A study of the Algonquin Hotel

Cheryl Jelonek
A STUDY OF THE ALGONQUIN HOTEL

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Entering the charming lobby of the Algonquin Hotel was quite exciting, especially since I had no previous knowledge of the hotel. A taxi driver had suggested the Algonquin, and it will be obvious that he was quite convincing. It was he, with his acute perceptions, who had provided the initial stimulus for this work. Although, at that time, I had no idea that the Algonquin Hotel would serve as the subject for my paintings. I had returned to the hotel eight months later to begin my photographic studies.
I. THE ALGONQUIN HOTEL

The Algonquin Hotel, located on West 44th Street in New York City, is a turn-of-the-century structure. Both the exterior and the interior of the building reflect this era. The physical appearance of the large lobby, elegant dining rooms, and the intimate private rooms provided the stimulus for this study. I had always been interested in human figures and interiors and their relationship to one another. The uniqueness and beauty of the Algonquin provided an excellent environment for a study of these relationships in my paintings.

Sensual reds, browns, and golds enhance the dimly lit lobby. Every aspect of the decor, from the sculpted ivory ceiling to the dark wooden wall panels and pillars is appealing. Lighting fixtures with brass designs adorn the pillars with similar chandeliers hanging throughout, and antique lamps with painted bases spot the tables in the lobby. Much of the furniture is upholstered in brocade and velvet with interesting patterns and weaves.
The glass on the entry doors and the dividing panel are incised with design. Large brass ashtrays, fresh flowers, and bells on the tables all ornament the lobby appropriately.

The private rooms, even with their visual signs of aging, retain the charm of the lobby. They do not seem to have changed drastically since the 1920's. Instead of plastic or cheap veneer, all of the appointments are brass, solid wood and leather. The drapes, wall coverings and bathrooms are all preserved quite well. Rather than cardboard reproductions in plastic frames, only original lithographs and prints dating from 1920-1940 adorn the walls.

After appreciating the decor of the hotel, and realizing that it has been virtually unchanged since the 1920's, one must be curious about its past. This long-lived beauty beckons one to take more than a casual glance. The hotel earned its notoriety in the 1920's. Famous patrons, such as Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, John Barrymore, Tallulah Bankhead and Helen Hayes were regular guests. The Round Table or Vicious Circle was also
formed at this time.

The meeting of the legendary Round Table began in 1919 due to the efforts of Peter Toohey and Murdock Pemberton. They had planned a meeting at the Algonquin with Alexander Woollcott and sent invitations to every theater critic and important editor in the city. Of those invited, Franklin P. Adams, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Brock Pemberton, Heywood Broun, Ruth Hale, Harold Ross, Jane Grant and Robert Sherwood would make up the Round Table along with Alexander Woollcott and the organizers of the first meeting. The only regulars not in attendance at the first gathering were Marc Connelly and George S. Kaufman. The group was very selective about its members, and no one was welcome without the consensus of all.

No one came to the Round Table a "Nobody"; they all held respectable positions in 1919 and after and were showing talent almost as prodigious as their ambition. Still, like most fervent self-believers, they also needed reassurance that they were indeed as good as they thought. That reassurance came almost as a prerequisite of acceptance in the Algonquin group.¹

James R. Gaines believes it was that need of reassurance that kept the group together so long. The Round Table group continued to gather at the Algonquin for twelve years following that first meeting.

During that time, their writings had become quite celebrated, and consequently, they became well known public figures, who were readily accepted into the social set of the time. Frank Case, the owner of the hotel, provided the group with a large round table in the Rose Room. This proved to be a valuable asset to the Algonquin, because not only did the members write about the place, but their very presence brought in numbers of actors and writers.

When I returned to the Algonquin Hotel for a second time, I came with a camera to take photographs throughout the lobby, hallways, and rooms. Even though the management was hospitable, the physical limitations presented a few problems that I was not prepared for. The lighting was very low, and not being permitted to use electronic flash or floods, the exposures needed to be very
long. Also, so as not to disturb the patrons, I was forbidden to photograph the hotel guests, but I could use employees. But, the major limitation was time. I was confined to an hour in mid-morning. Even with these restrictions, however, I was able to acquire a considerable amount of information for my paintings.
II. THE USE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

The history of painting probably began in the caves as much as ten thousand years ago. The history of photography, the process of fixing an image produced by the aid of light, began about a hundred and twenty years ago. In spite of this vast difference in age, photography and painting have a great deal of influence on each other.\(^2\)

Photography is a technique that I directly apply to my paintings. My photographs are not an end in themselves, nor are they the finished product, but instead they are an inspirational and informative source for my paintings. A photograph will often reveal various visual possibilities that I had not originally perceived.

