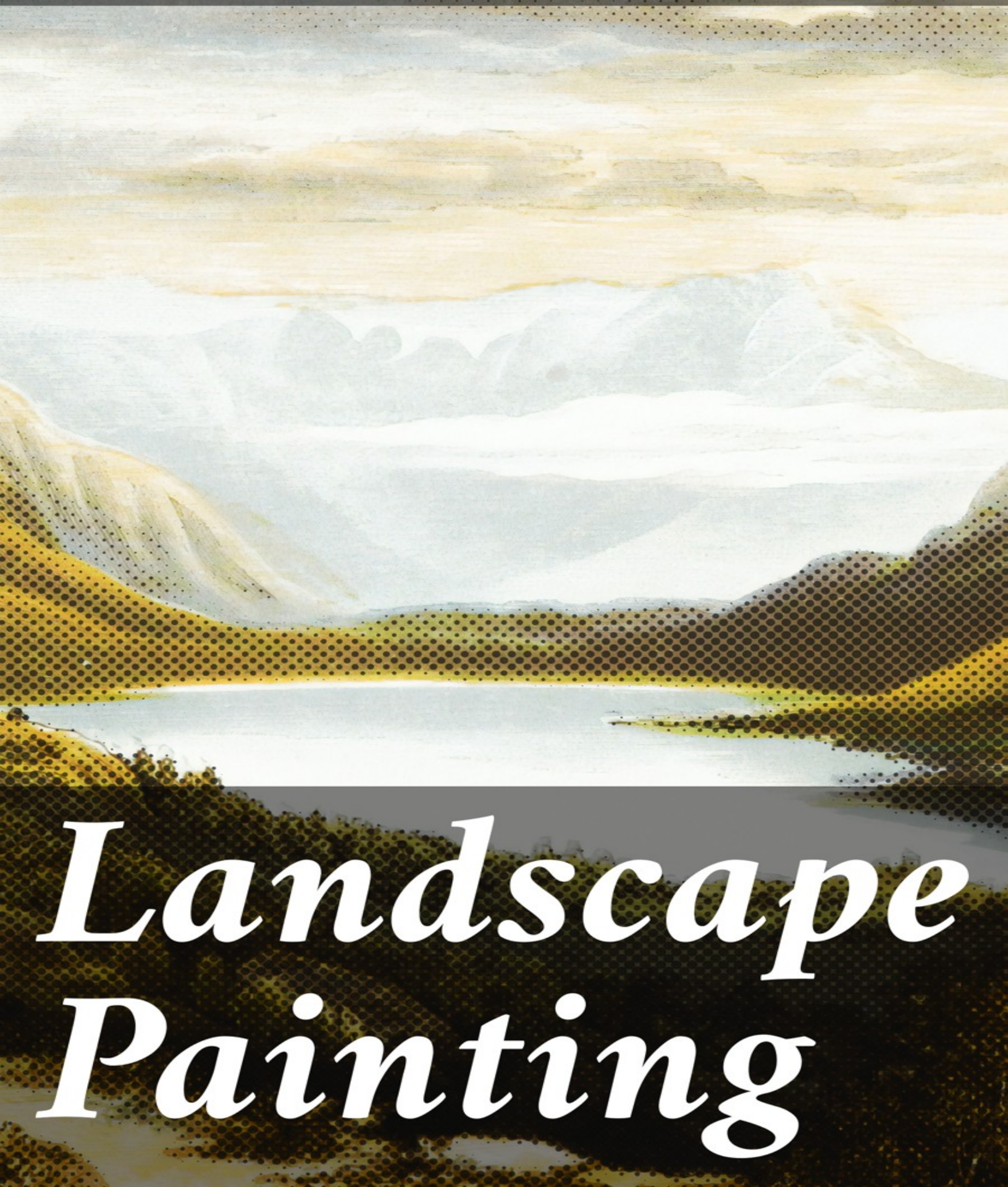
Lovell Birge Harrison



Landscape Painting

Lovell Birge Harrison

Landscape Painting

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066086459

Table of Contents

FOREWORD

Table of Contents

THIS little book represents the fulfilment of a promise to put into permanent form certain impromptu talks on landscape painting given before the Art Students' League of New York at its summer school at Woodstock, N. Y. No effort has been made to elaborate the themes treated, the writer feeling that what might be gained in literary form might very well be lost in spontaneity and conciseness of statement. It is hardly necessary to say that these little talks make no claim to infallibility of judgment. They simply represent the present beliefs and convictions of a painter who is himself still a student; but they are sincere, at least, and "straight from the shoulder."

