

## An Artist Teaches

*Reflections on the Art of Painting*

DAVID LEFFEL

Bright Light Publishing, \$85.00 cloth, ISBN 0-9747074-0-6; 2224  
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David Leffel's paintings have won admiration from art lovers for many years. His command of light and texture and his singular way—at least until legions of students took to imitating it—of arranging still lifes make for works of compelling beauty. Leffel also distinguished himself as a teacher at the Art Students League of New York, where he was one of that august institution's most popular instructors.

If Leffel were no more than another masterful artist whose works were elegantly reproduced between two hard covers, *An Artist Teaches* would be just another very pretty art book. If Leffel were no more than another articulate teacher, his book would be just another how-to, valuable only for those striving to learn the craft of painting. Luckily it is much more, for Leffel has a philosophical bent and grounds his remarks about art and painting in a thought-out aesthetic—an aesthetic based in metaphysics!

Leffel believes that painting is the pursuit of intelligence, of expanding the range of what we can see, and of arriving at that elusive quality we call insight. The beginning of insight is the recognition that, in the words of Medardo Russo, whom Leffel quotes, "Light being the essence of our existence, a work of art that is not concerned with light has no right to exist." When anyone claims that something is the "essence of our existence," he has entered the realm of metaphysics.

In the first and most important part of the book, Leffel describes what he means by "concept," or the essential visual idea. It is not the physical objects represented in the painting but that which the painting is about. For Leffel it is always about beauty as revealed by light and the distribution of light. That is true, he says, whether the subject is landscape, portrait, or still life. Composition is the natural extension of the visual concept. It's the means by which the concept is realized, not the mere arrangement of shapes. Concept dictates the placement of objects, the relative space they take up in comparison with the foreground and background, and the intensity of the light that falls on each. In good painting, Leffel says, everything enhances the concept and nothing is painted for its own sake. Elements that represent only themselves are a sure mark of poor painting.

Leffel defines foreground as light, background as everything else—regardless of their place on the picture plane. Shadows give stability; they hold the light. Light is where the viewer naturally senses the foreground. That is why Leffel criticizes Eakins and Vermeer. Both painted portraits with the shadow side toward the viewer.

*Truly great painters—Velázquez or Rembrandt—never make this mistake. It goes against human nature and is more than a matter of technique. It is a matter of taste.*

What Leffel overlooks is that in putting the shadow side toward the viewer, Eakins and Vermeer may have intended a comment on human nature, or that different lighting arrangements add variety to a body of work. I, for one, would be reluctant to tell Vermeer his gemlike portraits, like *Girl With a Pearl*

*Earring*, could be improved by bringing the light from in front of the model. Leffel here has either extraordinary testicular fortitude or colossalchutzpah.

The second part of the book is about techniques and tools. At times Leffel sounds more like a tennis instructor than an art teacher, telling his readers the proper way to hold and swing a brush. Yet here he provides specific advice that may benefit aspiring artists. Use the brush to transfer paint to the surface with precise strokes that have definite beginnings and ends. Don't scatter darks and lights around the painting; keep them grouped in a few major masses. Too much transparency sacrifices solidity; too much opacity loses the depth. Add background color to receding planes. Never darken the value of the light at the lighted edge of an object. Lighten the background immediately adjacent to an object. Mix colors from no more than two colors plus black or white.

Part 3 contains Leffel's reflections on the art of painting. Epigrammatic and fun to read, they elucidate some of the ideas that precede them and introduce a few new ones.

*Good painting is consistency of thought. ... In understanding there is no excess. ... So many paintings, so little art. ... Artists paint paint first and things second. Painters paint things first and paint second. Aside from all else, this is why Rembrandt is in a class by himself. He understood paint better than anyone before and since.*

Leffel's debt to Rembrandt shows up in everything from the handling of backgrounds to choice of motifs to the white headband he wraps himself in for one of his many self-portraits.

Leffel wisely borrowed an excellent layout idea from Jacqueline and Maurice Guillaud, whose *Rembrandt: The Human Form and Spirit* (Clarkson Potter, 1986) uses details of paintings to direct viewers to nuances of brushwork they would otherwise miss. I just wish he had hired a good editor. It would have saved him some apparent contradictions and, more importantly, the tortured syntax of a sentence like "Composition evolves from the concept and establishes the visual image of the structure upon which the artist effectuates the realization of his vision." For a different reason a good editor would have banished a sentence like "Intensity is compressed, vital, intense." But these flaws pale beside the book's many merits. Wonderfully illustrated and provocatively written, *An Artist Teaches* delights the eye and titillates the mind. ■

REVIEWER: Gary Michael is a fine artist and longtime art book reviewer for numerous publications. His website is [www.gary-theartist.com](http://www.gary-theartist.com).