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Elements of Art & Art Vocabulary

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Old Masters Academy™

Welcome to the Old Masters Academy™ online art course!

Throughout this Course, we use art-related terminology. This document will help you to familiarize yourself with Elements of Arts as well as Art Vocabulary, so next time you come across some art lexicon you will understand the meaning of various art expressions.

How can we analyze art?

Fine Art is Measurable and Analyzable, even though some try to convince us that Art is too ephemeral for that.

Any piece of art has more or less objective criteria that can be taken into consideration when we try to understand what we like about it and why we like it. And on the contrary, being able to formulate and describe reasons why we find piece of artwork to be not really successful.

As far as a painting has a physical presence - a Body, we can analyze it using the rules of harmony that are universal and barely changed for centuries.

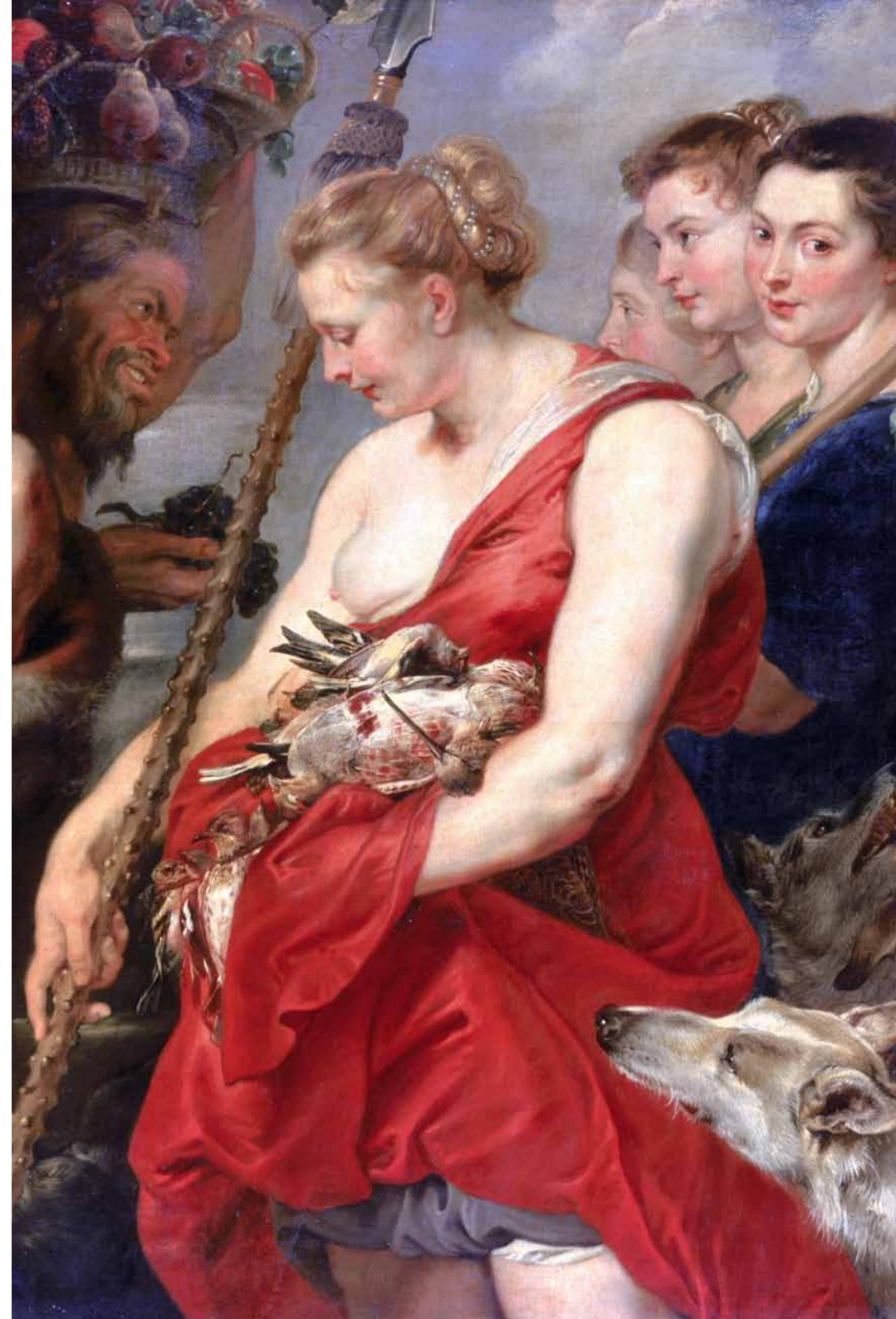
Visual Art in general and painting in particular are as measurable and analyzable as other liberal arts like, let's say, music or architecture.