It is to be regretted that the art of color printing has not yet reached a stage of development where it can be trusted with the reproduction of a masterpiece of landscape, which often depends for its beauty on color-tones and color-transitions of extreme delicacy. In the present volume it has been judged best to confine the reproductions to simple half-tones in black and white—to give no color rather than color which is false and misleading; and the illustrations here included are therefore presented, not as adequate representations of the works themselves, but as hints and suggestions only of the qualities which give to those works their distinction and their beauty.

Thanks are due to the editors of *Scribner's Magazine, The North American Review, The International Studio,* and *Palatte and Brush* for permission to reprint here certain of

the chapters which have already appeared in the publications mentioned.

B. H.

WOODSTOCK, N. Y., 1909.

Landscape Art in General

Table of Contents

LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Table of Contents

I

LANDSCAPE ART IN GENERAL

For some occult reason in which the two factors of race and psychology are intimately blended, landscape art in its best expression is and ever has been confined within the narrow geographical limits of Northern and Western Europe. Oriental art—the art of Persia, Japan, and India—has always been more or less abstract and symbolical; and, as the art of a people invariably reflects the character of the race which gave it birth, we may deduce with certainty the character of the Oriental from the character of his art. By reversing the same reasoning we reach the conclusion that the simple existence of our Aryan ancestors (lived close to nature in the constant companionship of elemental things) has found expression in the landscape art of their remote descendants. The artistic temperament is no growth of a day. It has its roots in the far-away beginnings of a people, and we make no unwarranted presumption in asserting that the landscape or marine painter of to-day is at last giving expression to the groping instincts and ideals of his cave-dwelling forbears. The blinding storms with which they

battled, the mountains they scaled in the pursuit of game, the waves they rode in their primitive canoes, the hard winters that froze their blood, and the soft spring suns that warmed them, have all been woven into the fabric of the race. In this way only can we explain the fact that the peoples of Northern Europe have alone been able to comprehend and place upon canvas the ever-varying *moods* of nature—savage, cruel, and relentless at times, and at times exquisitely gentle, brooding, and poetic.

What is more difficult to explain, however, is the fact that this ability should only have developed and ripened within the last hundred years. Of course, viewed in the larger sense, European pictorial art, as a whole, is a comparatively modern thing—a mere matter of four or five centuries. But in its earliest development it was in no sense an expression of out-of-door life or out-of-door feeling.

This is doubtless in part explained by the fact that the earliest European art was an Oriental derivative(see the Byzantine school), and that it remained throughout the whole of the Italian Renaissance in the service of the Oriental religion which we had imported from Palestine. Moreover, the Italians were themselves more or less Oriental in character, with the subtle southern temperament and the southern mental bias. There was little of the cave-dweller or the viking in their ancestry.

However this may be, it is quite certain that the old masters knew little about landscape—and cared less. Their concern was with humanity; its joys and its sorrows; its loves and its passionate hatreds; its wars; its pageants; its faiths and its superstitions. Landscape to them was never

more than a stage setting, a background against which the human actors played their parts. Viewed simply in this light, it was not only adequate, but frequently artistic and admirably beautiful. Nevertheless, it was not landscape at all in the modern sense of the word—landscape as we know it. It was conventional in form, false in color, and devoid of atmosphere and luminosity.

Not until the early years of the nineteenth century, and then in far-away England, did the first true school of landscape make its appearance. A small group of painters, the best known of whom perhaps were Constable, Crome, and Bonington, went out into the fields, and brought back pictures which were the first true impressions of out-door nature ever placed upon canvas. Their achievement was unique. Indeed, it was one of the most astounding intellectual feats of all time, and it has never received a fraction of the praise which is its just due. Art, be it remembered, is a thing of infinitely slow growth, each school building upon the foundations prepared by its forerunners, each generation adding its mite to the general store of knowledge and experience.

