

PART II—THE ARTISTIC SIDE

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRINCIPLES OF PICTURE BUILDING

THERE may still be those that would continue the discussion on the art status of photography. We shall not even allude to the main objects of controversy in this field, but shall at once assume that the principles of normal picture construction apply to photographic pictures. It will speedily become obvious, in fact, that this is the only course to adopt if we are to utilise that power of pictorial expression which the pigmenting brush undoubtedly places in our hands.

It has for a considerable time been the custom to decry photographically produced prints in which handwork—often referred to as “faking”—has been incorporated. This attitude is only justifiable if the handwork is actually discernible to the moderately alert critic. Duality of medium is fatal to the unified appeal of any work of art, and any photographically produced picture which, at the same time, simulates in appearance a hand-produced work of art, leaving the spectator in two minds as to the point of view from which he should regard the work, must inevitably fail. Thus, it follows that if the reproduction given by the negative is to be radically departed from, this must be done in such a way that the added elements are not only in themselves correct, but they must be consistent with the vision of the facts given by the photographic means. *In other words, it is only by knowledge and observation that the photographic image may be altered and supplemented.* If these factors be absent, or if, being present, they are insufficient in degree to order the additions made to the photograph, the work will exhibit duality of

medium and be unacceptable. From this follows the second golden rule in employing the freer photographic processes, sometimes called "Control" processes; *never allow the picture to go beyond the limits of the knowledge and observation of nature which you possess.*

Having uttered this word of caution, it only remains to be added that, given adequate knowledge, pictures of a unified æsthetic appeal may be produced, which are worthy to rank beside other works of graphic art—certainly of monochrome graphic art. It should be in the hope of ultimately producing such pictures that the systematic mastery of the bromoil and transfer processes should be undertaken. A frequent contention is that if sufficient knowledge be accumulated to enable the production of fine bromoils, the artist might just as well etch, engrave or paint. This is, to a certain extent, true, although not completely so, because the technical facility which must accompany the knowledge in the case of the painter is much more difficult to acquire than in the case of the bromoiler. There is also another aspect of the matter; the quality and type of print produced by these photographic processes is quite inimitable by other means, and the artist who chooses bromoil as his medium will soon feel that it is just the unique qualities intrinsic to his process which make him prefer his finished result to an etching, aquatint, or engraving. W. J. Roberts, Sam Weller, Bertram Cox, and many other well-known bromoilers have all the necessary technical equipment to produce successful paintings if they wish, and on occasion they do turn to other media, but it is impossible not to agree that they are producing work of the utmost value and significance in their more usual medium.

The Fundamentals of the Picture. There are two main co-ordinations to be achieved in making a pleasing picture: co-ordination of form and co-ordination of tone. In nature the facts presented to the eye are haphazard, and as often as not are intermingled with details unrelated to the main theme. The production of a picture from these unrelated minutiae involves an ordering and modifying operation. Unsuitable elements must be eliminated, and partially

jarring notes must be modified to bring them into unified arrangement with the rest of the subject matter. If plain straight photography be adopted as the means of producing the graphic result, the only process of control available is selection of the subject, and its arrangement either by moving the actual objects to be presented (as in still life and figure work) or by moving the position of the camera (as in landscape work). A further partial control of tone values can be introduced by shading during printing, or by generalised modification of tones on the negative.

With bromoil, however, the possibilities are greatly increased, and, given the knowledge, the need for which is stressed in a previous paragraph, there is almost a complete control from the practical point of view; that is to say, if the scene taken was of sufficient possibilities to merit the exposure of a plate, there is sufficient power in the pigment processes to eliminate and modify all the more important imperfections of form or tone which the subject may exhibit.

Composition. Composition is the reduction to an orderly arrangement of the forms, shapes and lines of the picture. In most books dealing with the subject it is the practice to divide up the possible arrangements or compositions into such categories as pyramidal, elliptical, diagonal, etc., and providing these are regarded by the student as merely examples of the forms composition may take, and not as immutable laws of nature, there is no harm in this course. A far better practice, however, for the learner to adopt is to cultivate a sense of abstract balance in the picture, because many of the strongest and most arresting pictures, particularly by modern artists, are founded on principles of construction which could not so easily be classified.

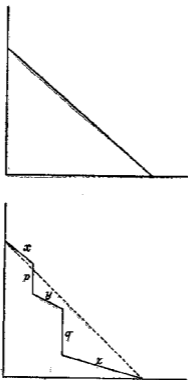
It is not our purpose in the present volume to deal *ab initio* with general art principles, but rather to confine our remarks to those aspects of the subject which are of special interest to practitioners in bromoil. As far as composition is concerned, this will in the main be decided in the negative, and will not be amenable to large changes in the pigmentation operation. However, such defects as lines running out at the corners can be easily masked by

darkening the corners, or by modifying the lines themselves with the plastic rubber. It is a limiting condition of the process that lines cannot be drawn by any ordinary means, although it is quite true, particularly of transfers, that after-work on the finished print may be carried out with Conté crayon or other suitable drawing medium. One important manner in which landscape compositions may be strengthened is by the working in of suitable skies; the exact methods employed will be detailed in a subsequent chapter.