We analyze their elements and how harmoniously they are composed. In music, there is musical notation, rules of harmony and composition. In Classical Architecture - there are building typology, classical orders, theory of form, perception of form, space planning and other criteria that could be analytically decomposed.

Visual Art, in particular painting, also consists of its Elements. Once you know what the elements are, you can efficiently use them practically while creating art or theoretically when analyzing your own artwork. Such knowledge also widens your art horizons, letting you analyze the works of other artists and especially works of the Old Masters. Understanding what real qualities of Old Masters' paintings are, we would be able to dig deeper than just the simple explanations such as: "I like it because I like it." "There is something in it." "It moves me and inspires me; and yes, the character has a lovely face expression."

You have to go beyond stereotypical phrases by being able to explain WHY you like or dislike it and WHAT exactly impresses you. This is a professional approach.

All Elements of Art described below will help you to understand whether they have been used efficiently in the creation of art and what elements were ignored or used half capacity.



12 Elements of Art

Elements referring to Color:

1. Color (or Hue)
2. Tone (or Value)
3. Intensity (or Saturation)

Elements attributed to Physical / Material aspect:

4. Line
5. Shape and Form
6. Space and Volume
7. Texture

Elements attributed to Construction:

8. Composition
9. Direction
10. Size
11. Time and Movement
12. Contrast



Elements referring to Color

Colors are the basic elements of a painting. Each color has 3 main characteristics: Color, Tone and Intensity.

1. Color or Hue

Both terms Hue and Color can be used interchangeably. However, there's some difference in their meanings.

When we talk about colors, for example, Yellow, Red, Blue and Orange, Green, Violet - we are talking about Hues.

Hue is a pure color, an inherent color. With no White added to it (otherwise we would call it Tint); or without any Black added (otherwise we would call it Shade).

While the term "Color" is used in a broad way for describing nuances of the Tint like "phistashkoes green," for example, or "cool brown."

You may also hear a term *Local Color*, or sometimes it can be called Perceptual Color. This is about actual color seen on an object or a person.

2. Tone or Value. Tints and Shades, also Luminance, Luminosity.

You can use both terms Tone and Value to describe relative lightness or darkness without any consideration of Hue. The Tone / Value of the Color is changing from the lightest to the darkest tones possible for that particular Color. When you increase lightness of a Color by adding White, we call such mixture a *Tint*. When, on the contrary, we want to darken a Color by adding Black, such mixture is called a *Shade*.

So, a Tone/Value of any Color could be changed in two ways:

1. By tinting or shading a Color;
2. By applying a Color in thin Glazing layers.

These two ways can be successfully combined. Tinting and Shading have their advantages and disadvantages. It is especially common when beginners add White to lighten a Color or add Black to darken it. The result of such approach is usually not so picturesque, but rather decorative and artificial. However, in a case when we would like to use an Underpainting as one of the initial steps of painting, it is perfectly appropriate to fall back to Tinting. Colors lightened with White can cause a shift in mix towards colder-looking color, and that is just what we expect from an Underpainting.

3. Intensity or Saturation, also Chroma or Chromaticity.

Intensity literally implies how intense, rich, deep, vibrant, and vivid Color is. By employing the knowledge of Primary and Secondary Colors and how they interact with each other (there is the whole Video Lesson dedicated to this topic) you will be able to neutralize or mute any excessively bright color without losing its colorful characteristics.

Adding White to any bright Color (Tinting) can kill the Intensity of that Color, making the Color dull and cloudy.

Intensity underlines a purity or strength of a Color. Bright Colors are often associated with positive energy and heightened emotions.

The method of Glazing can be efficiently employed for increasing Intensity to its maximum potential.



Elements attributed to Physical / Material aspect

4. Line

Lines can be painted with a brush or formed as a division between two painted areas. Lines in painting could be a very impressive visual language; however, when applied all over the board, it can make a painting look flat and decorative.

There are two kinds of lines we need to mention here:

- Outlines
- Contours

Although many artists use these terms interchangeably, there is a fundamental difference in the meanings of these two words.

