Indirect Painting Technique

What We Can Learn From Jan Van Eyck

by Stephen Knudsen

As Modernism has shown us, there is often something immediate and visceral about a good painting made in just a layer or two. Indirect painting, on the other hand, with its complex under painting and glaze layers does not have this elegant economy. However, for what indirect technique lacks in urgency, it makes up for in a subsurface complexity that direct painting simply cannot duplicate.

Jan van Eyck in the Modern Age

Double Nude (see **Figure 1**), artist William Beckman's complex yet frank presentation of a nude couple, challenges us to look at portraiture in a new way. Forget Adam and Eve. The vitality of this pair is very much of our time. Here, we have the artist and his wife, Diana, when they were young — their physiques hardened from running 70 miles per week while training for marathons. There is something quite contemporary about the empty room, the bare wall and the couple stripped down to their flesh that complements their confident and strong stance. The work chronicles a time in the artist's developing career when he had moved to New York to put his talent and his willpower on a larger stage.

That willpower extends to the painting's formation. Beckman spent an entire year completing *Double Nude* (1977-1978), painting 50 hours a week. To create the intense detail, Beckman superimposed flesh areas with 30 layers and used a razor and sandpaper to scrape and smooth away any build-up of excess dried oil so that each new layer exposed the previous one. The effect is stunning. Standing in front of *Double Nude*, I could swear I was looking at living epithelial cells instead of paint. For more information regarding Beckman's technique, consult John Arthur's book *Realists at Work*.

While *Double Nude* explores modern themes, Beckman created the painting employing techniques from the past. Beckman's way of working has innovative rhythms that he invented himself, but there is a debt also to the original color theory of the early virtuoso of indirect oil technique, Jan van Eyck. Although the accoutrements that we love to analyze in *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* (see **Figure 2**) are missing from Beckman's portrait, we notice immediately the familial bond between the couples. Likewise, Jan van Eyck and Beckman's works may be 544 years apart, but we can see similarities in their method.

To labor so intensely to capture the essence of humanity is certainly more in line with the 15th century than our own

Figure 1: *Double Nude, Diana and William Beckman,* 1977-1978, by William Beckman. Oil on panel, 64" x 59". Today, the Forum Gallery in New YorK re p resents Beckman.

era. And most of us will not choose this path. Nevertheless, the insights we can gain from the work of Jan van Eyck apply to many forms of painting. Even if you do not feel the need to adopt his rather extreme methods, there is still a place for the color theory that one can glean from a closer look at this artist.

Jan van Eyck was arguably the most notable painter of the Northern Renaissance. His paintings were considered a mimetic miracle in their time, and they continue to astonish many viewers today. He is considered to be one of the greats for good reason. He solved some of the most difficult color problems that nature can dish out.

Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride is a masterpiece of technical dexterity. It is a painting that convincingly depicts the interior space in two perspectives: as the viewer looks into the room at the couple and the room reflected back in miniature by the mirror in the background. Complex and innovative glazing renders clothing, drapery, metal and stained-glass. The painting is a marvelous depiction of human flesh with a form of subsurface light scattering and color nuance that almost makes the couple breathe. This miraculous level of detail (for the time) does not simply record the relationship of the Arnolfini couple. It sanctifies it. In the following section, we will look at how the layering techniques of Jan van Eyck might be emulated with materials available to artists today.

Image courtesy of National Gallery, London, England.

Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride, by Jan van Eyck. Oil on wood, 32" x 23 1/2".

Underpainting is Key

Jan van Eyck's indirect painting methods produced a highly refined underpainting that was often drastically different from the observed final color. Subsequent layers were not expected to cover up roughness or mistakes so the underpainting had to be flawless. Glazing colorized and added missing details and modulations at the micro level. Sequences of semi-translucent or translucent glazes colorized and modulated the underpainting in a meticulous negotiation toward the observed or desired final color.

It is vital in the indirect approach to have a certain amount of leeway in value when glazing. Starting with a light underpainting is one way to do this. Jan van Eyck worked strictly in a light to dark progression. Painters during the High Renaissance, like Titian and Leonardo da Vinci, who painted a dark underpainting, would then *scumble* (partial covering of lighter paint applied to a dried layer) a second underpainting layer called the *dead color*. In either case, the underpainting that directly precedes glazing is lighter than the final intended result. This creates some room for maneuvering when glazing, which is necessary because the painting will get darker every time a glaze is put down.