Chiaroscuro. Chiaroscuro is the arrangement of lights and shades in the picture. It is a subject not nearly so fully treated in text-books as composition, partly because it is not so easy to lay down rules and dogmas. In the control of the chiaroscuro yielded by the negative—or rather the lack of it—the pigment processes are paramount. The average straight print from a straight photographic negative possesses an almost continuous range of tones from clean white paper, to the deepest possible black. In some lucky subjects the elements of a pleasing arrangement of tones occur, but usually the tonal system is too complicated to be capable of yielding æsthetic results of a high order. It is necessary to reduce all this variety to something simpler and more easily taken in by the eye and the mind. One method by which this may be effected is to break up the continuous range of tones into several bands of tone, more or less sharply separated from each other, the tones in each band being all in close approximation to the average tone of the band.

A scheme which frequently underlies successful pictures is one in which there are three bands of adjacent tone values present, preferably in unequal amounts. The three bands will correspond to highlights, middle tones and shadows respectively. It will be understood that in talking of tonal bands, we in no sense mean banded shapes in the picture, but rather tonal bands in the graph showing all the tones to be found in a picture. Thus in the straight print we might represent the tonal scale by a straight line as in Fig. 5A, while the modified tonal scale will appear as in Fig. 5B, the sections x, y, z being the bands of tone,

and the p , q representing the sharp transitions from one to the other. In Plate I, a, b, c, and d will be seen four typical dispositions of the three tonal bands within the walls of the picture space. If the appearance of typical straight prints of such objects is recalled, it will at once be seen that



FIGS. 5A AND 5B.

the tonal areas are by no means grouped as in these diagrams but that there is an all-over sameness and lack of simplicity which hampers the appeal of the picture. It is not suggested that the actual groupings will in every case be so simple as those depicted; frequently there will be principal and subsidiary areas of each of the tone bands, the extent of

such areas being carefully adjusted for balance. In fact the dynamic equilibrium of such a scheme is in many ways a more enduring and interesting foundation for a picture than the static poise of the more simple arrangements.

The classic rule for arriving at a strong chiaroscuro is to bring the highest light and deepest dark up against each other at a strong point in the picture, i.e. at the focus of the compositional lines, and to balance the tonal areas for quantity about this pivotal spot. Although more varied arrangements are now being experimented with by the younger artists the older scheme is a very reliable one to follow until it is thoroughly mastered, when more varied arrangements may be tried with some prospect of success. Always analysis of fine work, whether photographic or graphic, is the key to learning what is satisfactory in practice and what is not.

In working on a bromoil picture it is a very good plan to consider a small gaslight print of the subject, and to make a rough sketch similar to those facing page 96, indicating the main tonal areas. In this way a firm grasp is obtained of what is to be attempted, and a plan of action can be formulated. The three tonal bands may be worked up in three soakings, the first at a low temperature, inking with hard ink for the deep tones, following with a higher temperature soaking and medium ink, and finally the highest temperature soaking and then ink for the highlight bands. Conversion of areas which fall in one tone band in the straight print to another area, for reasons of composition and chiaroscuro, can be effected by withholding ink to transfer to a lighter tone, or by applying an excess of thinner ink to transfer to a darker area. Typical instances of such alterations are when the far distance needs lightening to give true recession, and when the immediate foreground requires strengthening to give prominence. Frequently stones or other light objects in the foreground need toning down to fit them in with the general tone of the deep tone band. Again, fine effects can be obtained by lightening the tones of light buildings so that they show up lighter than the sky tone. This is an effect much more often seen in nature than recorded in the negative, though panchromatic plates are altering all that.

Bromoil Portraiture. The use of the bromoil and transfer processes for purposes of portraiture is now not at all uncommon among professional portraitists, and a good deal of amateur work is also to be seen in the principal exhibitions. There are quite considerable advantages to be gained in this line of work from the freedom and latitude of the control processes. For stunt lightings and the kinema type of work it is true that very little can be done, but with the kind of portrait where a more restrained lighting is used, and strong characterisation is the main aim, several of the characteristic features of the process may be turned to good account.

A tone scheme which may be very effectively exploited is that in which the main area of the picture is occupied by medium and light greys, with here and there pure white highlights, on to which are added very limited areas of almost pure black, leaving an almost vacant gap in the scale from the pure black to a lightish grey. This style of work, especially if finished with a fine stipple grain, gives a vivacity and spontaneity inimitable by any other means. If the print is a straight bromoil the effect inclines to delicacy, whereas in a transfer the result will appear harder and firmer.

