

Oil Painting: The Process of Completing a Painting

There are many ways to start and work on an oil painting and there are no right or wrong ways to work out the painting. Plein Air painters and Alla Prima painters start with a sketch and add paint all in one session, getting thicker as they go. Other painters build up multiple thin layers over time. To maintain the integrity of the paint surface without cracking, separating or blooming under a varnish, there is one cardinal rule called “fat over lean” that should be followed. This means that oil paint in the bottom layers should be thinner (using mineral spirit type compounds for regular oils or thinner specific for water mixable oils). With each layer, the paint should get “fatter”, that is, it should contain more oil. In the top layers, this means an oily medium needs to be added to the paint.

Supports— The most common supports used for oil painting are:

1. A blank canvas primed with gesso (most pre-made canvases that you buy in the store are prepped this way).
2. Wood panels or MDF board can also be primed with gesso (usually 2-3 coats or more are needed)
3. Canvas can be glued to wood or MDF board (PVA glue is common as the glue needs to be acid free). The canvas must be primed with gesso if it is not already.

Methods of Starting—

1. Sketch a drawing of the subject matter on the support (this is usually a rough sketch), and begin blocking in colors. The sketch can be done with pastel pencil or thin acrylic paint. Graphite can be used, but has a tendency to dull the oil paint.
2. Tone the support with a color or colors. This can be done with acrylic paint, or with thin oil paint. When dry, sketch a drawing of the subject matter and proceed to block in colors.
3. Monochromatic Undertone: Using a wash of thinned oil paint, create a drawing of the subject matter in more detail than just a sketch. This becomes a road map to the painting. Some of the undertone can be allowed to peak through as the painting is developed. When the undertone drawing is dry, then colors can be blocked in.

In my classes, I encourage students to start with the monochromatic undertone method of beginning a painting until they are comfortable with color mixing and how the oil paint behaves as it is added in layers.

The following are examples of how a painting is developed in layers using the monochromatic undertone method:

Original Photo:



Paint plus thinner used to sketch in the composition of the painting with the goal of getting highlights, middle tones and dark tones. You can start by ragging out dominant highlight areas, then start to add dominant dark tones.



Once you have the general composition locked in, you can begin to add more detail until you feel you have enough information available to develop the painting.





Final Undertone Sketch:



Because the undertone sketch is done with thinner, it should dry fairly quickly over several days. Then you can begin to block in your first best guess at colors. Look for general shapes and dominant areas of color. Close your left eye (opposite if left handed) and blur your right eye to see these general shapes. Sometimes this color is an average of all the colors in an area. Most painters begin with the background or the darkest color areas. Keep the paint thin and loose with no paint stroke marks and no hard line edges.



Notice that the undertone sketch is not covered up, but is being allowed to show through in areas.



It's ok to correct areas as you go. Note, the shadows on the pathway appeared too dark as the surrounding colors were put in. This was corrected and lighter shadow colors were inserted wet in to wet right from the get-go.



Image at final blocked in color stage:



You might ask, where did all the colors come from? If you look carefully, you can see the pinks and purples in the pathway, and the blued greens and purples in the distant bushes. In person, there would be much more color information available, but a photograph overdoes the darks and color information is lost in the highlights. It's OK to "invent" color! YOU are the artist!



From here on out, you are slowing down and adding more and more detail to the painting. Mostly this is done by painting the “texture” of an area, rather than trying to paint every leaf/branch/etc. Look for similar colors in different areas and paint them in at the same time.



Put down shadow colors (in this case shadow greens) first. Keep a light touch. You can always add thicker and heavier paint in the last stages.



Then add mid tone colors softly wet into wet and finally a few highlight tones.



For each area, do the same switching to the appropriate colors for the area.







Finished Painting:



Original Photo:



Remember: this is only one example. Every painting has its own unique problems that must be solved by the painter. There is no one right way. Keep loose, watch the paint, and most importantly—Have Fun!

Jo Watson