

Koo Schadler Illuminated Self Portrait egg tempera on true gesso finished

Questions: Overall, how does this painting strike you? What are some of your impressions? What do you like about it? Why? Dislike? Why? What details do you particularly notice?

These two small paintings almost took my breath away when I first saw them because they are so meticulously rendered. Compared to larger paintings in the gallery, they are like exquisite miniatures with exacting details and luminous quality.

One can almost detect a Mona Lisa smile in the self-portrait. It might also remind one of Vermeer's "Girl with a Pearl Earring." The artist even wears a pearl earring as well as a necklace of pearls and shells. However, instead of the Turkish turban worn by Vermeer's "Girl," she wears a light blue bateau and dark "scrunchie," which, if we haven't already guessed, confirms that this is modern painting rather than one long-housed in some remote museum.

The paintings are done in the Renaissance style using egg tempera, a fitting medium since it was employed extensively by many of the old masters. The details of the various objects in the margin of the self-portrait draw us in for closer examination. Here we find shells (repeating those in the necklace) flowers, an *egg* (perhaps an homage to the egg tempera), a butterfly or moth, small insects, and a snail. Is the caterpillar climbing a paintbrush intended to remind us of the labor-intensive work the painting required?

Rather than imitating the Renaissance masters, Schadler prefers to be inspired by their settings, composition, color and design, substituting their biblical characters with animals, human models, and bits of nature that appeal to her. Her works tend to be small, rather simple subjects and are mainly portraits of adults, children, and a variety of animals and other creatures and plants. Some animals are featured in diptychs and triptychs.

Egg tempera, the medium Schadler is noted for, is a painting process that uses egg yolk as a binder with color pigments diluted with water. The painting is usually done on wood panels since the "true" gesso ground (not acrylic and preferably homemade) requires a rigid support to prevent cracking. One type of finishing Schadler likes to use is application of several thin coats of oil paint over the tempera. These glazes deepen the color and give the glossy finish she desires. In this painting, the artist's complexion, the velvet of her dress, and even the background almost shimmer under her technique.

The statement surrounding the portrait reads, "It was a wine jar when the molding began. As the wheel runs round why does it turn out a water pitcher? Horace" The quote is from this Roman philosopher's epistle titled Ars Poetica, which

contains his advice to artists. The translations from Latin vary, but the following excerpt from Leon Golden's translation seems a little easier to grasp:

You started out to make a wine jar. Why, as the wheel turns, does it end up as a pitcher? In short, let the work be anything you like, but let it at least be one, single thing.

Schadler seems to follow Horace's advice with her small paintings and often single subjects. Yet she says she doesn't intend for any quotes she uses to be *taken literally*. For this reason, sometimes the lettering is purposely obscured or close to illegible. Her aim is to combine text with images as the masters did with illuminated manuscripts into an artistic, visual whole.

Artist's Biography

Koo Schadler was born in 1962 in Connecticut. After completing a BA degree in *art history* at Tufts University in 1984, she interned at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and then studied painting in Florence, Italy. In 1986, she moved to California, where Chester Arnold at the College of Marin introduced her to egg tempera. Several years later, she returned to New England where she now pursues full time the study and creation of egg tempera paintings and silverpoint drawings in a studio in Alstead, New Hampshire.

Schadler is a Master painter of The Copley Society of Boston and a board member of the (new) Society of Tempera Painters, founded in 1997. She writes and lectures on egg tempera, and teaches workshops around the country. She is the author of "Egg Tempera Painting —A Comprehensive Guide," a highlydetailed manual available through her website.

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FURTHER NOTES

Egg Tempera

Egg tempera is a painting process that uses egg yolk to bind pigments and dates back to ancient Greece. Egyptians and Romans may also have been familiar with the medium. During the Renaissance egg tempered pigments were the most used medium for easel painting throughout Europe. Artists from the period who were masters of egg tempera include: Botticelli, Giotto, Fra Filippo Lippi, Fra Angelico. While Michelangelo and da Vinci were well versed in egg tempera, oil became more popular during their time because it was slow-drying and permitted blending. Within a short time, egg tempera was almost totally abandoned or combined with oil.

In the 19th century a 14th century manuscript by Cennino Cennini describing egg tempera painting was translated and a slow revival began. The few modern painters who prefer working with egg tempera include: Thomas Hart Benton, Paul Cadmus, Ben Shahn, George Tooker, Robert Vickrey, and Andrew Wyeth,

Egg tempera painting is usually done on a wood panel since the "true" gesso ground (not acrylic) needs a rigid support to prevent cracking. While true gesso can be purchased, Schadler urges artists to make their own. Her manual gives detailed instructions in making gesso as well as other requirements in the elaborate process of egg tempera painting as practiced by this dedicated artist.

There is no one prescribed way to work with egg tempera. Many modern artists have developed variations on the basic technique modernized from Cennini's descriptions in several sources. (See bibliography). Some egg tempera paintings have a distinctive almost ethereal look to them, as with the George Tooker paintings in the KIA current show. But other egg temperas may not be easily distinguished from, say watercolor, as with some of Andrew Wyeth's landscape works.

One Source Lighting

Another "old master" technique Schadler uses in portrait painting is one source lighting. Most often the light comes from the upper left-hand corner because most artists are right-handed and light from the left won't get in the way of the work. A second reason for left placement is that western cultures read from left to right, and thirdly, light from the upper left has traditionally been representative of inner light.

Profile Portraits

A portrait in profile was often used in early Renaissance mimicking the portraits shown on medals. A profile view was also used for female saints and brides. It gave the subject a more serious demeanor and kept the viewer from seeing too much of a woman. It also preserved her virtuous character.

Silverpoint

Another Renaissance technique Schadler uses for drawings is silverpoint. Before graphite pencils were invented, artists made drawings using metal embedded in a stylus. Although various metals like copper and gold were used, silverpoint was the most popular. Since silverpoint needs a surface with "tooth" to make its mark, the homemade gesso used by egg tempera artists (made from rabbitskin glue and chalk) provides an excellent base for silver point. The lines are built up in many carefully applied layers that cannot be erased. Silverpoint eventually tarnishes, but it's that feature that makes it highly desirable.

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