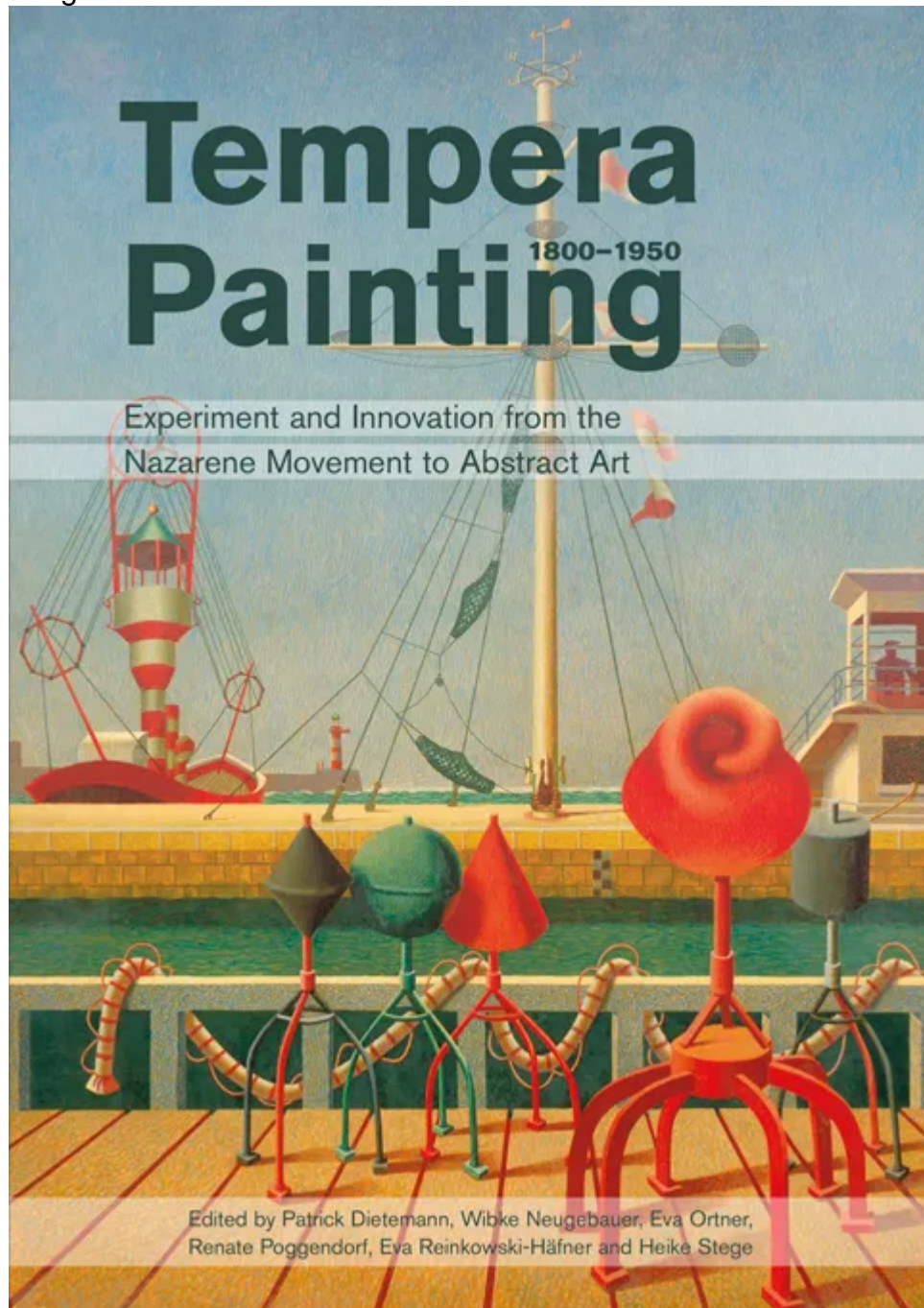


Book Review: Tempera Painting 1800–1950

Submitted by sharragrow on 18 Jul 2024

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***Tempera Painting 1800–1950: Experiment and Innovation from the Nazarene Movement to Abstract Art*, Edited by Patrick Dietemann, [Wibke Neugebauer](#), [Eva Ortner](#),**

