



# Painting

Chapter 10



# History

- One of the major concerns of Western painting has been representing the appearance of things in the natural world
- Painting itself was not regarded as an important practice until the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. Around that time, a figure known as *la pittura*- “the picture”- appeared in Italian art as the personification of painting
- In the Middle Ages, painting was not included among the liberal arts (understood to involve inspiration and creative invention)- it was merely considered a mechanical skill involving the ability to copy
- In the Renaissance, imitation meant more than copying appearance- it was the representation of nature as seen by and through the artist’s imagination

# Early Painting Media

From prehistoric times to now, the painting process has remained essentially the same.

- Artists use pigments suspended in a medium or binder that holds the particles together (as in drawing).
- The binder both protects the pigment from changes and acts as an adhesive to anchor the pigment to the *support*- the surface on which the artist paints. Common supports include canvas, a wooden panel, paper, or a wall.
- Supports are often primed (prepared) with a ground- a paintlike material such as gesso. Gesso is made of glue and chalk. Grounds make the support surface smoother, provide a barrier from absorbent paint, and increase the brightness of color (when using a white ground, which is the most common).
- Paint also requires a *vehicle* or solvent, which thins the paint and enables it to flow. Water-based paints like acrylic or watercolor use water as a vehicle, and oil paints use turpentine as a vehicle.

# Painting Mediums

Each medium has unique characteristics and has flourished at particular historical moments.

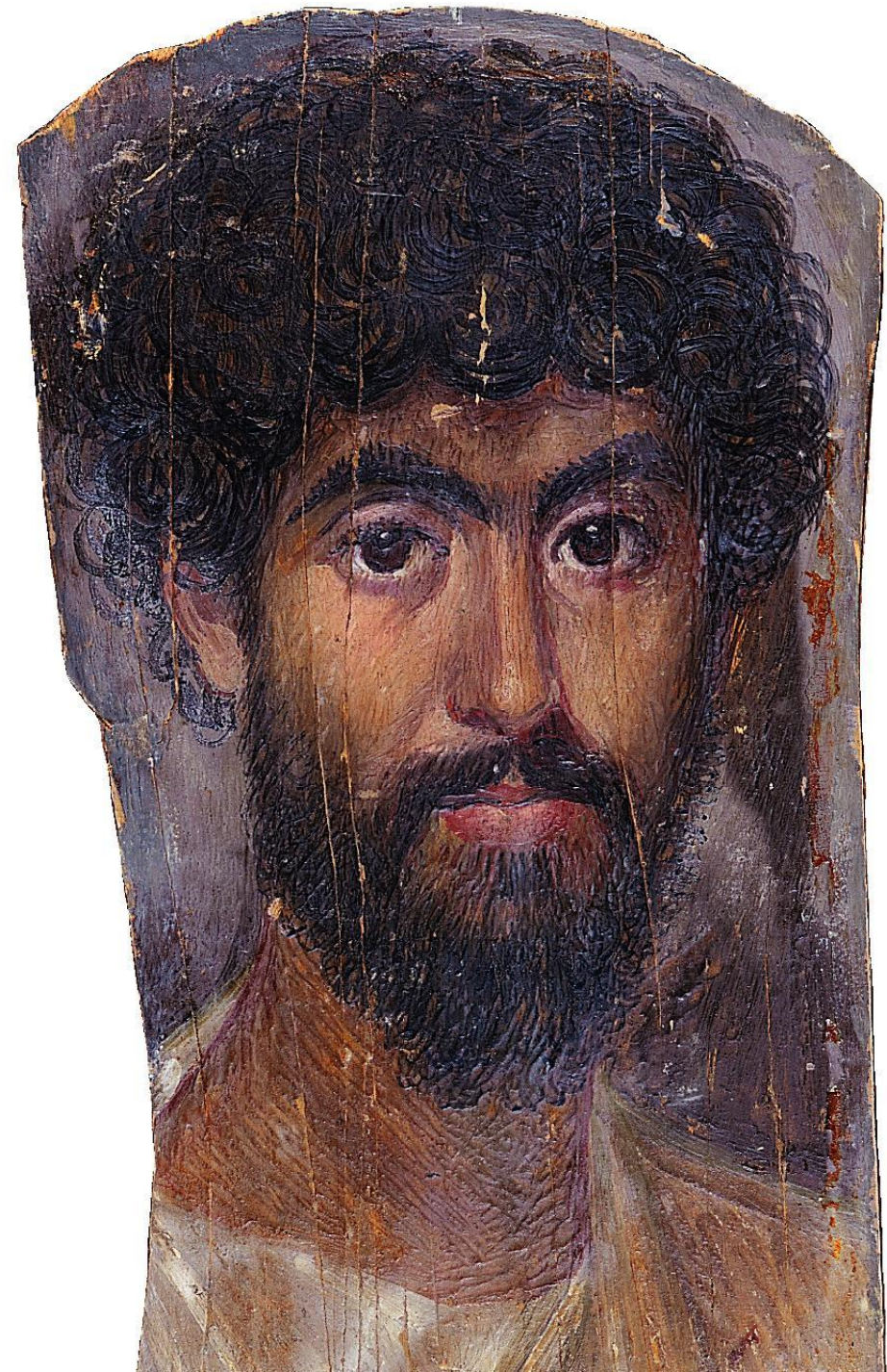
Medium	Binder	Properties/Characteristics	Associated Time Period
Encaustic	Wax	Luminous Dries almost instantly, so artists must work quickly	Classical Greece, ancient Egypt
Fresco	Limewater	Done on a wall	Renaissance, ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome
Tempera	Egg yolk	Colors cannot be easily blended, so paint is meticulously applied with a painted brush in lines	Renaissance
Oil	Linseed oil	Slow drying, easily blended	Early 15 <sup>th</sup> Century
Watercolor	Gum Arabic	Translucent, expressive	Ancient Egypt, early 20 <sup>th</sup> Century
Gouache	Gum Arabic	Opaque; essentially watercolor with chalk added, difficult to blend	Early 20 <sup>th</sup> Century
Synthetic Media (acrylic)	plastic	Fast drying, chemically created pigments, versatile	Became available in the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century