If portraits of the deep-toned order are attempted, the important thing will be to secure brilliant delineation of all the shadow gradations. To this end it will be best to employ a very hard ink in conjunction with a low swelling temperature. If, at the same time, a smooth modelling of the skin textures is desired, it is imperative to swell to a moderately high temperature and ink these portions with soft ink. Never attempt to get a really smooth rendering of lighter tones with a hard ink. The granularity which almost always results will not be suited for the more delicately gradated passages.

A most important point in securing relief and solidity in a portrait is the "losing and finding" of the outline of the figure against the background. The subduing of an over-emphatic or busy background is a task easily accomplished by the use of soft ink, and the modulation of the background tones adjacent to the figure is difficult rather from the artistic than from the technical point of view.

A study of the great portraits by Van Dyck, Velasquez, Reynolds, Titian and other more modern masters will soon reveal a number of methods of work which can be tried until a good deal of facility is attained. It is one of the minor difficulties of bromoil that mostly the modifications have to be carried out slowly and with deliberation, so that no attempt can be made of securing effects of bravura execution which are so characteristic of the more vigorous types of painted portraits, such as those by Franz Hals and Augustus John.

Apart from shading of the hands and arms where these conflict with the predominance of the head, little should be attempted in the way of modifying skin tones. The natural gradations of tone secured from the negative will, in most cases, prove so subtle that a very skilled hand indeed will be needed to alter these by any brushwork. If the necessary knowledge of the contours of the skin and the underlying anatomical structures is available, some modifications of the highlights may be attempted. It has previously been emphasized how difficult it is to obtain true differentiation in the highest lights in bromoil. In this work use of the plastic rubber is almost an essential for the greatest brilliance of effect. If this is carried out with extreme care and no little manual dexterity, very vivid results may be obtained, particularly in direct bromoil, and to a less degree with transfer.

The prominent German photographer, Otto Kurt Vogel-sang, has developed a style of portraiture and figure work which abandons all idea of delicacy, and aims at a rendering full of power and force. The pigmenting is evidently carried out with great speed and ease, and very little evening up or fining of the grain is allowed. The prints convey an impression similar to very vigorous chalk drawings, and are mostly transfers of large size. The same treatment is employed by this artist for some very striking nudes. In fact many of the objections to photography of the nude on the ground that so few models are really perfect enough to photograph well, would be removed if this line were developed by a pigmenter with adequate knowledge of figure drawing to correct the more obvious drawbacks of the model used.

LANDSCAPE WORK IN BROMOIL AND TRANSFER

The vast bulk of work turned out in the two processes in question comes under the heading of landscape. Bromoil and transfer may be equally well employed for either of the two main types of landscape work, i.e. street scenes, and open rural landscape. In the first class the characteristics of the process may be employed to suggest the texture of stone and brick work, or to emphasize the quality of the lighting. It is possible, by individual handling of the pigment, to give such distinction of treatment to scenes of this type that the patterning of sunlit patches which is almost a *sine qua non* for success in this type of subject with the ordinary silver printing processes, may be altogether dispensed with, and highly significant pictures made without the assistance of direct sunlight. Where, however, the subject in the negative is sunlit, an altogether more vibrant quality may be imparted by judicious pigmentation than anything that can be attained by straightforward silver printing. This type of subject may well be treated in a granular style, with a luscious rendering of the deep shadows obtained by inking these portions only with a plentiful supply of ink of a soft consistency applied after swelling to the appropriate degree. This, it will be observed, is the very reverse of the procedure previously suggested, in which the stiff ink is used for the shadows and the softer ink for the highlights.

One of the main fascinations of the pigmentation operation is that the technique employed can be varied to suit the subject and the effect desired, just as if the subject were being etched or painted in oils. In the above case vibrant hazy highlights and smooth velvety shadows were required so that the reversal of the normal inking procedure was indicated as a promising method of attack. The distinctive style of some of the more prominent exponents of the processes arise from the fact that they favour a particular type of subject, and have worked out a technique to deal with the problems with which they are confronted. This we shall be able to pursue at greater length when we come to consider the plates which illustrate this book.

A specially important use for the latitude which the two processes allow, in the case of photography of street scenes, is that of dealing with figures. Street scenes may be taken early on Sunday mornings when no one is about, which results in the entire absence of life in the picture, or, alternatively, they may be taken in the full course of week-day activity, when it is almost impossible, in many cases, to avoid getting figures at awkward places in the composition. Bromoil allows of the addition of figures where wanted, and of the removal of unwanted examples—always within limits. The addition or removal of figures on a large scale cannot ordinarily be undertaken with complete assurance, but figures in the middle and far distance can usually be added or obliterated as required with a good deal of ease. Where figures stand out in silhouette against a sunlit distance, a good deal of emphasis can be laid on the sunlight effect by deepening the tone of the figures appreciably. Figures seen in such circumstances will be found to appear darker than would otherwise be the case.

