

Book review: Painting in Tempera, c.1900

Edited by Karoline Beltinger and Jilleen Nadolny

Submitted by bborghese on Fri, 24/02/2017 - 16:31

Reviewed by Joyce Townsend

Archetype ISBN 978-1-909-492-44-8 and the Swiss institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA) ISBN 978-3-908196-85-3 ISSN 1661-8815, 2016, 263 pages with colour illustrations.

The Tempera Group which was formed in 2010 and has produced this book, has about 15 members, active researchers who are investigating the significant number of artists who claimed, towards the end of the nineteenth century and the earlier part of the twentieth century, to be working in 'tempera' to overcome the known shortcomings of oil-based paint. These researchers are active in conservation science, materials history and technical art history, and include conservators and art historians. The artists were working mainly in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.

As a group, one is tempted to summarise these artists as experimental and even maverick individuals with only one common viewpoint: each took 'tempera' to mean whatever he wanted it to mean, with some of them in agreement only to the extent that tempera paints should be thinnable in water rather than organic solvents when applied, and should not have drying oil as the major ingredient. Some of them included wax-based materials that had been styled as 'encaustic paints' in the eighteenth century, under the umbrella of 'tempera': the historical study in this book begins here. Oddly to those more used to treating or studying early paintings, virtually none of these artists gave 'tempera' its traditional meaning of a paint medium made from egg and water, with the main variations being whether to include the white of the egg, or vinegar, and in what proportions, in addition to egg yolk.

The paintings that resulted have a range of surface appearances and conservation issues, unsurprisingly since this wider definition of tempera includes home-made paints including cheese- and milk-based concoctions, and adaptations from more traditional documentary sources, as well as commercial product lines of paint endorsed by or in several cases developed by artists. Some of the 'tempera' paintings of this period survive in excellent condition, with a slightly matt surface and a lack of cracks belying their age today of 80-150 years. The younger examples fall within the period where forgery with modern materials has more of a chance of going undetected, because there have been fewer publications on the materials and processes of earlier twentieth-century artists than on their predecessors. The good condition of some tempera paintings of this age may give them away, but the analysis and recognition of all variants of 'tempera', and even the interpretation of the analytical results, can be very challenging ? where an unusual or alarming response to cleaning methods appropriate to oil paints has not already alerted the conservator to an unusual material. Interpreting analysis is addressed too.

The artists discussed in this book include Franz von Lenbach and Franz von Stuck in nineteenth-century Germany, Arnold Böcklin and Cuno Amiet in Switzerland at the same period, and Wassily Kandinsky and other members of Die Brücke early in the following century. Such studies are also relevant to German expressionists such as Emil Nolde who worked a few decades later in the twentieth century. Different papers provide new information on the little-known history of production and use of new paint formulations including those from Schoenfeld of Dusseldorf, Pereira paints, Keim paints, Syntonos paints, tempera grassa from Maimeri, and others. Research carried out at this period by Ernst Berger, Max Doerner and Alexander Eibner, all published in German and less familiar even now in consequence, is discussed, as is the long-running professional rivalry between some of these individuals, representing different schools in Germany for the training of artists.

The book itself is printed on quite a matte paper, which gives a good rendering of the non-glossy surface of many tempera paintings that are illustrated and discussed. It covers historical, documentary and technical studies, and the development of analytical methods for such complex paint mixtures. More remains to be done in this area, but as one of the first to be printed of several books in progress on the topic of 'tempera' at this period, it is a valuable resource.