



Utrecht Art Supplies

Oil Painting: Advice for Beginners



Oil paints can at first seem a little bit mysterious. They don't behave like other types of paint in terms of handling or drying time, and a huge range of materials and techniques have been developed throughout the history of the medium. As complex as oil painting may seem, though, at the core of the craft are a few common principles. Learn them, and you can begin to unlock the descriptive power and lively expressiveness that's made oil paint the favorite medium of so many artists.

Fat over Lean

Success in oil painting depends to some extent on sensible layering. "Fat over lean" is the traditional principle that recommends the first layers have less oil than each subsequent layer. Also, faster-drying layers should be applied first, followed by slower drying ones. This ensures good adhesion between layers and prevents defects like peeling, crazing or wrinkling.



Where to Begin

Some artists begin by covering the entire canvas with a thin veil of a naturally fast-drying earth color like raw or burnt umber, but others jump right in full-palette. The main advantage of starting with a monochrome (single earth color) is being able to establish lights and darks before handling the overall color scheme. Starting full palette on a bare primed canvas keeps colors bright and vibrant.



Using Mediums

If you'll be using a traditional oil-based medium, in the early stages colors should be thinned only with OMS so paint doesn't become too "fat" or oily. Fast-drying alkyd medium is best used from start to finish or just in the first stages. Use painting medium to improve brush movement, make paints more workable and impart uniform gloss. Whatever medium you're using, try to use the minimum effective amount and avoid over-thinning colors.

Measuring by Thumb

Artists are often observed squinting at an outstretched thumb. This technique is used for measuring and comparing the apparent heights and widths of elements within the picture. Try for yourself: Hold a paintbrush upside down so your thumb rests near the brush handle sticking out of your fist. Close one eye and sight against the brush handle, measuring between the tip of the brush handle and the top of the thumb. Extend your arm fully without bending the elbow for accurate comparisons each time. Compare elements like a human subject's head, hands and torso, trees and houses, etc. to achieve accurate proportions.



Working with Color

Work with the brightest hues first, then mix toward neutrals (browns, greys). Blending two or more colors can make a more dull mixture, but won't make a brighter one. (The exception is dark transparent colors like phthalo blue that can be brought to full brightness by adding white.)

Remember: every neutral is a version of a brighter color that can be named as a primary or secondary, so challenge yourself to "name" neutrals as you mix them. Colors should be mixed on the palette as much as possible- not on the canvas- to keep clean, accurate hues.



Mixing with the palette knife rather than the brush makes it easy to produce enough of a

single color all at once, and preserves brushes in good condition.



In between sessions, sometimes colors can “sink in” and appear dull. One way to remedy this is by “oiling out” before the next application of fresh paint. This involves applying an extremely thin application of medium, just enough to restore the dry paint to its wet appearance and promote fluid brush application. Take care to apply just enough medium to achieve desired effect, not so much that the canvas feels greasy. If you’d like to revive colors without wetting the surface, apply a coat of retouch varnish instead.

Step Away from the Canvas

When you stand at a fixed distance from the easel for a long time, it’s easy to lose your grasp of proportion. Periodically step back from the canvas and take breaks at intervals to stay fresh. If the canvas becomes completely saturated with wet paint to the point where



Finishing touches

An important part of painting is learning what makes a picture “finished”. In general, unfinished is better than overworked. The last passages on a picture should be carefully considered and deliberately executed. After the major statements in color and value have been made, the final stage of painting should unify everything, fine-tune edges and make the highlights “pop”. The consistency of the paint in the final stages is very important, because the brushstrokes will communicate themselves more in this layer than in any previous one.

Drying Time and Varnishing

Unlike acrylic which dries relatively quickly by evaporation, oil paint cures through oxidation over a period of months, during which time dimensional and chemical changes are taking place. For best results, a final varnish shouldn’t be applied until paint is completely dry. Retouch Varnish can be applied to paintings dry to the touch but not yet completely cured.