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Abbott Handerson Thayer: “A Beautiful Law of Nature”

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Developed by Gold Leaf Studios
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Introduction to the Exhibition and History

In the last twenty years of his life, Abbott Handerson Thayer (1849 – 1921) devoted himself to his Protective Coloration theories of animals in nature. Long since preoccupied with the powers of observation, the technical problems of gradation and tone, and a sensitivity to shape and color, the renowned artist and naturalist began to gather information on the coloration of birds in the early 1890s. Eventually he came to conclude that the patterned coats of most animals was a generalization or distillation of the features of those physical settings in which it was commonly found, a surface that would be absorbed into a greater variety of specific backdrops. He deemed this occurrence a “beautiful law of nature.”

The familiarity with optical effects he developed through these studies was thus of paramount importance when he began applying these same principles to the camouflage of military war vessels in the mid-to-late 1910s.

With this exhibit Gold Leaf Studios, representing the Abbott Handerson Thayer Trust, aims to illuminate the context and progression of Thayer’s Protective Coloration findings into his work on military camouflage. Exhibiting his groundbreaking early camouflage designs for Navy ships and submarines alongside his optical studies of animals in and out of their natural environments, this collection of work shows Thayer’s devotion to the visual properties of the natural world and his attempts to employ their principles in aiding his country during wartime. Ultimately, this show also hopes to honor the legacy of this eccentric genius and great American painter and naturalist.

The collection of over 40 artworks in this exhibition consists of paintings, drawings and sketches by Abbott Handerson Thayer from throughout the course of his life, largely focused on animals and nature. Further works in the inventory include printing proof samples for Thayer’s book, *Concealing-Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*, with the artist’s handwritten notes and corrections, as well as an original copy of the book. Works range in date from childhood

ornithological drawings from c. the mid 1860s, to intensive, detailed concept designs for Navy ship camouflage c. the mid 1910s, which illuminate Thayer's lifelong commitment to the laws of nature.

Thayer's Development of 'Concealing-Coloration in the Animal Kingdom'

From an early age Thayer was an avid naturalist, spending many hours of his free time hunting, trapping, observing and drawing the wildlife abundant in the areas where he lived; when he established permanent residence in Dublin, New Hampshire in 1901, he reveled in his natural surroundings, hiking and exploring the surrounding wilderness as part of his daily routine. His son Gerald was an eager companion in these pursuits, and the two began to systematically collect bird specimens, which they would stuff and catalogue.

It was in the passionate examination of birds that Thayer's theories of Protective Coloration first evolved. He observed in the coats of many animals the employment of strong arbitrary color patterns which tended to conceal them by destroying their continuity of surface and thus obscuring the contour of their shape. For instance, he noted that the flecked coloring of woodland birds resembles the dappled effect of sunlight seen through bits of branches and leaves. Plumage, according to Thayer, "is a sort of patchwork of pictures, subtly intermingled, each an epitome of some particular type or detail of woodland scenery."

In 1909 with Gerald's editorial assistance, Thayer published *Concealing-Coloration in the Animal Kingdom: An Exposition of the Laws of Disguise Through Color and Pattern*. The book detailed the artist's theories of natural camouflage among many species of animal in a variety of natural environments, accompanied by illustrations to support his claims. Thayer also gave practical demonstrations of his discoveries to some of the world's leading naturalists in both the United States and Europe, bringing his principle of Protective Coloration to the attention of the foremost international authorities of his day.

Applying Natural Optic Principles to Early Camouflage

The last decade of Thayer's life was marred by several frustrations, beginning with the stiff criticism from the scientific community of his book; he spent much of the rest of his life trying to prove his theories to skeptical colleagues, among which was former President Theodore Roosevelt. [Records of their correspondence are on file at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, copies of which should ideally be borrowed to accompany this exhibition.]

The outbreak of World War I stimulated a flurry of earnest but ineffectual activity; he became anxious to adapt his principle of camouflage to the design of soldiers' uniforms. He wrote many letters to military officials, including Franklin Roosevelt, then the Assistant Secretary of the Navy [Records of their correspondence are on file at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, copies of which should ideally be borrowed to accompany this exhibition.]. He even arranged to have fellow painter John Singer Sargent present his designs to the British War Office. However, none of these efforts materialized or reached fruition, and the failure of his work to be accepted in his own lifetime left Thayer embittered.

While Thayer's theories were never fully endorsed by the scientific or military community—it was largely agreed upon that his ideas and intentions were noble, but that he took it too far, applied it too broadly and exaggerated the nature of his findings—there is no doubt that his efforts did much to bring the issue of camouflage to the attention of the public.

Thayer was personally unsuccessful in convincing Allied forces in World War I of the military utility of camouflage, but the matter was widely discussed and enough interest was generated to produce a second printing of *Concealing-Coloration in the Animal Kingdom* in 1918. By World War II, most military vessels were equipped with camouflage patterns for protection, the designs of which were not much different from Thayer's initial proposals from over twenty years before.

Further Reading

Smithsonian Archives of American Art

There is a large amount of Thayer's correspondences in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, much of which concerns his research on protective coloration and the publication of *Concealing Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*. Correspondence is available for viewing on the Smithsonian Archives website, arranged alphabetically by last name of correspondent and chronologically within each folder. As noted by the Smithsonian's web page:

“To pursue and defend his theories on concealing coloration... [Abbott Thayer] corresponded with many notable naturalists, biologists, ornithologists, and collection curators. Most notable is his extensive correspondence with Sir Edwin Bagnall Poulton, a British zoologist, and draft letters to Theodore Roosevelt, in defense and promotion of his work. He corresponded with many, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, then the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and the War Office in London, promoting his theory on the value of concealing coloration for warships and the military. Correspondence is arranged alphabetically by last name of correspondent and chronologically within each folder.”

Perhaps most intriguing within the context of this exhibit are Thayer's correspondences with Franklin Roosevelt and Theodore Roosevelt. In his letters to Franklin, Thayer included drawings of camouflage studies for marine vessels that match those studies currently in the care of Gold Leaf Studios. Letters to Theodore are impassioned debates, full of educational and enthralling detail that illuminate the debate surrounding Thayer's theories of protective coloration. You can view the material online here:

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/abbott-handerson-thayer-and-thayer-family-papers-7440/more>

PRP Productions: “Invisible: Abbott Thayer and the Art of Camouflage”

In 2008, PRP Productions produced a documentary on the subject of Thayer and his camouflage studies. The film uses archival footage and interviews with historians, artists, and descendants of Thayer to discuss the evolution and inspiration behind his work. For more information, visit the link below:

http://prpproductions.com/New_Site/Welcome_.html

Selected Images

The sample images below together focus on the main points of the exhibition: Thayer's devotion to nature and his theories of Protective Coloration, and its combined influence in his development of camouflage designs for Navy vessels at the onset of WWI. All images are by Abbott Handerson Thayer and property of the Abbott Handerson Thayer Trust. The frames were custom made for the exhibited work by Gold Leaf Studios.



Description: Plumage study of ducks in a natural environment with descriptive notes; early study for book *Concealing-Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*.

Pen and ink on paper.

Dimensions: 7 1/2" X 5"

Frame Dimensions: 20" X 18 1/8"



Description: Wood duck on a pond; early study for book *Concealing-Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*.

Oil on board.

Site Dimensions: 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ " X 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Frame Dimensions: 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ " X 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ "



Description: Diagram of Navy ship camouflage.

Watercolor and pencil on paper.

Dimensions: 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ " X 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Frame Dimensions: 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ " X 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ "