

Preface to Jean-Baptiste Oudry's Lectures on Painting Technique Delivered to the French Royal Academy in 1749 and 1752



Preface

For over a quarter of a century Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755) was court painter to Louis XV of France, becoming one of the most popular French painters of the mid-eighteenth century. Accepted (*agr  *) into the Acad  mie royale in 1717, Oudry was appointed assistant professor (*adjoint    professeur*) at the Acad  mie in 1739 and was promoted to full professor in 1743, being granted lodgings at the Louvre the following year (Opperman 1983).

Beginning in 2002, the Paintings Conservation Department at the J. Paul Getty Museum undertook conservation and restoration work on three large paintings by Oudry from a series of life-size portraits of exotic animals in the Staatliches Museum in Schwerin, Germany. Two of these paintings, *Rhinoceros* (306 cm x 453 cm) and *Lion* (307.3 cm x 257.8 cm) had not been seen in public for nearly 150 years because of their poor condition. Following their conservation, they were displayed alongside other works from Oudry’s suite of animal portraits at Schwerin in the exhibition *Oudry’s Painted Menagerie* shown successively in 2007–8 at the Getty Museum; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Staatliches Museum, Schwerin (Morton 2007). Conservation and restoration of the third painting, *Reclining Tiger* (191 cm x 259 cm), will be completed in early 2009.

The conservation treatments provided an opportunity for Getty Museum conservators, in collaboration with scientists from the Getty Conservation Institute, to study the materials and methods used by Oudry in the creation of these monumental animal paintings. Of particular interest has been comparing the findings of technical and scientific investigations of his paintings with what the artist espoused on painting techniques, and with established painting practices of the period (see, for example, Bergeon and Martin 1994; Massing 1998).

Arising from these investigations were English-language translations of two lectures Oudry delivered to the Acad  mie royale, which we are pleased to publish here for the first time, together with the original French texts.

As a professor, Oudry was persuaded to deliver two discourses (*conf  rences*) on painting technique to students of the Acad  mie royale. The first, “R  flexions sur la mani  re



d'étudier la couleur en comparant les objets les uns avec les autres," was delivered on June 7, 1749; the second, "Discours sur la pratique de la peinture et ses procédés principaux: ébaucher, peindre à fond, et retoucher," was delivered on December 2, 1752. Both these lectures were published posthumously in the nineteenth century from transcripts of the Académie proceedings (Oudry 1844; Oudry 1863). A third lecture, which Oudry alludes to at the end of his *Discours*, was never given. He died in 1755. The two extant lectures provide some interesting insights into the views on painting practice held by an established academician and successful professional painter. Oudry, in many respects, comes across as very traditional in his outlook and quite conservative for his time. He generally offers good, common sense advice which, even from today's perspective, represents sound practice for painting in oils on canvas. The first lecture, *Réflexions*, is more general in tone and addresses broader aspects of painting, with particular attention to faithful rendering of the appearance and colors of the real world. The later *Discours* provides more detailed and specific guidance to students on the various stages involved in the creation of a painting, from the initial preparation of the canvas through the application of the final touches and details. Oudry describes the three main stages of the painting process that were seemingly widely adopted by French painters of the mid-eighteenth century: *ébaucher* (the painted sketch or underpainting), *peindre à fond* (overpainting) and *retoucher* (retouching). Oudry alluded that his third lecture would have addressed the correct choice of colors (i.e., specific pigments and/or combinations) for glazing and other paint effects.

The two lectures by Oudry are a rare example of an artist's personal testimony on matters to do with practical, technical aspects of painting. As such, they are valuable source of information, both on Oudry's own painting technique and on general practices of the period.

Oudry's lectures were translated for the Getty Conservation Institute by Steve Stella. Additional editing and annotation was done by Alan Phenix of the Getty Conservation Institute, Tiarna Doherty of the J. Paul Getty Museum and Michael Swicklick of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. The transcriptions of the French texts were kindly proof-read by Michel Bouchard, Getty Conservation Institute.

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