

Dearest watercolourists,

Today we dive into another water based paint: Tempera.

Tempera is a fast drying medium consisting of coloured pigments mixed with a binder: traditionally, egg yolk and other additives. Tempera also refers to the paintings done in this medium. It has the reputation of lasting well over time and today we can still find examples of work done in the first century AD.

In Europe, Egg tempera was a primary method of painting until the sixteenth century when it was replaced by oil painting. Tempera was discovered decorating Egyptian Sarcophagi, as well as murals across Eur-Asia.

In my experience, it is the Medieval Christian art decorating basilicas and churches that comes to mind when referring to Tempera.



*The Annunciation*, tempera on wood by Simone Martini, 1333 (saints on either side of the central panel by Lippo Memmi); in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Tempera was the medium used for decorating religious panels (tempera on wood) and illustrating Byzantine manuscripts.



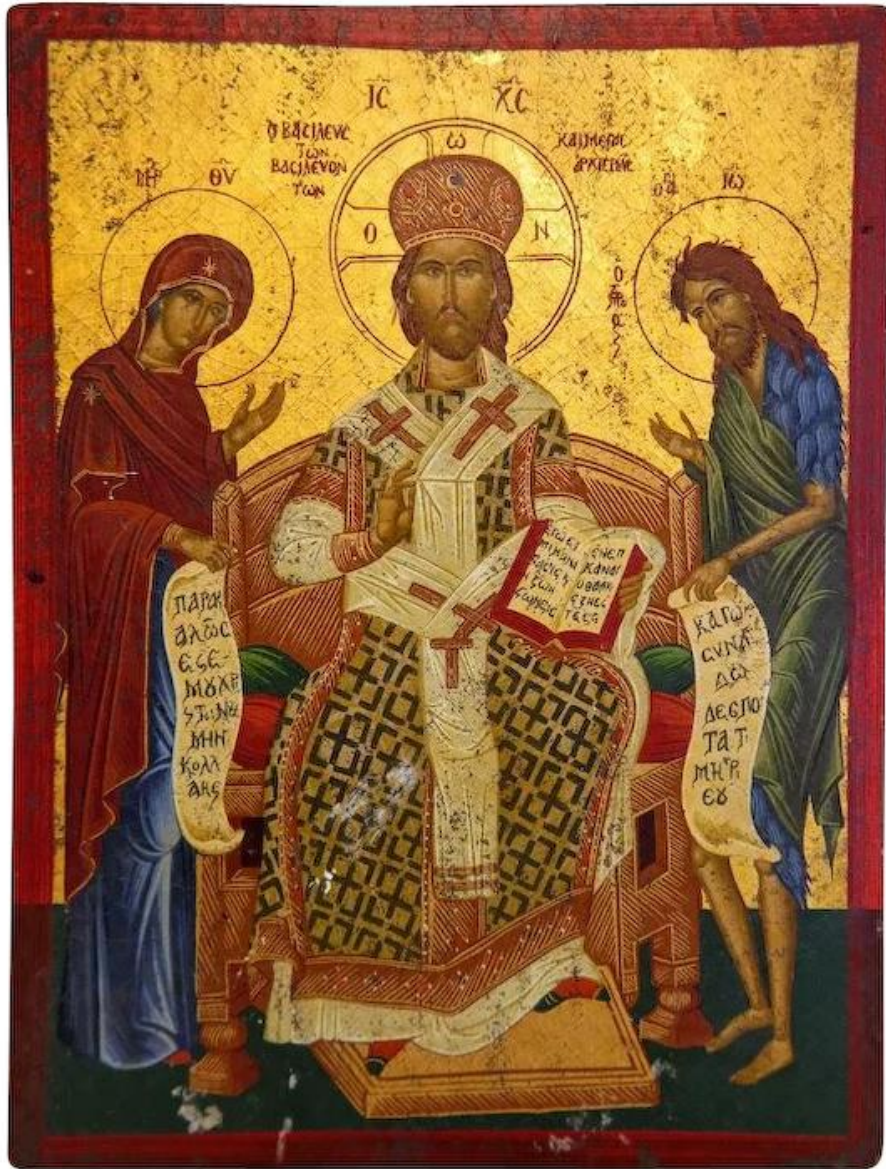
*Jaharis Byzantine Lectionary, ca. 1100, Made in Constantinople, Medium:Tempera, gold, and ink on parchment; leather binding*



*SANDRO BOTTICELLI (1445-1510), 'Idealized Portrait of a Lady', 1480,(egg tempera on a poplar panel)*

With the discovery of oil painting, the Catholic world moved towards a new art form dictated by this discovery, while the Byzantine-Orthodox world continued the tradition of Tempera painting in decorating the Christian buildings.





*Greek Orthodox Icon, tempera on wood, 20th century, Jesus Christ sitting on a throne as the Ruler of the universe.*

Oil slowly replaced Tempera in Western Europe during Early Renaissance, when the medium, which was imported from Afghanistan, was appropriated in Early Netherlandish paintings. From the Netherlands, it arrived in Italy.





The Crucifixion; The Last Judgmentca. 1440–41, Jan van Eyck Netherlandish, Oil on canvas, transferred from wood

In the western world, Tempera techniques saw a revival in the nineteenth and twentieth century with the artistic movement of the Pre-Raphaelites.





*Marianne Stokes 1855–1927 Tempera on wood : 416 × 340 mm*

Traditionally, to make Tempera from scratch one can use dry powdered natural pigments mixed with egg yolk and other plant gums or waxes as additives. Egg yolk cannot be used by itself with pigment because it dries almost immediately and it causes the paint to crack. It requires another agent, for example vinegar or even water. Because the pigments were all natural and each interacted differently with water, yolk and the plant gums, each colour would be obtained

using a specific recipe, sometimes created by artist or artists studios and kept secret.

What I find very interesting but not too surprising is that when painting icons on church walls, the Tempera formula would change, as liquid myrrh was sometimes added to the mixture, on the one hand as a divine blessing, on the other to give the paint a pleasing smell, as you can imagine, the organic egg in tempera could release a rather pungent smell sometime after completion.

Although it is a water soluble medium, because it contains egg yolk, tempera has a consistency that may get too greasy, so the artist would have to progressively work on the colour by adding water to preserve the texture. Also, because it was a very natural medium, it could only be used fresh. It would not resist being stored. All in all, the medium was a very difficult one to master and it posed many difficulties. However, its main advantage was the resistance of the pigment in time.

In comparison to watercolour, tempera is more durable and also more saturated. It can also be applied on wood and paper. The texture makes it more precise and the fast drying time is also an advantage.

Today we use premixed colours and paints. Let me know if you have some tempera at home and would like to have a workshop on the different mediums.

I really do not want to suggest you to buy anything, but what I want to do is encourage you to experiment with various paints. By getting to know a little bit more about this mediums, they should get less intimidating and more exciting and some might even find their way into your own artistic practice. I also hope that this overview would also add to how you experience art in a museum (once those are safe to visit of course).

Please let me know what you think about this and if you have any favourite Tempera painting!

Kindest,

Ioana