

PROPER USE OF MATERIALS IN OIL PAINTING

What follows is a short guide to oil painting that I have prepared for students in intermediate painting. It is by no means all-inclusive, but it does lay out the essentials for tackling the medium of oil paint. In the end, artists learn what works or doesn't work through experience. Don't be offput by all the do's and don'ts. Remember that oil painting has lasted for five hundred years! This means it is a forgiving medium. Artists can make lots of technical mistakes and still end up with paintings that will be around long after they are gone!

General Rules

Do not eat or drink while painting. Store all resins and solvents in their original containers only, and store these in a metal locker. Store your medium in a metal container, and make only as much as you need. Pour dirty solvents into a metal can for filtering or else dispose of them in the large red metal can beneath the sink. Dispose of dirty rags in a special metal container. Squeeze out only as much paint as you are going to need. NEVER POUR ANY RESINS OR SOLVENTS DIRECTLY DOWN THE SINK. Wear protective clothing. The use of rubber gloves is strongly encouraged.

- I. **Oil Paints:** It is preferable to work with rubber gloves when painting with oils. It does not take long to get used to wearing gloves while painting, and they protect the skin of the hands—which is an organ and directly absorbs that which with it gets in contact. NEVER put the paintbrush in your mouth, or touch your mouth when you are painting. The components in several pigments are toxic.
 - A. **Pigment properties:** Each pigment has physical and chemical properties, which artists learn about through experience and study.
 - B. **Permanence:** An acceptable pigment must neither fade nor darken on continued exposure to light. The quality of resistance to fading is known as lightfastness. Fading or darkening of color of a pigment over time on exposure to light is a chemical reaction set in motion by the light. All the pigments listed on your materials list are approved for permanent painting, although cheaper paints contain inferior pigments and can darken or fade. When purchasing additional pigments, look for indications of a permanence of “I” or “II” for lightfastness on the labels.
- II. **Brushes:** Never put a paintbrush in your mouth. Clean brushes by following these three steps: 1) carefully wipe the brush bristles and handle with a cloth or paper towel; 2) go the sink and scrub the brush bristles with soap or a grease-breaker like “Goop” or Murphy’s oil soap and (preferably warm) water. Be sure to reshape the bristles when you are through.

III. Solvents: In this class, we will use only ODORLESS paint thinner or ODORLESS turpentine. Remember, this does not mean they are harmless—only odorless. Try to purchase a brand labeled “pure,” or at least a brand that lists the ingredients. Cover the can when not in use. Remember that vaporization takes place and contaminates the air, evaporating more rapidly in warm temperatures. For this reason, it is important to keep the painting room cool. Temperatures below 70 degrees F. are safest. Avoid all skin contact. After using any solvent, wash with soap and water.

NOTE: Odorless turp is a safe solvent, but has one drawback: it is not as good a solvent for damar resin. Nevertheless, it can be used, and we will use it in this class.

IV. Resins: We will use damar varnish in this class, which is a solution of damar resin in turpentine (do not buy damar crystals). Resins dissolve and mix with various solvents and oils. Damar is used as a final picture varnish (when the painting is thoroughly dry to the touch), as well as one of the ingredients of a glazing medium. Students may also purchase Venice Turpentine for their mediums. This is an extremely thick fluid resin which enhances the glazing properties of the medium and adds to the gloss. This is OPTIONAL only, as Venice turp is very expensive.

V. Oils: Students may choose either refined linseed oil or cold-pressed linseed oil, which are generally prepared in ready-to-use form.

VI. Painting Mediums: There are many painting mediums prepared by artists, but the best remain simple. A medium is used for more complex methods of painting, which employ thinner coats of paint or glazes over dried underpaintings. The medium dilutes the vehicle and also contains solid ingredients with film-forming properties in themselves. These leave behind them substances which, when dry, help the chemical structure of the painting. Much opaque painting, or average thickness painting, however, is done without the use of any mediums at all. Painters simply thin the tube pigments with a small bit of turpentine. (Avoid overuse of turp, or it will cause cracking.)

VII. Glazing: Glazing is a method of layering the paint to achieve certain effects. Among these effects is color depth, which can only be achieved in this manner. Other effects are sfumato (softening of contours) or simple alteration of a color. The general principle is to apply glazed layers over brilliant, reflective underpainting. There are many variations and effects in which glazing can be used, however, which artists discover on their own.

A. Basic Recipe: This basic recipe uses the oil and varnish to counteract each other's weaknesses and to create a strong binding structure for layering:

Damar Varnish	4 parts
Linseed oil	2 parts
Venice Turp	1 part (optional)
Turpentine	4 parts

- B. The first layer of paint should be pigment thinned with turp
 - 1) Each successive layer should have a small amount of medium added to it.
 - 2) In building layers of paint, increase by a few drops the amount of OIL in the medium (FAT OVER LEAN)

VIII. Problems

- A. In order to avoid problems, adhere to the simplest oil painting techniques possible.
- B. To avoid *pentimento* (the effect where, because thin top coatings of paint have become more transparent with age, the underpainting or drawing originally concealed has become visible), practice the following rules:
 - 1. Plan your multiple layers of paint with fat over lean in mind
 - 2. Scrape off very dark areas before overpainting them with paler tones
 - 3. Take down any textures you don't want with your knife or a sharp blade
- C. To avoid *cracking*:
 - 1. Avoid overuse of turpentine
 - 2. Avoid painting fast-drying pigments over slow-drying ones
 - 3. Avoid using transparent paints (like alizaron crimson) as underpaintings unless they are used to make a tint (e.g., mixed with a lot of white to make pink); use pigments that are by nature transparent on top layers or in glazing.
- D. Remember: The underpainting and the ground will always have some degree of influence on the final painting. Oil paint layers become thinner with age, and color effects are different depending on what color is over what color.

IX. References

- A. The best general reference book for artists, and oil painters in particular, is Ralph Mayer's The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques (New York: Viking Press, 1970). This book answers all technical questions, is well-indexed, and is not so conservative as to ignore modern approaches to oil painting. Two additional good sources for learning the techniques of oil painting are:

Clifford T. Chieffo, The Contemporary Oil Painter's Handbook
(Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976)

Reed Kay, The Painter's Guide to Studio Methods and Materials
(Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983)

- B. Art supply stores usually have a book section where there might be a couple of books on oil painting that appeal to you. The simpler the better. The large bookstore chains also carry books on artist's materials and oil painting in particular.