The English portrait men of the same period, for instance, although fine painters, simply followed in the tracks of the old masters. There is nothing especially original in the canvases of Reynolds, Gainsborough, or Romney. But this little band of landscapists, with no artistic parents, with no predecessors to point out the way, suddenly evolved a totally new art out of thin air. Their discoveries, it is true, were confined to the realm of color, but their achievements in that domain were sufficiently

remarkable to give England a place which she could never otherwise have had among the art-producing nations of the world. They were the first to see and to record the pearly tones of out-door nature, and their technical bequest to posterity was an extended gamut of grays and mauves and lilacs which remain upon the artist's palette to the present day.

A scant half-dozen of their pictures drifted over to France, and there became the inspiration of a new art movement, which finally resulted in the great school of Barbizon. Millet and Troyon, Corot and Rousseau incontestably produced greater work than Crome and Constable, but their pictures were all painted on the lines marked out by the Englishmen. Indeed, it is questionable if we should have ever had a Barbizon school had it not been for the iconoclasts across the Channel.

While the great Barbizon school of painters was still in its prime, there appeared upon the artistic horizon another band of innovators who have since become known as the French Impressionists or Luminarists. They were in reality, as their name implies, painters of light, and their technique was founded upon the scientific principle that light is essentially prismatic. White, being made up of the three primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—should so be painted, they declared, the three pure pigments lying side by side upon the canvas—and the same with red, with yellow, and with blue; there could be no blue so powerful that it would not be qualified with touches of red and yellow, no yellow so brilliant that the red and the blue were not felt in its composition, no red so intense that the blue and the yellow

did not play across it. The work of these men really seems to vibrate with light, and the word "vibration," first employed by them, has now been permanently added to the artists' vocabulary. Under the leadership of Pissaro, Sisley, and Monet they delivered a message which future artists can never afford to ignore.

But, while their discovery is sound in principle, no entirely satisfactory technical method of applying it to the painting of pictures has yet been discovered. It is certain that the dots and dashes and cross-hatched strokes of pure color generally used by the Luminarists do not render the effect of nature as seen by the ordinary cultivated eye. The veteran Monet himself has lived long enough to recognize this, and in his more recent work he has abandoned his early militant method, while retaining the general principle of broken color.

This is one of the unsolved problems of art that we moderns have to work out. Another is the question of how

best to convey the impression of motion upon the rigidly quiescent surface of a canvas. This has never been accomplished, but to assert that it is impossible would be a hazardous statement. Still another problem derives from the limitations of the human eye. A good photographic lens will see every leaf upon a tree or every individual in a crowd of ten thousand people. The human eye can see at best but a dozen or two of leaves or people, the remainder producing the effect of a more or less indefinite blur. How is this blur to be rendered with just sufficient definition to produce the desired effect upon the spectator? It is quite certain that other problems will arise, problems as unsuspected to-day as was the prismatic theory of light a hundred years ago. It

is impossible of course to particularize. One small discovery frequently leads to

From a photograph by Braun, Clement & Co.

J. F. Millet—"The Shepherdess"

a much greater one, and the only thing we can predict with certainty is that the unexpected will occur. But we do at least know that the door is ajar, that the glorious sunlight is out there, just beyond, and that nothing can keep us longer cooped up in-doors.

Color

Table of Contents

II

COLOR

We are all born color-blind. The most perfect eyes in the world cannot see one-quarter of the colors which are known to exist in nature. Those of us who are fortunate, it is true, are able to differentiate with reasonable exactness the three primary colors which go to make up our limited human color-scale—but what about the tones which certainly exist above the ultra-violet band and below the infra-red?

For convenience, the full color-scale of nature may be divided into four octaves, of which less than one-quarter is taken up by the prismatic scale of the rainbow, which includes all the colors visible to the human eye. Immediately below the line of infra-red, at the point where the human vision ceases to record color-impressions, there begins a series of vibrations which we can only feel as warmth; and still lower down the scale is another series which the human ear records in the form of sound. Yet we know of a certainty that these vibrations are also potential color-waves, that each note of music carries its own special color-note, whose quality and beauty, alas! may never be known to man, owing to the limited range of his vision.