# Encaustic

Most of the surviving encaustic paintings from the ancient world come from Faiyum in Egypt, 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. These funeral portraits were attached to the mummy cases of the deceased.

Note that the neck and shoulders are simplified, while the face is painted naturalistically.

Mummy Portrait of a Man, Faiyum, Egypt, 160-70 CE, encaustic on wood, 14" by 18"



# Fresco

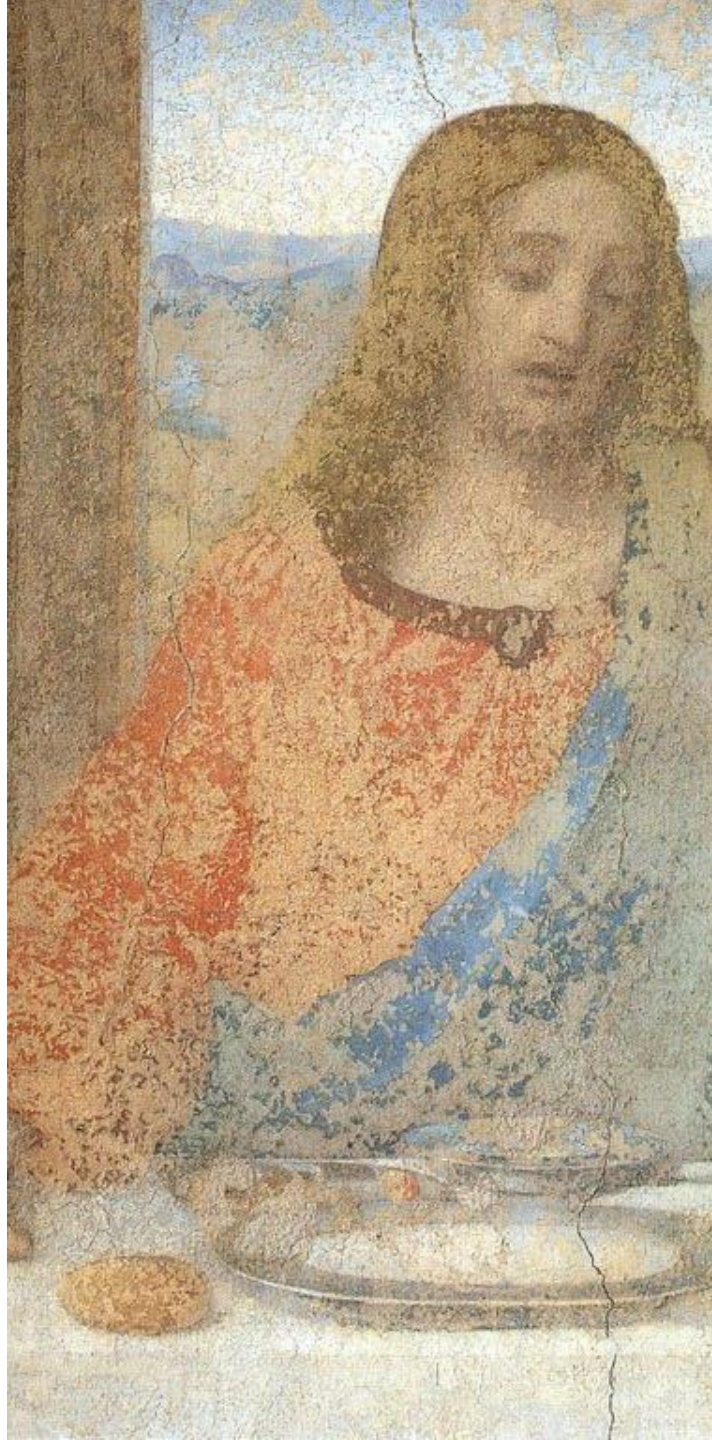
- **Buon Fresco** (“good” or “true” fresco, Italian): the paint is applied to a wet wall, and must be done quickly. The wet plaster absorbs the wet pigment, and the painting literally becomes part of the wall, which is extremely durable.
- **Fresco Secco** (“dry fresco”, Italian): the paint is applied to a dry wall. The pigment is combined with other binders like egg yolk, wax, or oil, and applied separately. This allows the artist to be more meticulous and detailed in the painting process, but may flake off of the wall over time.



