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What Painting Is



Synopsis

Unlike many books on painting that usually talk about art or painters, James Elkins's compelling and original work focuses on alchemy, for like the alchemist, the painter seeks to transform and be transformed by the medium. In *What Painting Is*, James Elkins communicates the experience of painting beyond the traditional vocabulary of art history. Alchemy provides a magical language to explore what it is a painter really does in her or his studio - the smells, the mess, the struggle to control the uncontrollable, the special knowledge only painters hold of how colours will mix, and how they will look. Written from the perspective of a painter-turned-art historian, *What Painting Is* is like nothing you have ever read about art.

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Customer Reviews

When one looks at a Monet, what exactly is one looking at? A framed painting, surely. And, too, as traditional art history texts would suggest, an "impression of light and atmosphere." But for art historian and painter Elkins, the essence of a painting--"what painting is"--goes beyond such abstractions. For one must not overlook the "process" of painting itself, the process by which artists get their hands dirty mixing oils and pigments, jabbing and scraping until one day the mess of paint blobs magically emerges as water lilies (or a haystack or a field of poppies) on the canvas. Indeed, it is the transformative power of the act of painting that Elkins explores in *What Painting Is* and that he elucidates expertly by way of another transformative art--the ancient practice of alchemy. In each of the nine chapters, Elkins draws parallels between artistic and alchemical processes. Like the alchemist, the painter sequesters him-or herself into the studio to mix and match substances in

search of a recipe that will turn unpromising materia prima into the perfect painting (the philosopher's stone). Elkins, a true alchemist of ideas, has conjured up an original and insightful book that is sure to transform the reader's understanding of painting. Veronica Scrol --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"A remarkable discussion...an extraordinary evocation of art and oil painting." -- Leon Golub, painter
"A truly original book. It will make you look at paintings differently and think about paint differently." -- Boston Globe
"This book is brilliant." -- Frank Auerbach, painter

Elkins uses alchemy to interpret and read paintings. It sounds strange, but the way he explains it using such an odd device helped me to expand the way I think about art and paintings. It also is a book about paint- not conceptual or computer art or even theory. It is more concerned with the physical act of pushing paint, the solid matter of pigment, and the artisan-like way a painter operates in the studio. If you're a person who is interested in the hands-on experience in art, and like thinking about new ideas, this book will be a lot of fun. If you don't like getting your hands dirty, you may want to look elsewhere.

Not sure the exact reason, but this is my favorite read this year. I mix my own paints, and this the only book gets the joy of mixing oil pigments and experimenting. I did read this on the Kindle, btw, which was a bit tricky, but still solid.

I have been painting for nearly 20 years and this is the first book that I have encountered that has accurately described the material act of painting itself from a painter's perspective. I agree to some extent with other reviewers who complained that the discussions of alchemy were too long and obscure. However, in an age of digital images this foray into obsolete and arcane mucking about is absolutely necessary to explain why paint remains a vital medium. Even without the metaphoric parallels between painting and alchemy, delving into the alchemist's kitchen seems like an excellent introduction into the mind of a painter. I have one serious reservation about this book: I do not think that it would be useful for inexperienced painters. It is all too easy to be utterly seduced by the descriptions of lush thickets of paint and exquisite glazes. These must remain a means to greater understanding rather than an end in themselves. Elkins is aware of the problem and devotes a later chapter to self-reference and narcissism. I am keen to try this book out on non-painting friends to see what impression it makes on them...

Absolutely brilliant! James Elkins is one of my favorite writers!

Wonderful read .. especially for a painter. .

Truly excellent book for artists. So many books on art are at best irritating, but this one was wonderful. Sent me into my studio filled with energy and ideas.

Terrific book.

This book was recommended reading before attending a workshop. I found it extremely helpful. Full of very interesting examples and information about the history of art, the making of art and the process.

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