I use photographs for various reasons. The photograph provides an accurate depiction of light, shadow and reflections which is most important to my painting. Where the photograph captures the light in a moment, to draw or sketch light values would take hours. It would be practically impossible to render natural light before it changed dramatically. Subtle light effects, which are

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also very important, would remain undetected by
the eye or ignored. With a camera, one can record
many views of a particular subject and also achieve
varying possibilities of light.

The original three-dimensional subject has
been simply reduced to a two-dimensional photo-
graphic print. This abstraction aids in deter-
mining the composition for the painting. Positive
and negative shapes and spaces, and their relation-
ship to one another can be evaluated more precisely.
By controlling the development of the print, such
as burning-in (darkening) or dodging (lightening)
areas, various compositions can be studied. Then
I do tracings of the print, changing the design in
each before the final decision is made.

The camera provides other assets, such as
spontaneity, capturing the moment and the unposed
subject. The action of someone's movement, or
their particular gesture is recorded. Taking
photographs in these situations becomes more
practical than sketching.

The negative provides information that can be
referred to at one's convenience. Very often, I
enlarge a small section of the image to examine specific areas. Since my paintings are very detailed, this is an important factor.

It bears repeating that the photograph opens up an immense visual field. Natural conditions so transient that they would normally be beyond the reach of even the most skilled draughtsman working from memory; the unselective character of the lens; the fact that the images are more accessible in the hand at any time, in a way that nature is not - these are among photography's exclusive characteristics.3

Ever since optical drawing aids, such as the camera obscura, had been invented, artists and technicians have taken advantage of them. For many years, Vermeer had baffled art historians with the precise order and perspective in his paintings.

As long ago as 1891, when eyes had not yet grown accustomed to the camera's way of seeing things, Joseph Pennell, an American etcher, lithographer, and friend of Whistler, was struck by the "photographic perspective" of Vermeer's Officer and Laughing Girl. What had caught his eye was the disproportionate size of the man in relation to the girl. This is the kind of distortion imposed by a camera on objects closest to its lens, and it occurs in many of Vermeer's other works, such as Lady With a Lute.

3 Aaron Scharf, Art and Photography (Baltimore, 1969) p. 249.
This distorted perspective and treatment of light on textured surfaces convinced scholars that Vermeer did indeed use the camera obscura.

In the View of Delft and in the painting of the girl in the coned shaped hat he has literally made light sparkle. And upon close examination, the sparkling areas in each can be seen to consist of little dots of flattened paint called pointilles, which resemble nothing so much as the fuzzy, overlapping sequins of light that appear in an out-of-focus photograph and are referred to as discs of confusion by photographers. 5

Vermeer used the camera obscura as a point of departure, with his main objective being to paint light and the way it described shapes.

After the advent of photography, many painters of the nineteenth century used photographs as a source for their paintings. Degas used photographs but did not readily speak of his use of photography. He only hinted at it, but friends and associates testified to his use of photographs. 6 He worked directly from many. Degas' compositional innovations and unusual poses were based largely on photographs, in fact, many of those photographs

5 Koningberger, p. 141.
6 Scharf, p. 142.
exist today. In many of his paintings the main subject is off to the side or even cut off partially by the edge. The poses of his subjects, especially those of humans and horses, are extremely natural. We can assume that he studied the photographs of Muybridge dealing with motion of humans and animals.\textsuperscript{7} It is the qualities of his compositional innovations, unusual poses and extreme perspective that give Degas' work a uniqueness.

The non-selective character of the lens gives certain photographs an ascendancy over paintings which otherwise, because of the more palpable nature of paint and other characteristics beyond the scope of photography, they would not have. Often, it is the very "lack" of order, the unnaturalness and even the distortions in form which provide photographs with a special power. Often, the artist corrected the very things which, in the photograph, produce the great impact. He tried to transform the photograph, to give it pictorial logic, when its strength resides in its lack of logic. Few artists in the nineteenth century fully understood or utilized this fundamental attribute of the camera; the force of convention was too intimidating. Degas created something new in painting from such photographic images.\textsuperscript{8}

I agree with Scharf that lack of order,

\textsuperscript{7} Scharf, pp. 159-160.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., pp. 160-161.
unnaturalness and distortions may be positive aspects of a photograph. It should retain its personality and good qualities. I can control distortion, selective focus, and the field of vision by the lens that I choose. I use selective focus for interest. The photograph is not in the same focus throughout and I try to achieve this in my paintings. I can also control the viewers' eye by having fuzzy out-of-focus objects leading into ones of more detail and definition. Distorted perspective does not bother me as long as it does not conflict with the point of view of the painting.
Sizing is the first step in preparing the stretched fabric for oil paint. I choose to use linen canvas instead of cotton canvas because of its textural quality and durability. Two thin applications of rabbit skin glue are embedded into the fabric. It is imperative that the glue has sealed the fabric from the oil paint to follow, because, otherwise, rotting would occur. In the second step, the priming coat of paint is applied. This is the working surface and it should serve the needs of one's technique. I paint very lean with little oil and use flat opaque color. For this reason, I use tinted titanium for my primer. This must dry fully before work may follow.

