

12100 Bister

A brown pigment prepared from wood soot may have been used since very early times, but it is not specifically mentioned in English sources of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Hilliard's reference to soot for shading brown or black gives no indication as to whether wood or coal soot is meant, and the latter seems most likely. The French name *bistre* is listed in both de Mayerne's manuscripts and in Boutet's book on miniature painting. In the English translation of Goeree's book the color is listed simply as *soot of wood*. None of the four works listed is purely English in origin, and it is not until one reaches English sources dating from the second half of the eighteenth century that frequent references to bister are to be found. It seems that the best pigment was made from beechwood in France, and Dossie attributes its limited use in England to that fact. Once the pigment was obtained, preparation was a comparatively simple matter. It was boiled in water, and, when it had been allowed to settle to some extent but was still hot, the clearer part was separated from the sediment and the fluid evaporated, leaving a fine pigment of a warm, deep transparent brown.

Bistre was used only in water color painting, for asphaltum provided a similar transparent brown in oils. Bistre may have been superior to asphaltum as a water color, although it was not altogether easy to use, its slightly resinous character making it difficult to work with and mix with other colors. Spanish liquorice was often incorporated with it to improve its working properties and impart a richer tone, but such an addition was detrimental because liquorice brown was fugitive.

excerpts from:

Artist's Pigments c. 1600-1835 R.D. Harley