

MADE TO BE RAVISHED:

WHY MASTERPIECES SHOULD RUIN THEMSELVES

B.Twitney-Geyser and B.Bee

Abstract - Exegesis of the unknown 18th century artists' manual *L'art nouveau de la peinture en fromage* by J.-A. Roquefort shows that science has no place in conservation, that artists intended all their *oeuvre*, to deteriorate into brown sludge, and that no one in a white coat should intervene in this beautiful, natural process.

1 Introduction

Aesthetes the world over now generally acknowledge that science and technology have destroyed all human aspects of the conservation profession. These concerned individuals agree unanimously that the inhumane practice of flaying prostrate and helpless paintings, without benefit of anaesthesia, in sterile white laboratories must stop. It is here that scholars such as the present authors have a vital role to play, for we believe that only careful scrutiny of historical texts can lead the conservation profession back to its unscientific foundations.

Such a text is the previously neglected artists' manual *L'art nouveau de la peinture en fromage, ou en ramequin* (1), *inventée de trouver graduellement des façons de peindre inférieures à celles qui existent* (2) written by the *avant-garde* painter J.-A. Roquefort in 1755 (3). It is indeed tragic that the profound and prophetic insights of Roquefort have been kept from the art world for so long, but his odyssey of discovery is published here in hopes of saving our priceless heritage of art from destruction at the hands of insensitive scientists. In fact, as will be shown, paintings can and should be destroyed naturally: costly and time-consuming treatments are not necessary (4).

2 The Text

Roquefort begins on an amazingly modest note considering the fundamental importance of his work:

I am not completely sure that the art which I am about to reveal, after more than two days of profound research, is sufficiently inferior to painting in soap, which is described in a recent brochure, to constitute a degree of imperfection proportionate to that which painting in soap itself holds beneath other

techniques of painting... One always encounters along the road of discovery a humiliating point where humanity recognizes its limitations, and past which one vainly hopes to be able to progress..(5).

Several points should be noted here. First, Roquefort found a new, unstable painting method in only two days. Contrast his efficiency with present-day research institutes which take years, if not decades, to discover new and inferior materials. If modern scientific conservation were doing its job properly, it would have developed many more inferior and impermanent painting materials and restoration processes, in proportion to the increased time devoted to them. Note too Roquefort's candid acknowledgement of human finitude, which stands in stark contrast to the arrogance of modern scientists, whose metaphysical dependence on causality and determinism is a tacit denial of life-giving spiritual and human values which only artists and aesthetes can understand and appreciate in our soulless technological society (6).

Roquefort continues:

I do not completely flatter myself that this is indeed the worst technique of painting that can be invented; it would be too vain to pretend that I have arrived, in a single attempt, at the lowest degree to which the technique of painting can descend; whilst those better known than I, with so much work and so much knowledge, have made nothing more inferior. At least if painting *en ramequin*(7) is not sufficiently worse than painting in soap...I will indicate in the intricate course of this learned dissertation, explanation and publication of the art of painting in cheese, the means of degrading it a little more; however, if it is found that it falls too far below painting in soap, I will also provide the means of diminishing this distance, without changing its rank in relation to painting in cheese, or reducing any of the lowliness I have attributed to it. For this one would only need to degrade painting in soap a little; the tartar salt, which it contains, will always provide a convenient way to degrade it whenever required, with the aid of humidity (8).

This passage shows that as early as 1755, materials "science" was no match for the un-

Received 5 October 1986

fettered creativity of the individual artist in discovering inferior painting methods and materials. Indeed, the search for the worst possible painting technique is still avidly pursued by artists of the 20th century. Of course, Roquefort's choices were limited to naturally occurring materials: paintings executed in soap or cheese are only the beginning of the tradition of works which are intended to self-destruct. Only the historically ignorant and visually illiterate scientifically trained conservator has the arrogance and temerity to arrest this process and "freeze" paintings in time or, worse, to "restore" them in conformity to the garish taste of the late 20th century.

The above passage also shows that the author was far ahead of his time in understanding the important role of extremes of relative humidity (RH) in the natural process of destruction of paintings. Indeed, 250 years later this process is still poorly understood. Meanwhile, museum administrators are quite right in resisting all attempts to control humidity levels in museums.

Roquefort then stresses the importance of natural degradation processes to aesthetics in painting:

And so, with soap and cheese one arrives gently, by prudent and measured degradation, at the worst painting technique. One must note here that I and my predecessors imitate the March of Nature, which has restored at times mysteries and error, to make the light of success shine more brightly (9).

Roquefort's message is clear: the artist, by careful choice of the worst possible materials, works in harmony with the dissolution processes of nature. The aesthetic product of the interaction is summed up in the Sanskrit word *patina* (10). Only Nature can "restore"; and "shining light" can only refer to spiritual enlightenment, not the stark, flat colour and homogenized texture of paintings flayed by atheistic, irreverent scientists.

Roquefort then describes the thought processes and methods of research which led to the discovery of cheese as an artists' material:

When I had recognized in cheese the plastic and glutinous properties which would render it applicable to a new technique of painting I tried to dissolve it to give it the necessary fluidity; but a thousand times I was tempted to give it up, until Chance led me to the following discovery. I dare not say how this came about: I am too bad a chemist to have proceeded from prior knowledge. I am completely ignorant of that subject: I know only, by simple examination, that cheese naturally contains a type of oil, whey and sea salt (11).

Several important points for modern conservation spring forth from this key passage. First, Roquefort's reference to "plastic" clearly shows that he foresaw the advent of acrylic paint. Second, his reference to "fluidity" shows that he also foresaw the importance of rheology as a tool for the study of the mechanical properties of artists' materials. Even more important, he shows that chemistry is useless; his visual literacy, which showed him clearly that cheese is composed of oil, whey and sea salt, proved sufficient for his great discovery. Last, Roquefort's persistence in adversity and final triumph shows that no research project should ever be abandoned. Any administrative input to the contrary should be ignored, for Roquefort's development of cheese as a painting material as the beginning of a grand aesthetic tradition of self-destruction of paintings, shows that the more unpromising the line of research, the greater will be its long-range importance (12).

This is how Roquefort's research breakthrough came about:

I tried in vain to dissolve cheese in all the substances which seemed to me capable of producing this effect. I did not succeed; and I made many fruitless attempts; but I had bought many types of cheese to perform my research, and in order to have a sufficient supply to succeed, I had bought very large ones: I could not sell them without taking a considerable loss and a philosopher who, like me, only spends his time making discoveries, in order to make them public, must economize. I resolved to eat my cheeses, and that is the happiest decision I could have made, since it brought about the discovery of painting en ramequin; a useful discovery for mortal man, except to him that made it; a discovery for ever memorable, since without it painting in soap would perhaps be the worst of all techniques. I made this great discovery when I put my cheese in an omelette... *Εύρεκα!* (13) I saw then that truly the egg - that is to say its yolk - dissolves cheese; it has since been ascertained that it dissolves very well those things which nothing else dissolves. It appears then that all the world knows this; but I believe no one before me has applied cheese dissolved in egg for the painting technique I term *en ramequin*. One should always give the things which one wishes to place before the world a striking name which has an air of erudition and importance. I greatly fear that the sound of this one is too common to increase the dignity of my new and *recherche* technique of painting; and if I learn that my active zeal has not been sufficient to promote the method, I will employ philosophers more learned than I to give it a Greek or Arabic name: I will not insist on calling it *peinture en ramequin* (14).

Surely Roquefort's research method as set forth here is the purest application of the

Arationality Principle (15) to be found outside of the Government of Canada. Indeed, Roquefort's achievement shows that a bureaucratic government organization is not necessary, or even sufficient, for research to progress arationally (16). Roquefort didn't have a fancy lab and his example supports one of the fundamental tenets of the Arationality Principle: the less administrative support you have, the more you accomplish. Roquefort could also afford to proceed along bold, novel lines because his experimental material could be eaten after his unemployment insurance benefits ran out. Still, his concern that his work appear to be prestigious in order to be appreciated by an arational world shows that the Arationality Principle pervades the Groves of Academe as well as the Federal Government. Recognition of one's work is always inversely proportional to its real merit (17).

(The reader will surely excuse the length of the foregoing discussion of the Arationality Principle, the purpose of which was to demonstrate the universality and cosmic importance of arationality.)