Outlines are visible (usually outer) edges of an object that outline its shape. Such outlines are formed by the surface that is bending at the edge between visible and invisible parts of an object. In simple terms, an outline is the line around a shape or an object.

Contours are virtual lines that are formed by intersecting an object by a flat plane at any angle and place. As such, there is

an indefinite number of contours that can be found for any given object at any given place of that object. Contours are very important when it comes to depicting an object's three-dimensional shape. Usually, applying pencil or brushstrokes along contours and separating different colors by contour lines helps to describe the form and shape of an object.

In medieval painting, artists painted outlines as regular equal-width lines. During the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci was one of the first artists who changed that approach by painting more “fluid” outlines that were varied from well-pronounced edges to diffused and soft lines of sfumato.

Later, more emphasis was made on contours. For example, in paintings of Vermeer and Caravaggio, contours between colors and light and shade play an important role.

Both outlines and contours are significant elements of visual art.

5. Shape and Form

Both Shape and Form define objects. They can be geometric or organic, man-made or natural. To describe any given object, artists depict their shapes and forms.

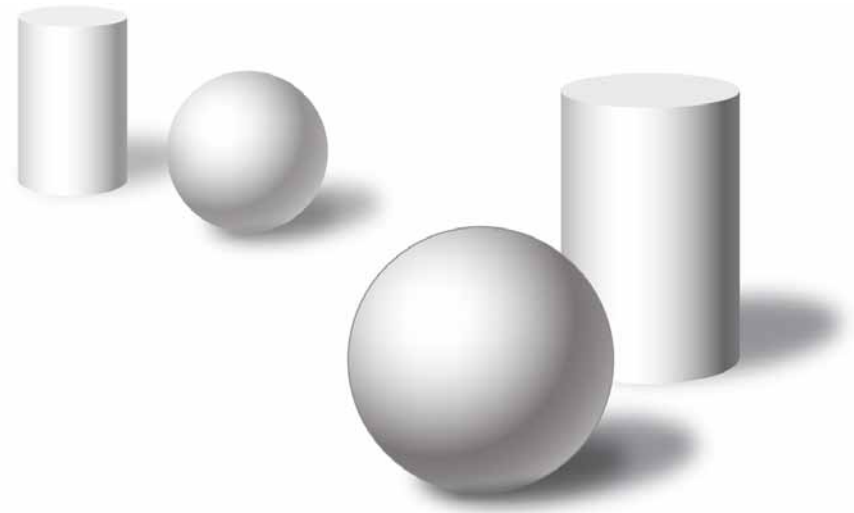
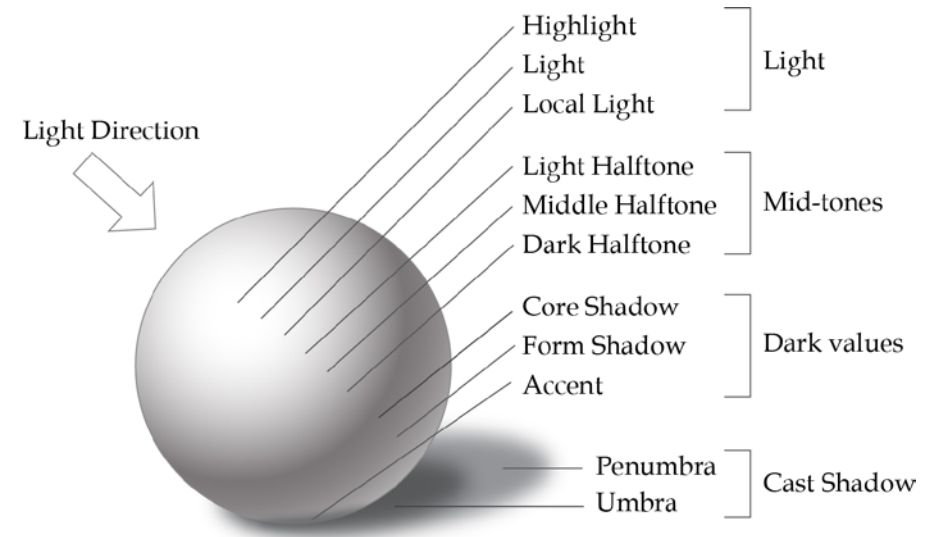
Shape and Form have similar meaning; the only difference is that Shape has two dimensions - height and width, while Form exists in three dimensions - height, width, and depth.