In the open or rural type of landscapes wide variations in the type of result are produced according to the inking technique adopted. A firmly delineated landscape with forceful rendering of contrasts results from the hard-ink technique, whereas by employing soft ink for the bulk of the inking operations a Corot-like delicacy and indefiniteness is produced. The power of adding to the compositional importance of the sky by working in cloud formations is a really valuable tool, whether the cloud forms are the result of manual treatment, or whether printed in from a suitable negative, the pigmenting serving to cover up the joins.

Two points of special importance in landscape photography are the rendering of the half tones, and the indication of distance and recession by suitable gradations of tone from the foreground to the far horizon. Both of these factors can be dealt with very suitably by exercise of due control in pigmenting. The usual straight print from a negative not taken on a panchromatic plate with appropriate colour filter shows many of the half tones far too deep. In particular, flat surfaces which should reflect

much of the sky light often show a tone similar to that of tree foliage or building walls. Judicious hopping of these parts, or skilful withholding of the pigment, can be used to correct these values. Of course, if a properly screened panchromatic negative material is used, the tones can be brought into much closer relationship with truth, but it is quite difficult to accomplish this without at the same time losing the recession of tones in the distance. The author earnestly recommends the use of panchromatic emulsions whenever possible, as giving a very close approximation to correct tones in the bromide print, and leaving less to the knowledge and skill of the pigmenter. However, even here the compromise has to be struck between full correction and recession, and the pigmenting operation, in consequence, holds the balance between the two.

Enveloppement. This French word is sometimes used to denote a peculiar quality of unity in a picture. It is difficult to describe in words exactly what is meant by the term, but if we consider it as meaning unity of texture, treatment, and general craftsmanship we shall not be far from the mark. It is a very important characteristic of any good picture, and is a primary cause of failure in a good deal of otherwise promising bromoils. Everything appears right in itself, but yet the picture refuses to cohere, and remains a collection of individual parts rather than an indissoluble whole. The building up process which is so frequently adopted by present day bromoilers using hard ink as a basis for their pictures requires a special mentality on the part of the picture maker if this unity is readily to be obtained. In some ways the soft ink methods lend themselves better to ease of working from this point of view because of the greater facility in getting pigment on to the matrix, and because all the tones are taking ink at one and the same time. Working in stages, there is a great danger of treating the hard-ink shadow portions in one style (as for instance vigorous granularity) and of changing to another (e.g., smooth delicacy) for the high-lights. The effect is fatal to the success of the picture. It is essential to conceive the subject throughout as a whole, and to keep the finished result constantly before the mind's

eye. Even such minor matters as style of mounting and finish are crucial in deciding the success of the completed work. Often a heavy black line round the picture space is all that is required to put together an otherwise none too coherent subject. In a similar way, a landscape full of interest requires a quiet sky if concentration of the attention is not to be sacrificed, and conversely a simple landscape will often form a useful basis upon which to poise a sky full of intricate cloud forms. In picture building, as in all other phases of constructive work, there is no substitute for logic and common sense.

Bromoil and Transfer. Before closing these general remarks and proceeding to a more detailed study of concrete problems in our next chapter, it will be well briefly to consider the differences in effect and style existing between the direct bromoil and the transferred image. As a general rule the direct bromoil is more brilliant and at the same time exhibits subtler tone gradations than the transfer; against this the transfer is more virile than the direct print. There are as many types of bromoil and transfer as there are workers, so that any generalisations must be to a certain extent discounted, but the above distinctions very generally appear.

For work where the photographic basis is strong the direct bromoil print will often prove more satisfying. Where, however, the aesthetic basis is well developed independently of the maintenance of photographic definition and gradation, the transfer will often score heavily. As a general rule, too, more hand work of a more elaborate nature can be carried out on the straight bromoil, either wet or dry, than can be safely added to a transfer, without its presence becoming obvious. Whether this is an advantage or not will again depend on the individual point of view.

There is one type of subject which is quite difficult to handle in transfer, and that is the subject where all the tones are very deep and strong. The securing of adequate differentiation under these circumstances demands the very highest technique, and there are few workers who are able to meet the demands. High key subjects, on the other hand, go much better in transfer than in bromoil.

In this case, paradoxical though it may seem, many transfers, each following a restrained inking, and not employing too great pressure, is the most advisable method of work. In general, it may be said that transfer makes the greatest demand on the technique, and on the artistic knowledge of the worker, of any of the photographic processes. The mastery of straight bromoil work is a *sine qua non* before attempting artistic work in transfer.