How to Create an Underpainting Like the Old Masters: A Step-by-Step Guide

An E-Book

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PORTABLE SHOPPER, LLC
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  About the Artist
Virtually every master of the High Renaissance, including Da Vinci and Raphael, began their paintings with an underpainting. It is a basic building block of every great realistic painting. This method was almost lost in the evolution of modern art. But the knowledge was carefully preserved, and today is still passed on from one artist to another. I learned underpainting from John Frederick Murray who learned from one of the great art teachers of the twentieth century, Frank J. Reilly. He, in turn, learned from George Bridgeman who had studied with Jean-Leon Gerome. We all learn from those who came before us. And on the pages that follow, I’m going to demonstrate one of the most important methods in creating paintings with outstanding realism.

What is an Underpainting?

An underpainting is almost always a monochromatic or neutral grey rendition of the painting on your canvas. It can also be rendered as a color sketch or wash, which is a much thinner version of the more direct and final painting. But either way, it is vital in developing the drawing and establishing the values (lights and darks), forms and composition of a painting.

When you do an underpainting, you get a clear idea of what your painting will look like before it is actually finished. It helps you see and solve many of the problems of the painting process in the earliest stages of your work. This prevents problems from showing up in the later stages, and gives you results that look fresh and effortless.

Underpainting is also a process of layering a painting to create more luminosity. You see, the underpainting never completely disappears when the painting is complete. It isn’t visible to the eye. But light travels through the layers of paint, reaching the underpainting, then reflects that light through all the overpainting layers. This is what gives a painting the luminosity so admired in masterworks over the centuries. Paintings without an underpainting never achieve the same degree of luminosity because they lack the depth of paint layering.

Many of the old masters used their underpaintings as part of their finished work. Backgrounds and other areas of a painting with less importance were sometimes left visible and not painted over. The reason was simple. Keep the viewers eye focused on the center of interest or the more finished areas of the painting. Keep in mind that it is not always necessary to finish each area of a painting to the same degree. Doing that can distract from the center of interest—the focal point of the painting.

Many contemporary artists today use an alla prima method of painting. This is a very direct method of painting, with little or no preparation. Alla prima paintings can be started and finished in one session. You can achieve a certain degree of luminosity this way. But it will never match the luminosity achieved by first developing an underpainting. That’s why Da Vinci started every painting with an underpainting. So did Rembrandt, Raphael, Rubens, Titian, and countless other masters whose work is priceless.

INTRODUCTION
Underpainting Methods

Several different methods of underpainting were used by the old masters.

1. **Grisaille (pronounced griz-eye)**
   This is a method of underpainting with gray paints in order to properly focus on the values and forms in your painting. It's best to use neutral gray paint, so that you don't throw off your colors when you paint over the underpainting. If properly mixed, neutral grays are neither warm nor cool; they are absolutely neutral in color or a perfect gray.

2. **Verdaccio**
   A method of underpainting with an olive green gray color of paint. The color of the underpainting may resemble a moon-lighting effect. This olive green gray color or dead color is used in the lighter values of the underpainting and a burnt umber or raw umber is used in the darker or shadow areas of the underpainting. Verdaccio underpainting was a favored method used by Flemish masters, such as Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony Van Dyke. The artists would use complementary colors in their overpaintings in order to achieve realistic and luminescent optical effects.

3. **Imprimatura**
   This method of underpainting uses a transparent layer of earth colors such as raw umber or burnt umber. The first stain of color or toning of the canvas can be considered imprimatura. A more advanced type of imprimatura is the wash-in method of underpainting, which is the focus of the lesson demonstrated in this book.

**The Wash-in Underpainting**

When a single layer of transparent paint is used to execute the underpainting, it is considered a type of imprimatura. With this method of underpainting, you rub down or oil out the entire canvas with refined or cold pressed linseed oil. You then paint over the canvas with an earth color such as raw umber or burnt umber, using a two- or three-inch-wide primer brush. Once the canvas is completely and opaquely covered with paint, you then wipe it down, with the paper towel or rag to the value of the shadow on the center of interest. The shadow on the center of interest in your painting might be located on the models face if you’re painting a portrait, or on a specific object in a still life. The paint on your canvas will no longer be opaque once your canvas is wiped down to the shadow value of your subject. Your canvas now has a transparent layer or stain of umber paint covering it.

Next, you use the back of your pencil to draw into the wet transparent umber paint layer on your canvas, establishing all elements of your subject and composition. It’s important to draw in all shadow and cast shadow shapes as well. Once this drawing is complete, you wipe out all areas of light and establish the values (light and dark) of your subject matter. Paper towels, rags, and paper blending stumps are just a few of the materials that can be used to pull out your lights. You must also make sure that all shadows and cast shadows are properly established. Proper modeling between light and shadow will ensure that the illusion of form is established on your subject. Different types of paint brushes can be used to pull out lights, soften edges, and model forms.

Once your picture is dry you have an underpainting, which will be painted over in color. Or it can stand on its own as a value study.
Did you know that Rembrandt began every masterpiece with an underpainting? So did da Vinci. And if you ever dreamed of painting on their level, you will have to learn how to do it too. You can. Right here. Right now.

You see, the underpainting method has always been passed on from master to student. That’s how the masters of realism learned it. That’s how I learned it.

Now you can learn it from my new e-book, How to Create an Underpainting Like the Old Masters.

It’s almost impossible to create successful realism in oils without knowing what’s in this book. With this book, you will learn to do in a few hours what legends in art learned serving apprenticeships with masters. And if you went to art classes to learn this method, you would have to pay hundreds ... if you could even find a class that teaches it.

The e-book teaches you the underpainting method step by step for only $25. It’s the method that helped make Rembrandt, da Vinci, Michelangelo and hundreds of others legends in their own time.

Buy this book today and take a giant leap in your painting skills with your very next painting!

You will learn:

Materials you’ll need and how to use them

How to light and compose the still life

How to prepare the underpainting
The wash-in underpainting - step by step

How to lay out the drawing

How to establish values, forms and mass

How to use your paint brushes

Glazing techniques

Get the e-book now for only $25!