# Leonardo da Vinci

## *The Last Supper*

- This detail image shows the before and after images of the restoration of the famous fresco. Restoration began in 1979 and was completed in 1999.
- Over time, moisture had crept between the wall and the paint, causing the image to flake off almost entirely.
- As technology advances, art conservators are able to restore artwork to what is believed to be its original image more successfully.





In dry environments, like the Buddhist caves at Ajanta, India, *fresco secco* has remained durable. The figure to the right is a bodhisattva, an enlightened being who postpones joining the Buddha in nirvana in order to help others achieve enlightenment.

Nirvana is not exactly heaven, but the state of being freed from suffering and the cycle of rebirth.

*Bodhisattva, detail of a fresco wall painting in Cave I, Ajanta, Maharashtra, India, ca. 475 CE*





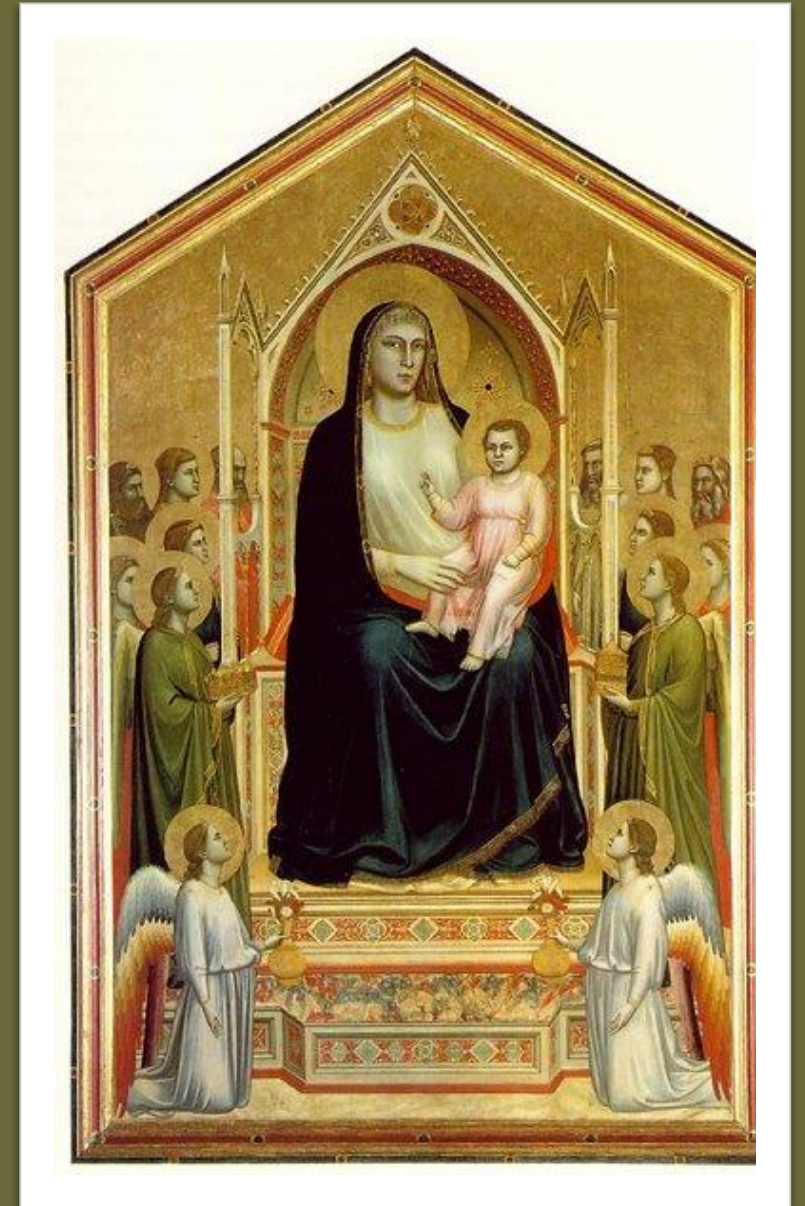
# Tempera

This tempera painting marks an advance in creating realistic work in the early Renaissance. Painters were becoming more interested in suggesting more than they portrayed.

The *denotation*, or literal meaning, of this painting is clear: Madonna and Child surrounded by angels.

The *connotation*, or feeling invoked, was the love between mother and child, and the love of God for humanity, to the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian audience.

*Giotto, Madonna and Child Enthroned, ca. 1310, tempera on panel, 10 ft. 8 in. by 6 ft. 8 ¼ in.*





Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, ca. 1482, tempera on a gesso ground on poplar panel, 6 ft. 8 in. by 10 ft. 3 ¼ in.

The figures and trees were painted on an undercoat- white for the figures, black for the trees. The transparency of the drapery was achieved by layering thin yellow washes over the undercoat. As many as 30 coats of color were required to paint each figure.