Meanwhile, back in his kitchen (18) in 1755, Roquefort worked out the nitty-gritty details of his revolutionary technique:

In simple language, take eggs that are fairly fresh, separate from the white the yolks that are the least pale, mix them together in a fairly large vessel, of whatever metal you happen to have; because one of the most fortunate features of the materials that I employ is that they require no acid or alkali strong enough to react dangerously with the metal. Take Gruyere cheese; that which has aged for two years is best, because its whey is stickier and more ductile than other cheeses. I am not telling you how much to use, as practitioners will learn this by experience: it depends upon the freshness of the eggs, the phase of the moon, the time of day, and the ways in which one performs the operation. Cut the cheese into thin slices, mix everything together, and warm it in the heat of a *bain-marie*; remove the mixture when the cheese is melted; you will then have a substance suitable for tempering all sorts of pigments. Do not worry about the light yellow tint which the colours will acquire, as it will give your works that golden tone which is so greatly admired, and which is preferable to a grey tone (19).

Roquefort's rejection of the dead hand of positivistic science in favour of sensitivity and arationality is shown by his staunch refusal to quantify his painting method. Even more important, indeed central, is his insistence on an overall yellow tonality in painting (20). This is proof positive, if indeed the instincts of true art lovers need any corroboration from history, that artists

want their paintings to be yellow all over. Roquefort's disparaging reference to a "grey tone" obviously indicates that paintings should never be varnished with Acryloid B-72.

Roquefort adds that his delicate and sophisticated painting medium requires a special support:

This technique of painting can not be used on wood, or muslin, or taffeta, or even ordinary cloth, for which painting in soap is so marvelously adapted. Cheese resists all these substances in order to pursue its natural association with bread. To make a panel on which to paint, take some wheat flour, make it into a paste with a little milk; pure milk renders it too friable, because of the butter fat which it contains: this paste will take any form you give it; you can even spread it out under a rolling-pin.

It will be good to mix into your paste a small quantity of bitters so that its taste keeps worms, ants, and children from eating your paintings, which happened to the first one I did, because I did not take this precaution. If your painting *en ramequin* does not appear to be sufficiently degraded, it can be made to deteriorate better by eliminating the bitters and exposing it to the ill consequences of being eaten. It is true that another aspect of elimination of the bitters which renders this new technique of painting superior is that many poor painters can at times make a meal of their works immediately and with more convenience and sustenance than painters in other media.

When your panel is formed, let it dry, in winter by the fire, in summer without it: meanwhile, I do not know if the heat is equal in the two circumstances: my discovery is too new for it to be possible for me to compare the effect of the two seasons on the panel; however, when I tell you to dry it by the fire, I have told you nothing at all, because I have determined neither the volume, nor the estimate. Therefore, dear artist, you must determine this yourself, whether the technique of painting *en ramequin* requires one annual revolution of the sun (21); while waiting, I believe that you can quite certainly make your panel dry in a place where you maintain the temperature in whatever season at 70 on the Reaumur scale (22); you then place it in an oven while you recite two or three Hail Marys provided you know it well enough to recite it (23).

When your picture is painted and completed you expose it to a quick fire, and you must take particular care to contrive the most convenient way to cook it: you must consult the taste of everyone in your studio, to find out whether they prefer a picture with hard-cooked eggs, or not; and you expose the painting to heat accordingly (24).

This passage from Roquefort is so laden with ramifications that one scarcely knows where to begin. However, when in doubt as to where

to begin, one can seldom go wrong by beginning at the beginning (25). Roquefort's suggestion that paintings be eaten has three implications of earth-shattering importance. First, it accords with all the latest findings from the sciences of ecology and environmental research regarding the utility of recycling our precious resources, including the human resource of creativity. Edible paintings also keep artists from starving, as Roquefort rightly points out; thus the Federal Government could reduce the national debt by eliminating the Canada Council (having first eaten it). Most important from the standpoint of aesthetics, Roquefort seems to be suggesting that paintings indeed should be allowed to turn to brown mush by natural processes. In addition, his stress on consulting one's audience on matters of taste shows conclusively that the preparation of paintings is a matter of taste, not science.

One might add that the discovery of this treatise sheds light on the origin of some 20th century painting techniques, the most stunning example of which was developed in 1961:

To Bake a Picture with P.E.

This is a description of a new art form using a new art medium, polyethylene powder baked on and then peeled off an ordinary cookie sheet. An outline of the intended picture is drawn on the cookie sheet, cooking or machine oil is spread around the edges of the sheet as the mold release agent, and the drawing is then filled with translucent or coloured polyethylene powder. The preparation is baked cooled, and then removed from the sheet. A translucent picture, which reveals the applied drawing, is produced (26).

Roquefort's painting *en ramequin* is obviously the (unacknowledged) source of the polyethylene powder technique. However, although the latter is an advance over Roquefort's method, as no support is required, polyethylene has the disadvantage of being quite inedible.