After selecting the photographic image, I project it on the prepared canvas, which has been made to the correct proportion. The projection is traced quickly eliminating fine detail.

The photographs that I use are black and white, and, as a result, the color selection is very intuitive and extremely important. This is especially
true concerning the first application of color or underpainting because it is then that the color relationships are stated and the basic palette is chosen. There is no attempt to shade or render objects, only to fill in the drawn shapes with flat areas of color. I try to achieve the middle value of each particular color. Even if the color is wrong, the value will still be approximate. This underpainting covers the canvas, changing the drawing into light and dark areas of color, thus resulting in the basic composition.

I then begin to render each item or shape in the painting, one at a time, and mix varying shades of color for each. The mixing of color is done totally on the palette. After all the values are achieved, I proceed to paint them systematically on the canvas. There is no direct mixing of color on the canvas other than softening the edges of these different values. I have studied the color in Vermeer's paintings. His shadows do not become grey or black, but retain the brilliance and intensity of the color. This is what I try to achieve by mixing the color on the palette. To help preserve
the integrity of the color, I do not use black in my paintings.

Vermeer used a very limited palette for his paintings, and there is usually a predominance of two colors in each work. I feel that limiting my palette has helped my work. Using a predominance of two contrasting colors is important to my color scheme. This creates some tension in the painting. The aspects of mixing and color choice ultimately aid in achieving the light/shadow depiction that I strive for.

The photograph is always at my side, and I use it for reference constantly since the achievement of similar light values is important. Corrections, color changes, and details are made after the painting has been thoroughly rendered. It has taken, on the average, eight weeks to complete each of these paintings.

Obviously, my work is of the realist vein. So many titles have been given to the realism of the 1970's that it is difficult to say which is most applicable. Such labels as Sharp-Focus Realism, Photographic Realism, and Radical Realism seem to
describe the painters who present an objective, matter-of-fact coolness in their paintings. Such subjects as store fronts, automobiles and various manufactured items are found in the work of such artists as Richard Estes, Ralph Goings and Robert Cottingham.

The subjects that I am portraying are different. These subjects, human figures relating to their environment, may be said to be warm, intimate, romantic and subjective. The works of other realists such as Audrey Flack and Douglas Bond also contain a romantic approach to photographic painting. In defining this type of realism, labels such as Figures/Environments, Realist Revival and Imagist Realism might be appropriate. Gerrit Henry stated in relation to Douglas Bond's work,

The attitude of the romantic Photo Realists, on the other hand, favors art over morality. He or she conceives of the contemporary American reality as a situation that must, by the very laws of nature, have its good and bad features, and it is this amoral, aesthetic sensibility that allows the artist to show a sense of style - if not actually employ one on canvas - in his discriminating choice of subject matters.9

In my paintings, the choice of subject matter is very important. Both the Algonquin Hotel and the people in it serve as the subjects. Having become fond of the hotel environment, this choice is understandable. The camera enabled me to capture moments of unposed reality. It captured romantic suggestions of light, shadow, mystery and drama. When I transposed this to the canvas, and manipulated it with an intuitive color, partially suggested by my remembrance of the experience, I achieved, I feel, a personal and intimate realism that, at the moment, pleases me and offers me encouragement for my future growth as a painter.
At Martha's Vineyard
BIBLIOGRAPHY


To
Fred Meyer
From
Ed Miller
Date
May 9, 1978
Subject
Thesis - Cheryl Jolmes

I'd consider Cheryl Jolmes' thesis paintings, and the written accompaniment to be completely satisfactory. Fine work!
I recommend that the thesis "A Study of the Algonquin Hotel" be accepted as satisfying the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree.

Yours truly,

Fred Meyer
Dear Fred Meyer,

I feel that Cheryl Jelonek is qualified to receive the MFA degree. Two general criticism, however: I can appreciate the painstaking amount of work and time in completing the three paintings, but they functioned for me as part of a series that still remains to be completed. Secondly, I questioned, at times, how the characteristics and treatment of the paintings (such as the study the Algonquin Lobby) went beyond the scope of the photograph. I enjoyed working briefly with Cheryl and look forward to being involved with other thesis from the College of Fine and Applied Arts.

Elliott Rubenstein