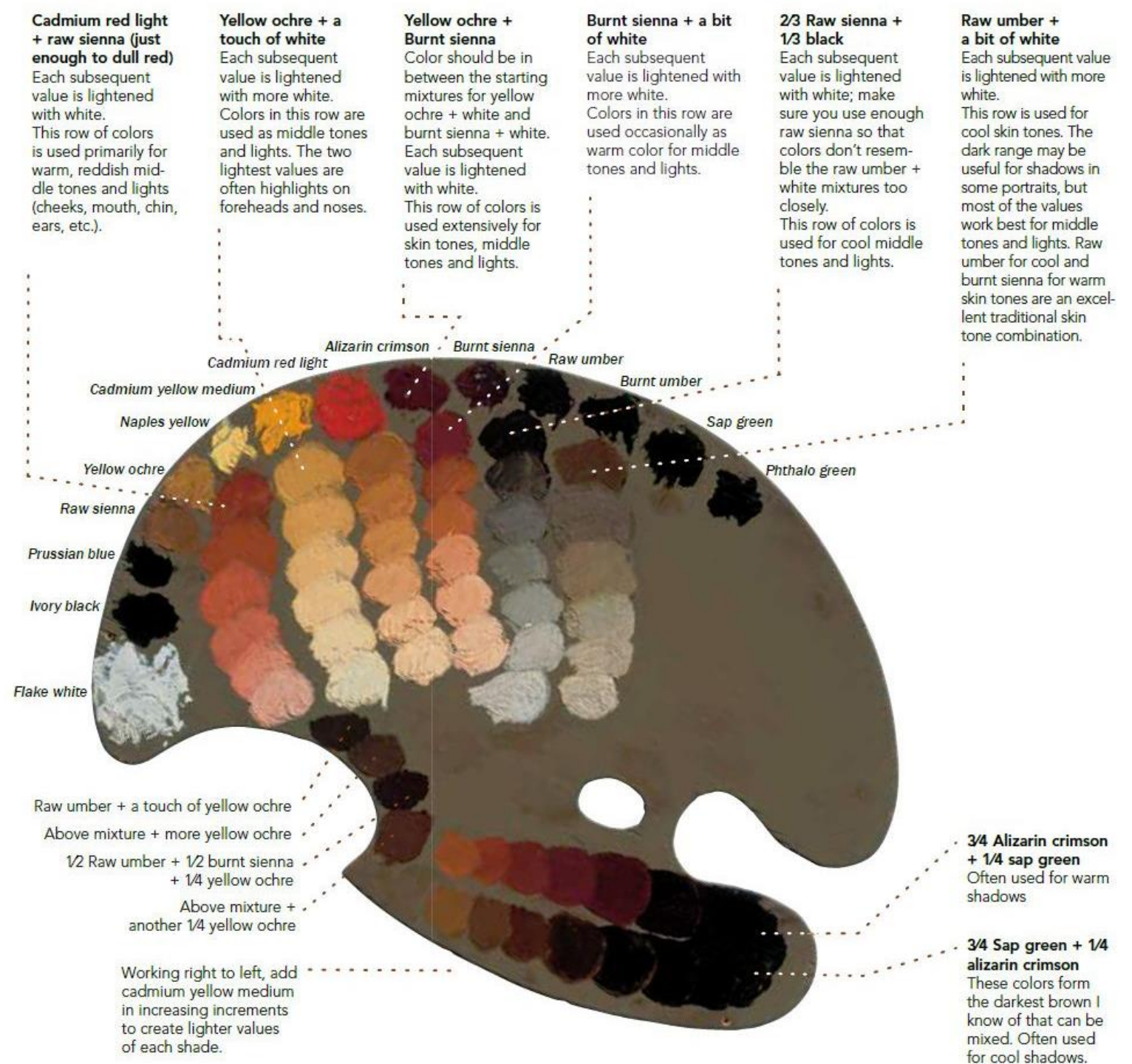
*Primavera*, which means “Spring”, was probably created for the marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, a member of the powerful Medici family, who employed Botticelli. The figures are from classical Roman literature, including the goddess Venus, god Mercury, and the Three Graces. Taking the scene as a whole, it is probably best understood in light of an allegorical meaning. The allusions to Spring and the month of May, the scene of a suitor’s pursuit, the Three Graces – all of these point to the idea of a springtime marriage. The setting in an orange grove is also noteworthy, since the Medici had adopted the orange tree as its family symbol.



# Oil

Painters in northern Europe realized that effects similar to Botticelli's tempera techniques could be achieved more quickly in oil paint. It can be blended on the surface to create a continuous scale of tones and hues that weren't possible before its invention. This gives artists the most realistic three dimensional effects. Since it is so slow to dry, the image can be reworked almost endlessly.

The image to the right shows an artist's palette, illustrating a wide range of tones and hues.





## Grisaille

Translating to “gray scale”, this technique relies on the translucency of oil. Thin films of transparent color, called *glazes*, are layered over an opaque black and white underpainting. Light penetrates the glaze, bounces off the underpainting, and is reflected back up through the glaze. The result is luminous, life-like tones.

A step-by-step copy of a master painting illustrates the grisaille process, though there are many more steps in between. The more layers of glaze, the more life-like the result. The paint must dry between layers, making it an extremely slow process.



Jan de Heem, *Still Life with Lobster*,  
late 1640s, oil on canvas, 25 1/8" by  
33 1/4"

This is an example of a **vanitas** painting (translating from Latin to vanity.) This tradition of still life painting was designed to remind us of the vanity, or frivolous quality, or human existence.

The extravagant meal depicted represents the material world. Other objects in the painting symbolize time, and the spiritual world- the half peeled lemon, the oyster (which spoils quickly), and the timepiece to the left of the oyster.



# Jenny Saville

The qualities of oil paint give it **expressive potential** beyond realistic representation.

Jenny Saville is a contemporary British painter associated with the Young British Artists. She depicts female figures in large scale oil paintings. She relates the material of oil paint to the body.