[Renate Poggendorf, Eva Reinkowski-Häfner and Heike Stege, Archetype Publications \(2019\), 226 pages / £47.50 / ISBN: 9781909492592](#)

Reviewed by Joyce H. Townsend

This book is the proceedings of an excellent and well attended three-day conference held in Munich in 2018. The conference was in-person only, concluding with a selection of workshops where the delegates could make and try out tempera-based paints. It presented recent research into the practicalities of artists at work, examination of paintings, analysis of complex paint samples and reconstructions of artists' practices. The book was published shortly before the global pandemic and has received less attention than it deserves. It complements *Painting in Tempera c.1900*, edited by Karoline Beltinger and Jilleen Nadolny (Archetype 2016) and [reviewed earlier for News in Conservation](#), and in-depth publications in German. It brings together studies on art in US and UK collections as well as collections in Munich, where a wide range of tempera paintings from this period can always be seen in the Neue Pinakothek, the Lenbachhaus and the Sammlung Schack, among others.

Taking the broadest definition of tempera paints as 'water-thinnable paint', the sense in which artists used it in mainland Europe, there is a long history of use that often centred on Munich. The city is also associated with innovation in artists' materials in both oil and tempera in this wider sense, and with significant figures (not too widely known to single-language English speakers) in the history of paint technology such as Ernst Berger, Adolf Keim, Alexander Eibner and Max Doerner for whom the Doerner Institut in Munich, a leading centre of art technological research, is named. Munich in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was associated with strongly expressed views and longrunning feuds amongst artists, manufacturers and chemists that have been investigated and untangled by German researchers since about 2000, notably in the Archetype-published proceedings of conferences organised by the Art Technological Source Research Group (latterly a working group of ICOM-CC).

In many ways *Tempera Painting 1800–1950* sits with this group of useful books. It covers the entire timespan when tempera-based paints were widely used in German-speaking countries, firstly for mural paintings on a monumental scale and then, as the 19th century progressed, for paintings on canvas, on a smaller scale appropriate for middle-class homes. An understanding of mural painting and external wall-painting in Germany at the beginning of this period illuminates the sometimes disastrous technical experiments by English artists of the mid-19th century who were deliberately not using true fresco when they worked on prestigious decorative commissions that today are challenging to preserve and often much altered in appearance.

In the 20th century, the range of new tempera paint products that emerged from the innovative hub of Munich reached into Scandinavia and Italy influencing early 20th-century artists working in these countries, as well as artists resident in Germany. It is likely they were exported more widely too. This broadens the relevance of the papers in this book.

There is a tendency to think there are no such tempera-based paintings in British or American collections because many artists in these countries had few connections to artists working in Germany, given the geopolitics of the first half of the 20th century; however, this is not always the case. Examples of such paintings from the early 20th century often puzzle conservators with

their surprisingly good and crack-free condition, given that they are now around a century old. These paintings sometimes have a rather matte appearance and/or an unusual stratigraphy and preparatory layers; they do not present any major challenges when treated in a manner similar to that done for traditional oil paintings, yet they do not look like simple oil tube paintings. Some of this perception of 'not in our collection' may have arisen because there was a genuine egg tempera revival in Britain at the end of the 19th century which lasted until the Second World War period and then quietly migrated to the USA where some of the Wyeth family of artists worked in egg tempera. However, some paintings with tempera-like media do not respond well if conserved in the same way as oil paintings, which is why this book is so useful in understanding them.

The pre-First World War group of artists known as der Blaue Reiter included Wassily Kandinsky and his partner Marianne von Werefkin, Gabriele Münter, Alexei Jawlensky, Franz Marc, August Macke and Paul Klee; they remain the best-known users of tempera-like paints. Some of this group who survived the First World War became known as abstract expressionists, and they are better represented in US, UK and German collections, which is another reason why the book is very useful. It is beautifully illustrated, informative and extensive for the proceedings of a relatively short conference, in English throughout, and discusses tempera paints from many viewpoints.

Author bio:

Dr Joyce H. Townsend is senior conservation scientist at Tate Britain, London, and IIC director of publications. At Tate, she carries out technical studies into paintings and watercolours in Tate's collection and interprets artists' painting processes using microscopy-based methods. Her favourite paintings are by colourists of all periods or were painted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Read the review in the June-July 2024 "News in Conservation" Issue 102, p. 44-45