Roquefort's aesthetic preferences regarding picture varnishes are made equally clear in the following passage:

The way to varnish a painting *en ramequin* is simple, and similar; you cover it well with white of egg. I have not had the time to make up a more complicated varnish - a varnish, for example, made from tartar salt, or a matte varnish; because that to me appears to be most worthy of admiration and imitation. A matte varnish: oh, what a lovely thing! The primary quality of a matte varnish is to conceal the surface upon which it is applied. Could one hope to find anything more felicitously appropriate for paintings *en ramequin*?

This is the acme of degradation in making varnish (27). The inferiority of my new technique gives me an incontestable claim for such a varnish.

I forgot to say that by choosing cheeses that are differently cured, one can, utilizing their various colours, save considerably on the cost of pigments, especially the lakes and ultramarines (28).

Even the most historically ignorant and visually illiterate scientist must concede that the evidence from this key passage shrieks with more force than the bluest blues of an overcleaned painting. Here Roquefort makes two aesthetic statements of paramount importance. The first is that he is expressing a preference for the soft, subtle colour of naturally aged cheese rather than brilliant pigments which offend the eye. The second is that varnish serves the important aesthetic function of further preventing paintings from offending the eye by keeping them from being seen. Our argument has come full circle: new paintings were not intended to be seen, and allowing them to deteriorate naturally will ensure that no one will ever see them.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can clearly be seen that application of evidence from the Roquefort treatise extends beyond aesthetics to museum practice in general. It is clear from the text that all paintings should be left free to self-destruct: the fittest will survive and the rest deserve to disappear. Museums will be saved the bother of de-accessioning their collections, and conservators will no longer waste energy arguing with curators who wish to lend the most fragile works in their collections to every Tom, Dick and Harry who asks for them. Museums will also save money on climate control installations, which are clearly superfluous, and on transportation and packing costs. Storage problems will cease, as the conditions which now obtain in most museum storage facilities are obviously more than adequate. The conservation profession will also cease - thus saving it from inevitable suicide by application of the philosophy of minimal intervention.

4 References

1. English: ramekin - cheese baked with breadcrumbs and eggs in a casserole.
2. English: The New Art of Painting in Cheese, or in a Ramekin, Invented to Discover Gradually Techniques of Painting Inferior to Those that Exist at Present (1).
3. We know nothing of Roquefort's oeuvre, since his success in inventing the worst possible painting techniques ensured that none of his paintings has survived.
4. Positive suggestions for the museum profession as a whole will be discussed in the conclusion.

5. *New Art...* p.620.
6. The totally alienating *Angst* and *Weltschmerz* of this *Weltanschauung* are set forth fully in Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* (known to the illiterate masses as *The Decline of the West*): "When Nature is comprehended coldly, by the logical force of the human intellect alone without feeling for its Creator's honour, Nature devoid of God follows knavishly the Law of Gravity".
7. As mentioned in Note 1 above, a ramekin is a quiche-like dish. Obviously in Roquefort's day Real Men did eat quiche! This can be logically and rigorously proved by the following syllogism: Roquefort was a real man. He ate quiche in 1755. Therefore real men ate quiche in 1755. Hellsa Poppin stresses the importance of ideas corresponding with facts in such cases:
"...we shall first consider the following two formulations, each of which states very simply (in a metalanguage) under what conditions a certain assertion (in an object language) corresponds to the facts:
a) The statement "snow is white" corresponds to the facts if, and only if, snow is, indeed, white.
b) The statement "grass is red" corresponds to the facts if, and only if, grass is, indeed, red."(2)
8. *New Art...* p.777.
9. *Ibid.*
10. For a full discussion of this view see Maharishi Moonie, *The Aesthetics of Sukranitisara* (in Sanskrit).
11. *New Art...* p.1022.
12. This principle, popularly known as Geyser's Law, has proved itself over and over again at NNOSHIT (3), and it guided the present authors in choosing to study the text dealt with here.
13. Roquefort's use of a Greek expletive clearly shows the influence of the Greek painter Apelles, who made a special black varnish to conceal his paintings.
14. *New Art...* pp.2-3.
15. See Hellsa Poppin, "The A-rationality of Scientific Revolutions" in *How to Defend Society from Science*.
16. In truly philosophical terms (of the sort that we use at NNOSHIT (3)) "Given the Quinian predicament (Kantian predicament?) that there is a real world but we can only describe it in terms of our own conceptual system (well, we should use someone else's conceptual system?) is it surprising that primitive reference has this character of apparent triviality?... None of this shows that a "physicalistic" theory of reference cannot be given. All we have shown is that a physicalistic theory of reference is not needed... After all, a physicalistic theory would not be incompatible with Tarskian truth/satisfaction definitions... In one sense, however, they are not causal explanatory notions... But if they enter into causal explanations at all, is it not possible that their causal/explanatory role justifies looking for a physicalistic account of what truth and reference are?" (4)
17. That's why we're publishing in this lousy rag instead of *Studies in Conservation*. (I take exception to this! Ed.)
18. In the discussion which follows, the reader, *mutatis mutandis*, can adapt Roquefort's technique to the microwave oven.
19. *New Art...* p.120.
20. It is worth mentioning that 19th century Canadian portrait painters achieved particularly sensitive golden effects with Cheddar media.
21. This reference is obscure. The term "annual revolution of the sun" makes no sense in either the Ptolemaic, Copernican or Keplerian solar system models, and in fact defies common sense and observation. Perhaps "daily" could be substituted for "annual", although even in Roquefort's time the geocentric solar system model was of merely antiquarian interest (5).
22. If the Celsius scale had been invented, Roquefort would surely have used it. In accordance with the same infallible historiographic principle, which holds for all history whether it be history of science or history of art, Raphael would surely have painted the *School of Athens* in day-glo colours had they been available.

23. NNOSHIT researchers recited Tom Lehrer's "Vatican Rag"; otherwise every detail of the experiment was re-created exactly.
24. *New Art...* pp.877-878.
25. Carroll, L. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Avenil Books (facsimile edition), p.182.
26. AATA Abstracts Vol.4, No.3761.
27. Roquefort's hegemony in this area lasted until the late 20th century, when antioxidants, which are by definition against nature, were added to varnishes.
28. *New Art...* p.22334.

5 References to the References

1. The Editorial Staff occasionally find it necessary to check references if their suspicions are aroused. Although they were unable, after extensive bibliographic research, to locate the work of J.-A. Roquefort, they did find an actual text by J.-A. Rouquet (1701-1758) *Recueil des Pièces Sur la Peinture...* (Paris: A.Marolles, 1755). The Editorial Staff draw no conclusions concerning the coincidence of dates and names, but wish to state that this evidence has been placed in the hands of the Academic Fraud Squad of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.
2. Poppin, H. "To Save the Phenomena: A Confutation of Convergent Realism" in *What Kind of Explanation is Truth?*, p.344.
3. See author's biographies below.
4. Poppin, H. *The Natural Ontological Attitude*, p.152.
5. Historically ignorant readers may confirm this by consulting A. Koyrés *Le vide et l'espace infini au XIV siècle*, pp.45-91 and C.Ptolemy's *Almagest* (Dover reprint 1962), p.7352.

B.TWITNEY-GEYSER Co-founder of the Nomansland National Organization for Synthesis and Haplography of Irrelevant Technology (NNOSHIT) at Whatsapoint University. Since 1973 she has held the Chair as Professor of Advanced Irrelevance and has conducted research in many irrelevant areas. *Author's address: Whatsapoint University, Whatsapoint, Nomansland.*

B.BEE Co-founder of the Nomansland National Organization for Synthesis and Haplography of Irrelevant Technology (NNOSHIT) at Whatsapoint University. Since 1973 he has not held the above chair (except by the back when the above was about to be seated) but has been a Research Ass in the department. He has conducted research in equally irrelevant areas and fields. *Author's address: as above.*

Résumé - L'exégèse du manuel d'artiste inconnu provenant du 18ième siècle et intitulé *The New Art of Painting in Cheese* par J.-A. Roquefort nous montre que la science n'a aucun place dans la conservation. Aussi, il nous indique que les artistes veulent que leurs works se détériorent en vase brune et qu'aucun personne portant un veston blanc doit interférer avec ce beau procédé naturel.

Auszug - Eine eindeutige Auslegung des 18ten Jahrhundert Kuensthandbuesches von J.A.Roquefort 以乾酪繪明之技藝 zeigt dass Wissenschaft in der Restaurierung keinen Platz hat. Die Kuenstler beabsichtigten naemlich ihre Werke soweit zerfallen zu lassen, bis sie nur noch ein braunes Abfallprodukt darstellten, und das Keiner in weissen Laborkittel in diesen wunderschoenen und natuerlichen Prozess eingriffen soll.