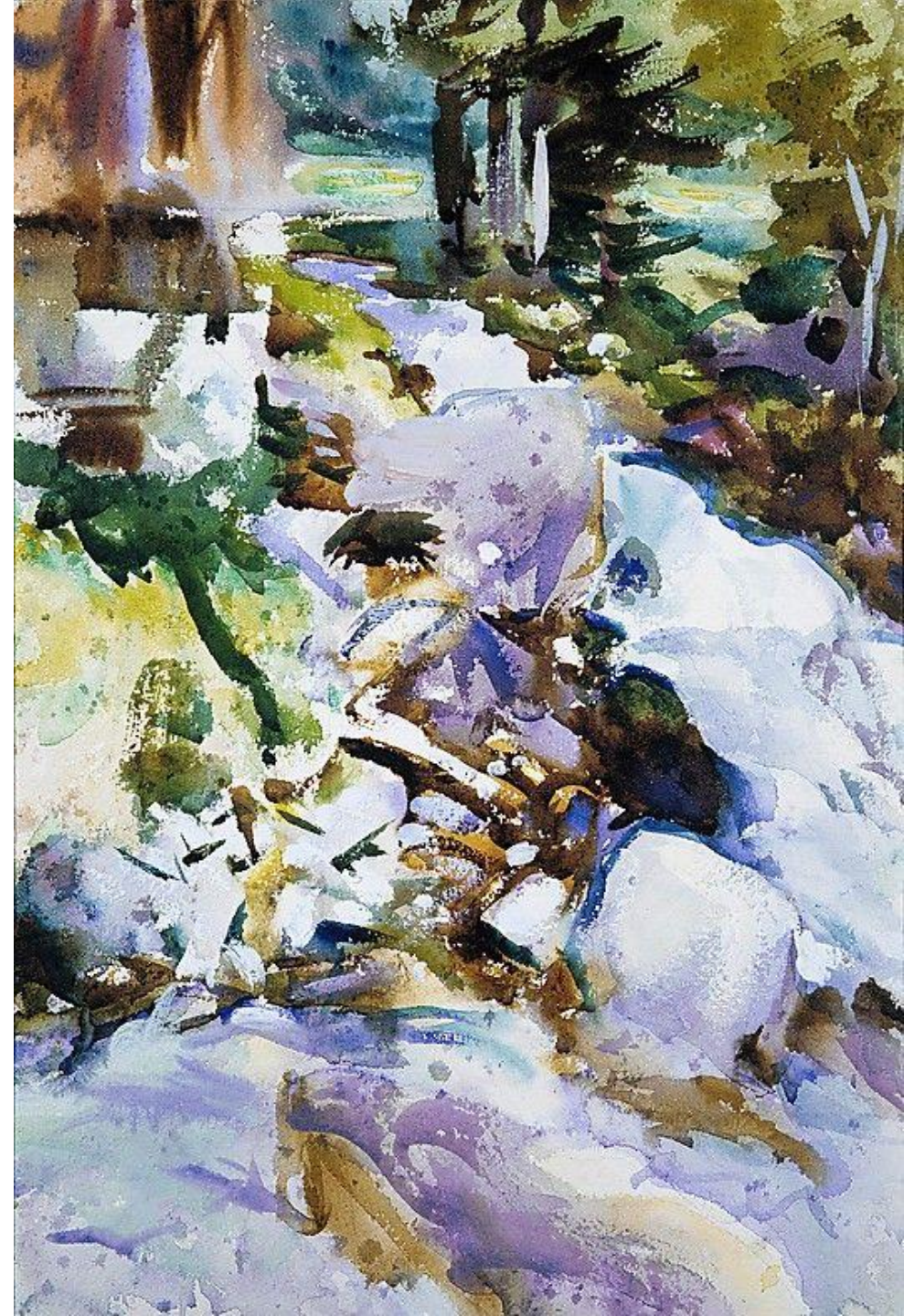


# Watercolor and Gouache

Watercolor is potentially the most expressive of the painting media. Historically, it's been used often as a sketching tool. Depending on the absorbency of the paper and the amount of watercolor on the brush, the material spreads along the fibers of the paper when it is applied. Thin solutions of paint and water are soft and transparent, and dense paint can become almost opaque. Gouache is an opaque watercolor. Gouache (pronounced "gwash") and watercolor are often combined to play with these qualities, as in the painting on the next slide.