Figure 3A shows an underpainting completed using the indirect mode. It is a replica using Jan Van Eyck protocols but painted with modern pigments that will not expose one to lead and arsenic. Note that an unglazed square of flesh is shown exposing the underpainting. This shows the first layer of flesh as opaque or semi-opaque, extremely light and well refined. For this flesh underpainting, titanium white and a touch of Indian yellow is mixed with two organic complements (phthalo green and quinacridone rose) to make multiple values of gray. The lighter tints get a bit more yellow and the very lightest tint is more of a bone white than a gray. Notice the unglazed pearls as well. All applied values are significantly lighter than what the values will be when the painting is finished.

The only medium used in the replica is linseed oil. (This departs slightly from the old protocol as Jan Van Eyck sometimes added egg yolk to the oil in early painting stages.) For this flesh stage only a slight touch of oil is added to the mixture. Just enough is used to make the mixture feel like butter at room temperature. The paint should have body and should not run if the palette was tipped. It should be so opaque that the palette does not show through the paint. The values are applied as small slabs of paint with very small synthetic sable brushes (rounds, filberts, and flats). The gradients and modulations are then created with almost phantom strokes (sweeping and stippling) where the brush barely touches the surface.

Glazing the Flesh

Once the entire underpainting is dry, flesh glazes are applied. In **Figure 3A** the glazing for flesh can be seen in its first two layers in most of the flesh. In **Figure 3B** most of the replica is finished, with up to four glaze layers in flesh and pearls. Glazes were mixed in great variety using quinacridones, phthalos, ultramarine, alizarin crimson, dioxazine purple, Indian yellow and yellow azo condensation pigment. These pigments are

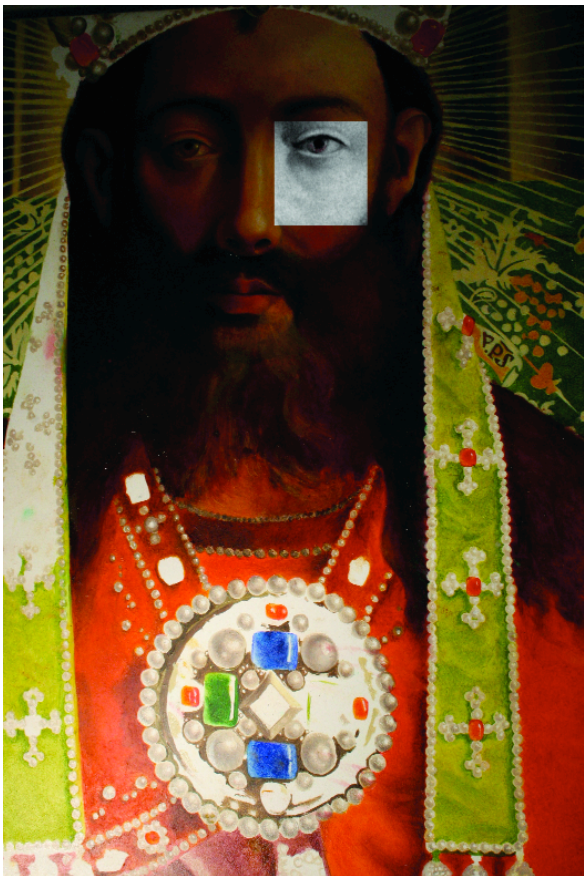

Figure 3A: (right) *Replicaof a detail of the Ghent Altar Piece by Jan van Eyck* by Allison Horner. The replica shows underpainting of the flesh in the small square. In the other flesh areas, the first two glaze layers have been applied. Pearls have an underpainting made with the same protocol used for flesh. Colored jewels and cloth are in the underpainting stage. The beard exhibits an underpainting (bright red) covered with a green glaze to create a richly complex neutral.

Figure 3B: Here the replica is complete except for many of the pearls, which are still in the underpainting stage. The original was painted by Jan van Eyck (and started by his brother, Hubert Van Eyck). Oil on oak panels,11' x15', St. Bavo Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium. 1425-1432.

dulled with small additions of complements and white. The pigments have only enough titanium white to chalk them up slightly and make them semi-translucent. Enough oil is added so that the palette shows through with only a light pressure of the finger through the paint. The paint should not run if tipped. See **Figure 4**.

Many different colored glazes are added simultaneously and then stippled and brushed into one another to create gradients and modulations. Brushes are constantly wiped off to keep everything from turning to mud. Once one glaze layer dries another is applied and a bit more oil and a bit less white is used in each subsequent glaze. Pearls receive a treatment similar to flesh though they are pushed into a slightly cooler final stage as seen in **Figure 3B.**

Below is a summary of paint manipulation in flesh glazing technique:

1. While the glazes are wet, a clean brush is used to stipple specs of one color into another.

2. During this process, the brush is constantly wiped off and a significant quantity of the applied glaze is removed from the painting.