However, no one can with certainty affirm that this may not be one of the joys that await future generations. Nothing is beyond the range of possibility. Already, by means of the fluoroscope, we are able to extend our vision somewhat,

and peer over a little into the realm of the ultra-violet. And, if it is held that a wise providence, at the beginnings of things, limited our sensory nerves to the record of such impressions as were essential to the physical existence of the primal creature, thereby confining our later æsthetic activities to the exploitation of a given range of sensations, a certain regret is nevertheless permissible when one thinks of the bewildering color-feast that might await us in a Wagner overture or a Beethoven sonata. What a fascinating problem it would be, for instance, to work out the color probabilities of some great masterpiece of music, and fling them glowing upon the translucent page of a vast cathedral window. If the time ever comes when man is able, by means of some miraculous transformer, to gaze upon music-color, it is safe to venture the prediction that it will be found to be harmonious and beautiful in proportion to the harmony and beauty of the music upon which it is based.

This is guesswork, of course, but it rests upon a strong basis of probability. Our actual knowledge of the subject is at present limited to mathematics. The velocity of the impulses has been noted and the number of the vibrations has been counted. We know those of sound to be comparatively slow, there being but 4,000 vibrations to the inch in the highest treble note of the piano. Above this on the ascending scale comes a long series of vibrations of which we know little or nothing; and it is not until we reach 36,000 vibrations to the inch that we come again within the range of human sensory consciousness. This number represents the rate of vibrations in the red note of our prismatic scale. The rate of vibration increases throughout

the scale until with the ultra-violet it reaches 61,000 to the inch. Here we step out once more into the unknown.

Yet color has no actual existence. It is only by courtesy that we can use the word. Nature is a monochrome save when there are living eyes to see it. The trees are not really green, nor are the flowers red and yellow and blue. Each object simply reflects rays of light which vibrate at a given rate of speed; and these rays, smiting upon the sensitive retina of the eye, produce the impressions which we know as color. Were it not for the retina there would be no color; and when the sensory nerves of the retina are partially paralyzed or deficient, as in the case of the color-blind, nature appears to the eye in her true monochromatic garb.

The human eye resembles closely the photographic camera, both in structure and in its manner of functioning. At the front in both is placed the lens, with its diaphragm to control the quantity of light which enters the recording chamber, this function being performed in the human eye by the elastic iris, which contracts and expands automatically as the light waxes or wanes. At the back of the camera is the sensitized plate, and at the back of the eye is the infinitely more sensitive retina, overlaid by the optic nerve, with its millions upon millions of minute tentacles, reaching out to seize upon every fleeting color and form that passes before the lens. These little transparent filaments (so infinitely minute that the point of the finest needle is like a fence-post in comparison) are divided into two distinct varieties, known respectively as rods and cones. The rods are straight and pointed like

needles, and the cones are somewhat blunt at the extremity.

We are told that the number of these nerve filaments reaches the astonishing total of about 137,000,000, of which only 7,000,000 are cones; but it is with this comparatively insignificant number of 7,000,000 cones that we artists have particularly to do. It is the function of the cones to record color, while the needles take care of the light.

If each of us had only received the 7,000,000 cones which are his just due, all would be well. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Nature abhors a duplicate, and no two human beings are similarly endowed in this respect. To the favored few she has given an unfair share of the precious cones, and others she has deprived of their birthright. The fortunate ones are the great colorists of the world, while those bereft are the color-blind.

Now we, as artists, could afford to ignore all this scientific side of the color question, were it not for the fact that it makes clear certain things which it is well for us to know. In the first place, it shows us the futility of any serious attempt to cultivate the sense of color. We are born with a certain given number of color-cones, and with just that allotment we must be content to go through life, for there is no known way of increasing their number, or of augmenting their efficiency. This efficiency may be decreased, however, either by a sudden shock, by paralysis, or by abuse of tobacco. In partial compensation for the depression is born of the knowledge of this ruthless law, is the further knowledge that the artistic personality of a painter must be