John Singer Sargent, Rushing Brook, 1904-11, watercolor, gouache, and graphite underdrawing, 18 3/8" by 12 3/8"

Sargent used flat, more intense dabs of gouache to contrast the transparent values of watercolor. This can be seen between the transparent blues of the water and the gray and white foam on top.





Winslow Homer,  
*A Wall, Nassau*, 1898, 14  
 $\frac{3}{4}$ " by 21  $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Note that the white  
areas of the painting are  
the bare paper. The  
texture of the paper can  
be seen through the thin  
paint.

The wall in this painting  
represents intrusion, and  
a divide between the  
local black population in  
the Bahamas and  
tourism.



# Synthetic Media (Acrylic)

Oil paint is sometimes frustrating for artists, because it is so slow drying, potentially toxic, and requires careful preparation. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, chemically created pigments suspended in plastic or resin binders were created, and adopted by artists seeking a more direct media with the “look” of oil paint.

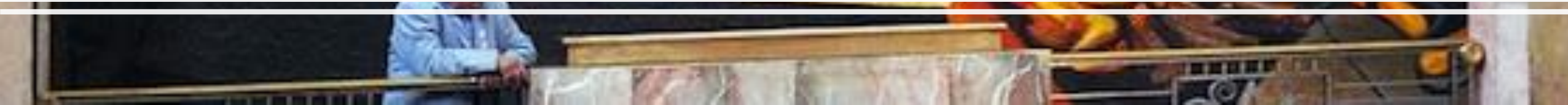
The first artists to experiment with synthetic media were a group of Mexican painters who wanted to create large-scale revolutionary mural art. They first attempted the work in fresco and oil, but the humidity of Mexico ruined their efforts. A workshop was organized in New York, closer to the chemical industry, to develop new paints.





*David Alfaro Siqueiros, Torment and Apotheosis of Cuauhtémoc (detail), 1950-51*

Painters David Alfaro, Siqueiros, Diego Rivera, and José Clemente Orozco were known as *Los Tres Grandes*. They painted outdoors so that their celebrations of the struggles of the working class could easily be seen.





Helen Frankenthaler,  
*The Bay*, 1963, acrylic  
on canvas, 6 ft. 8  $\frac{3}{4}$ " by  
6 ft. 9  $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Frankenthaler was a highly innovative painter and a major contributor to the history of postwar American painting. In the early 1950s, Frankenthaler began to stain raw, unprimed canvas with thinned oil paints. The oil paint left a messy, brownish "halo" around each stain. Synthetic paint removed the issues of the halos, and enabled the paint and canvas to become one, like in this painting from 1963.