3. Every time the tip of the brush touches the surface and is pulled straight back out, little holes of the underpainting began to appear.

4. It is important to note that this process will fail if the colors "over mix." In the microcosm of the painting, the viewer should be able to distinguish individual specs with distinctly different colors and tones.

Glazing the Rest

For large expanses of dark neutrals such as a dark background, a fur coat or a beard, a method is used that my students and I call complement glaze weaving. Red and green are the best to use for this since these colors are closer in value than any other complementary pair. In the replica, the first layer of the beard is done in a vivid quinacridone red barely neutralized with a sap green. Different values of the red are created by adding differing small amounts of dioxazine purple and Indian yellow. A very small amount of titanium white is added to make the mixture semi-translucent and give it a bit of body. These values are applied and brushed in strokes of varying pressure. More pressure allows the light ground to come through, thus allowing another means to modulate value.

In areas with little complexity, such as a dark field in a portrait, the white is left out of the mixture altogether, and the

Extra Reference

To better see the replica (**Figure 3B**) in context, look up Jan Van Eyck's *Ghent Altar Piece*, a 15-foot long polyptych. It is arguably the first painting in history to convincingly take viewers to the edge of the two sublime spaces. Atmospheric perspective extending to the horizon points us to an outward infinity, and the rendering of miniscule matter points us to an inward infinity. In the painting, Adam and Eve are the first life-size nudes in the Northern Renaissance and they are rendered almost palpable. Light is everywhere in the work, transcending into the many layers of flesh. Light also penetrates water in the fountain creating complex refraction patterns never before seen in painting. Light illuminates the water that runs from the fountain into a little stream on the ground that makes an implied exit through the bottom of the frame into the space of the actual cathedral (where the painting still resides). This illuminated water links the painting's Mass in heaven (as chronicled in Revelation 5) with the implied Mass on earth. This intense naturalism was intended to create strong feelings of spirituality and devotion in the worshiper. Thus we can see the rhyme and reason for Jan van Eyck's almost inconceivable (at the time) indirect painting techniques.

red is applied with a large brush and patted with a small piece of cotton cloth rolled into a ball. The contact area of this dabber is made flat with no folds. Translucent green is then superimposed over the dried red layer. The process can be repeated (with all white left out) until the area becomes dark enough. This results in dark neutrals with great inner clarity and complexity. The temptation to add black into the mix should be quelled. In avoiding black in the mix, Jan van Eyck avoided murky neutrals. Note that the iris of a brown eye should receive complement weaving as well. See the great complexity in the finished beard done with complement weaving in **Figure 3B**. With strands of hair on the periphery of the beard, weaving protocol is cheated slightly by mixing translucent neutrals on palette (in later stages of the painting.)

The cloth areas in **Figure 3A** are all in underpainting stage. For a colored cloth the lightest pure color in an area is applied first, in the underpainting. In other words a warm to cool sequence is followed. If the final color of a light area in a shirt is to be red-orange, semi-translucent orange is applied first and then translucent to semi-translucent red is glazed over that. What is to be red violet starts with red and then red violet and violet is glazed in the second layer. The first layer of this process uses a touch of white to chalk up the translucent pigment slightly and to give enough body for better creating gradients and needed complexity. It should still be translucent enough however so that different pressure strokes let light ground through to varying degrees for the sake of value modulation.

In a Jan van Eyck painting, the brush marks sink into the microcosm, leaving only miniscule freckle-like modulations visible when the painting is closely viewed. This absence of viscerally overt brushwork asserts the unrelenting naturalism. Of course, indirect painting needn't be refined to the level that brushstrokes are rendered invisible. In fact, there are examples of amplified mark making in oil painting as far back as the High Renaissance. One great pioneer of such painting was Titian.

Indirect technique need not be shrouded in such mystery, nor relegated to a mode of working long lost and unused. Sometimes the challenge is not to reinvent the wheel but how to use something old in a fresh way to make a relevant and poignant contemporary expression. A study of indirect painting techniques can give a painter greater options in finding a way to express content, whether that be a strict adherence to an old protocol or a mixing of direct and indirect approaches. **AC**

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Image courtesy of Stephen Knudsen.

Figure 4: Palette mixed for Jan van Eyck-style flesh glazes. Note the great variety of mostly organic glazes that will be applied selectively and manipulated simultaneously. Modern organics, like quinacridone rose, are more translucent than the pigments used by Jan van Eyck, however a slight addition of titanium white gets the glazes to the right refractive index. See *The Fourth Dimension of Color and the Dual Color Wheel* in the March 2010 issue of **Art Calendar.**