

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF PAINTING BIRDS

*Extracts from George Lodge's autobiography
"Memoirs of an Artist Naturalist"*

"This is not an easy subject to write about and must not be approached with assurance or dogmatism, as everyone who studies art has his own ideas and methods and, quite rightly, follows and uses them in order to get the results that appeal to him."

"Entirely different methods produce good results, and who shall say this or that is the right way? Individualism is necessary in all branches of art – if only to do away with monotony. It is to be supposed that 'Modern' artist would say that painting birds is not art at all, only 'copying from nature'. But those who have given their lives to painting picture of birds will say that few things in nature are more beautiful and full of grace than birds: therefore, why not 'copy' them? Especially so when one has the sense to realise how very difficult it is to copy a living bird"... "The drawing of birds in movement demands not only the ability to represent fore-shortening of the body, but also of the markings on the plumage. In such cases a certain amount of impressionism is obviously necessary; in fact, in painting *pictures* a lot more impressionism might be practised. But that is not to say that one should dispense with scientific accuracy."... "Light and shade help to convey an accurate impression of reality. Too much background is to be deprecated for scientific work. Realistic foreground, in the immediate vicinity of the bird, yes, but let it fade away into a wash of suitable tone and colour. Let the objects in the foreground be in proper relation to the size of the bird; let it be remembered that a blade of grass may be as tall as a snipe; and that one frond of bracken may be larger than a pheasant." ... "When you consider the matter it is surely preposterous to paint a ringed plover on the sand with its head towering about the horizon line, when in looking at the subject in life one sees only the few inches of sand and pebbles immediately round the bird and the horizon line a long way about the bird's head. In fact, the horizon line, when in looking at the subject in life one sees only the few inches of sand and pebbles immediately round the bird and the horizon line a long way above the bird's head. In fact, the horizon will be on the level of the observer's eyes; to see it on a level with the bird itself the spectator would have to lie down and have his eyes only a few inches from the ground instead of at a height of five or six feet."

"I suppose all landscape and animal painters make innumerable sketches direct from nature in order to have material for the surroundings and foundations of the pictures they paint. When I was young and strong I used to do a good deal of work in oils, and I have many sketches done in various parts of the world from the Tropics to the Arctic regions. I never hesitated to take out easel, canvas and painting gear in midwinter. I would work all day with snow deep on the ground, or skate out onto the ice and paint away until I was too cold to work, and so had to stop and take a cruise around on my skates until circulation was good enough to allow me to continue work."

"One of the difficulties of drawing birds is coping satisfactorily with foreshortened postures. The movements of birds, also, are so lively that it takes a very quick eye to see

and know what one is looking at, and what a bird is really doing. The only way is to make sketches as rapidly as possible and afterwards make the best one can of a bad sketch. Errors can often be rectified at leisure without spoiling the freshness of the sketch from life. But never let it be said by the bird artist that such a thing must be right because it was done from life: I know the fallacy of this all too well”...

“...in painting pictures of birds, photographs should be used with the greatest caution. I am thinking particularly of birds flying. Personally, I never use photography as a help; I much prefer to do as much as I can with my own eyes. I have never taken a photograph in my life and, of course, would never dream of using anybody else’s photograph. However erroneous one’s effort may be, given some natural ability for the job, it is surely better to rely on one’s own careful observations. The difference between a photographic record and an exact impression of rapid movement is erroneous. Rapid actions of birds and beasts should be rendered as they appear to the trained eye.”

“As a rule, stuffed mounted birds should never be used as models unless, indeed, one knows so much about the subject that the imperfections of the stuffing can be rectified in the drawing. No matter how well a bird may be stuffed – and there are few such – it will always lack the grace of the living bird. But stuffed specimens may come in useful for getting correct ideas of light and shade and reflected lights. They may also help in getting a proper drawing of fore-shortening... Although drawing from stuffed birds is to be deprecated, it is essential to have a good many skins of various species, as it is quite impossible to get scientifically correct drawings of the intricate markings of plumage without skins for constant reference. It is impossible to do such drawings from life; the birds must be handled.”

“The best medium for painting birds for scientific book purposes is undoubtedly water-colours, but it is quite impossible to get the intricate pattern of many plumages without having recourse to the use of body colour. As I have said, I always use tempera myself for book illustrations.”

“Tempera is an opaque medium, like oils, and cannot be used for clean transparent washes like water colour, but has to be used with the help of white and as a rule has to be worked with a very dry brush. The details of a bird’s plumage can be got just as well in tempera as in water colour; the effect is almost that of an oil painting. Tempera has the merit of drying very permanently so that one can paint in details over an already painted ground work without disturbing the under-colour. To such an extent can this be done that I have painted an entirely different subject over a picture already done.”

“There are a lot of men who have shot all their lives and are yet quite incapable of intelligently criticising a picture of game birds – or of any other bird or beast. The silliest remark I ever heard in connection with this matter was that of a shooting man who said he had picked up hundreds of shot partridges but had never yet seen the flank feathers coming up over the wings. It is a pity he had not the inclination, which every sportsman should have, to observe and find pleasure in watching closely in life the birds and beasts of the chase.”