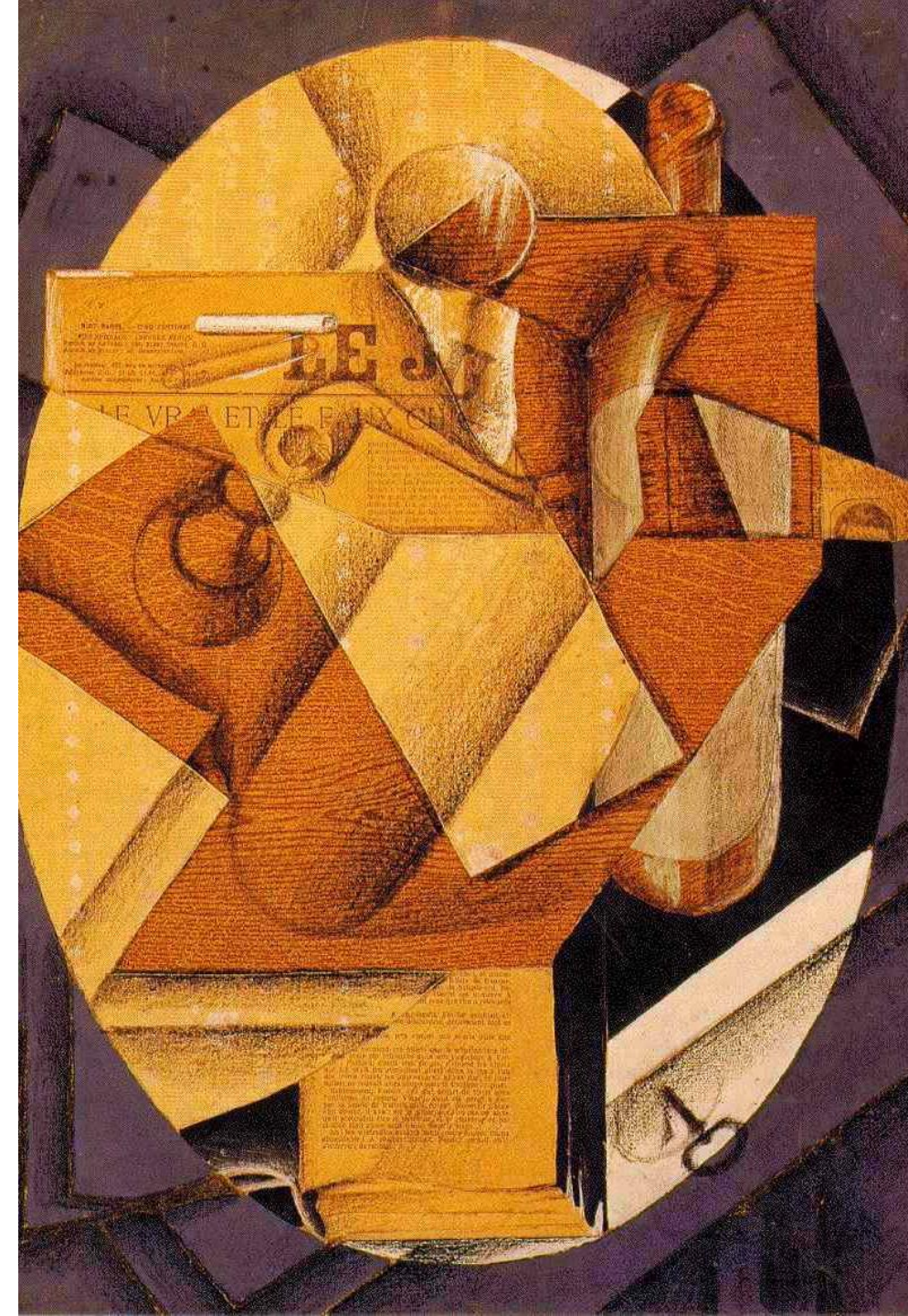
# The Expansion of Painting

Painting combined itself with other media, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The primary reason that artists began to work in *mixed media* was to reject the history of painting as a medium.

- Collage and Photomontage: *Collage* is the process of gluing fragments of relatively flat material, like printed paper or fabric, together. Collage allowed artists to challenge the 2-dimensional space of the canvas. *Photomontage* is a collage made entirely of photographs.
- Painting Beyond the Frame: The space of art was once defined by the picture frame. Very old paintings in museums are often framed in elaborate gold frames. Most contemporary art is shown without a frame. Paintings are no longer thought of as a window, and the “space of art” has extended into 3-dimensional space.

Juan Gris, *The Table*, 1914. colored papers, printed matter, and charcoal on paper mounted on canvas, 23 ½" by 17 ½"

This collage raises the question of what is “real” and what is “false” by bringing real-world elements into the space of the painting. It combines woodgrain-printed wall paper and hand-drawn woodgrain on paper, as well as a real newspaper. The newspaper reads “*Le Vrai et le Faux*” (The True and the False”).







Martha Rosler, *Gladiators*, from  
the series *House Beautiful:  
Bringing the War Home*, 2004

This photomontage combines news photographs of the war with advertisements from architecture, lifestyle, and design magazines. In the Vietnam era, war was first seen on television in living rooms. Her images suggest a comfort level with violence. She seems to ask, at what cost comes a “house beautiful”?

Robert Rauschenberg,  
*Monogram*, 1955-59.

Freestanding combine of oil,  
fabric, wood on canvas and  
wood, rubber heel, tennis  
ball, metal plaque, hardware,  
stuffed Angora goat, rubber  
tire, mounted on four wheels,  
42" by 5 ft 3 ¼" by 5 ft 4 ½"

This **combine-painting**, or high relief  
collage, literally moves off the wall.  
Rauschenberg worked on this  
painting for 5 years, with the desire  
to "make the animal look as if it  
belonged in a painting". By putting it  
on the floor, he called it a "pasture"  
for the goat.

