

UNDERPAINTING

Underpainting is the time-honored method of laying the foundation for a good painting by blocking in the main shapes and tones with thin paint, prior to the application of detailed color. The idea is to establish the overall composition and tonal relationships at the outset, thus providing a firm base from which to develop the painting.

The Old Masters often divided the execution of a complex painting into several, more manageable, stages. Firstly, an IMPRIMATURA OF TONED GROUND was laid, followed by an underpainting. When the artist was satisfied with the organization of the picture, he then overpainted with thicker color and/or transparent glazes.

Some artists favor working directly, or *ALLA PRIMA*, but there are certain advantages to making a preliminary underpainting. First of all, it helps to overcome the staring white of the canvas or board which comes through a toned ground or imprimatura. This makes it easier to judge the relative tones of the succeeding colors.

Secondly, mapping out the composition in this way gives you an accurate idea of what the final painting will look like. At this stage, you can see at a glance whether or not the picture "hangs together," and any necessary changes or corrections can be made. Because the paint is used so thinly in underpainting, mistakes at this point are easily corrected by wiping the paint with a rag soaked in turpentine substitute.

Corrections should be avoided in the later stages of the painting, because they involve scraping down the paint, and there is a danger that the colors will become clogged and look tired from being overworked.

Thirdly, an underpainting leaves the artist free to concentrate on color and texture in the later stages of the painting, because all the decisions about light, shade and modeling have already been made.

Always work loosely in the underpainting stage. Use a fairly large brush and work rapidly, blocking in the main shapes and masses only. It is a mistake to put in too much detail at this stage, because it tends to restrict the freedom of brushwork later on. It is essential to keep the painting in a flowing, changeable state and to work from the general to the particular.

Regarding the colors used for underpainting, there are several choices: you may choose to block in the light and dark areas in a rough approximation of their finished colors; you may use neutral grays, blues, or earth colors which will help to unify the later layers of color; or you may choose a color that contrasts with the final coloring of the subject (a warm red under a stormy gray sky, for example).

Rembrandt (1607-69) often underpainted his subjects in tones of gray, *terre verte*, or brown, overlaid with thin glazes. When painting flesh tones, Rubens (1577-1640) used an underpainting of *terre verte*; this subdued green complements the pinkish color of the flesh and, when allowed to shine through in places, lends a delicate coolness to the shadows.

Oil

When underpainting in oil, always use lean paint, diluted with turpentine to a fairly thin consistency (see *FAT OVER LEAN*). Allow the painting to dry thoroughly — at least 48 hours — before painting over it. A convenient alternative is to use acrylic paint for the underpainting. This dries within minutes, allowing you to begin the overpainting in the same session.

To indicate light areas, use very diluted paint, or wipe off the color with a rag. An underpainting should consist of a mere stain of color which dries quickly and doesn't smudge or lift off when overpainted.

Acrylic

Color for the underpainting stage should be mixed with matte medium, which dries without any shine.

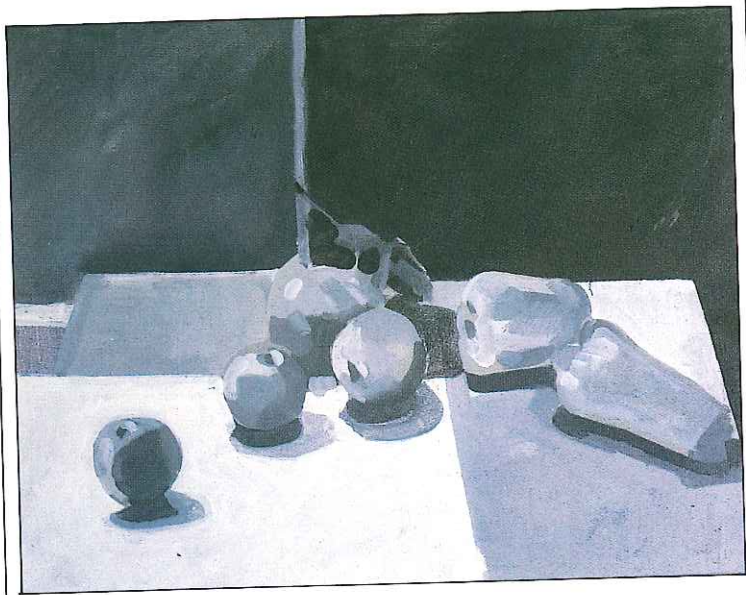
The obvious advantage of acrylic paints is that they dry so quickly, which means that you can complete the underpainting and the overpainting in one session if you wish.



Underpainting

1 Many artists choose to underpaint in tones of one color — usually a neutral color: this is called monochrome underpainting. Here the artist is making an underpainting for a still life. The paint is diluted with turpentine to a thin consistency and applied with short, scrubby strokes with a large flat brush. If desired, a toned ground or imprimatura can be applied before the underpainting. It is a matter of personal choice as to how you tackle the underpainting: you can work from light to dark, from dark to light, or you can start with the middle tones and then establish the lights and darks.

2 Here we see how the basic shapes and areas of tone are beginning to take form. This underpainting is done in tones of cool gray, mixed from Prussian blue and burnt umber — both quick-drying colors. Flake white is added for the lighter tones (never use titanium or zinc white, since these are very slow-drying colors). It is a good idea to blend the edges of the shapes lightly with a soft brush; this will eliminate any hard edges in the paint surface which will spoil the later applications of paint. Try not to create too many extremes of tone — keep the shadows lighter than they will finally appear and the highlights more subdued. The lighter the underpainting, the more vibrant the finished picture will appear.



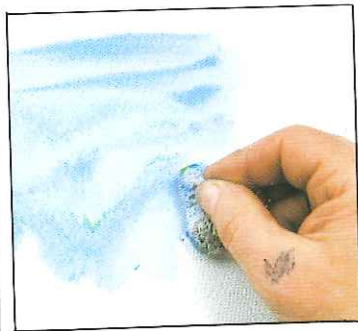
3 When the large masses have been established, use a smaller brush to refine the shapes if desired. Guard against too much detail, however. The underpainting is only a guide and should not be so perfect

handling in the later stages of the painting. Once the underpainting is thoroughly dry, you have a solid foundation on which to continue the painting in color.

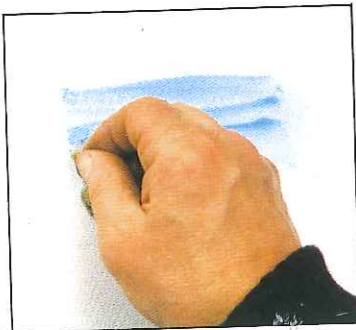
VARIEGATED WASH

With water-based media — ink, watercolor, and heavily diluted acrylic — exciting and unusual effects can be obtained by laying different colored washes side by side so that they melt into each other **WET-IN-WET**. Try using variegated washes when painting misty, atmospheric skies, for example.

Variegated washes are controllable only to a degree; when the colors start to bleed together there is little you can do to control the spread, except by tipping the board or blotting with a sponge. But then in any painting the best results are often achieved by a combination of skill, hope, and the “happy accident”!



2 While the first wash is still wet wash in another color with a sponge and let the colors run together.



Variegated wash • Sponging

1 Dampen the paper, then mix up a variety of colors and apply them in an irregular shape so that they flow together.



3 A more concentrated mixture of paint can then be drawn across the wash with a paintbrush to strengthen the colors.