6. Space or Volume

All objects are located in space and have their volume and spatial location. When depicting three-dimensional objects arranged in space on a two-dimensional surface of canvas, artists employ various methods such as linear and aerial perspective, and they use tonal values and colors to describe an object's volume and location.

For example, volume and spatial location of a white sphere can be described in artwork by gradations of light, mid-tones and dark values, as well as a shadow cast on a surface that this sphere is placed on.

Spatial arrangement of objects is described using rules of linear and aerial perspective. Linear perspective is based on rules of geometry and deals with an object's foreshortening, relative sizes and positioning; while Aerial perspective describes how the Earth's atmosphere influences the appearance of objects and helps to depict the depth of view.



7. Texture

Any object has its physical texture. To realistically portray an object, an artist has to depict how it looks and feels in real life, and this includes what texture it has – is it polished and smooth, soft, puffy, rough, greasy, and hairy and so on.

When painting a person, an artist may describe if this person has youthful skin or dry and wrinkled skin. The color mix, a method of application, a kind of underpainting and chosen mediums all play a significant role in the depiction of texture of a surface.



Elements attributed to Construction

8. Composition

The term composition means 'putting together.' It is the way in which all visual elements work together as one piece of art. Composition in painting combines all elements described above and conveys how lines, shapes and forms are arranged in relation to each other, how space and volume is constructed using perspective and tonal values, how colors work together with tones, and how texture is introduced.

The composition is one of the most important elements of art. It has its rules, and knowing and applying those rules, an artist can direct a viewer's gaze to a focal point, telling the story in one's artwork, making sure that the piece of art looks balanced, well-proportioned and is pleasing to look at. Using rules of composition, an artist can organize components of a piece of artwork, give it unity and integrity and incite feelings in viewers.

9. Direction

In artwork, direction is most often associated with lines. Lines can be straight, curved, interrupted with gaps, but in every case have some direction – vertical, horizontal, diagonal or circular.

Artwork with diagonal lines will look more dynamic, while straight vertical or horizontal lines would imply more stable appearance.

Curved or linear direction guides a viewer's gaze and can be used by artists to direct to the focal point of a composition.

In cultures where writing goes from left to right, diagonal lines that go from the bottom-left to the top-right are perceived to be ascending, and lines from the top-left to the bottom-right are perceived to be descending. Ascending direction is often associated with optimistic mood and the opposite is true for artwork with descending direction.

10. Time and Movement

Time and Movement are correlated to how a viewer perceives and looks at the painting.

Did you know that on average visitors in museums spend no more than 20 seconds looking at any given painting?

An artist, using compositional decisions, can guide a viewer to what parts of a painting to look longer at and what parts can be skipped faster.

The same goes for the movement. An artist can “direct” viewers through the painting using movement of objects and lines. In a painting, it can be depicted as something that is moving – like a train, flying birds or walking people, and a viewer would naturally follow this movement with his eyes, or a painting’s composition could have some directional lines that steer a viewer’s gaze in some directions with faster or slower movement.

11. Size

Size relates both to the dimension of a piece of artwork and to relative proportions between objects, depicted in a painting, as well as gaps between objects. A well-balanced composition very much depends on relative sizes of forms and volumes, as well as sizes of shapes with similar tonal values and colors. There are many rules of how to use sizes and proportions in composition, for example, making sure that gaps between objects are varying in size, to make artwork more pleasing to the eye.

12. Contrast

Contrast is juxtaposition of different elements in artwork. Contrast can be between colors, tonal values, sizes, textures, directions and movements. So, in simple terms, contrast is the difference between dark and light values, small and big sizes, thick and thin lines, smooth and rough textures, different directions of main lines and so on.

Contrast is a very effective tool of composition. High contrast draws attention to a certain area and creates more dramatic feeling in an artwork.

Art Vocabulary

Here is the vocabulary of Oil Painting Techniques used in the Old Masters .Academy™ Course:

1. Imprimatura
2. Underdrawing
3. Painted Sketch
4. Block-in
5. Underpainting and Underglazing
6. Dead Colors or Monochrome Underpainting (Grisaille)
7. Glazing
8. Scumbling
9. Velaturas
10. Turbid medium effect
11. Fat over Lean
12. Pentimenti
13. Oiling out
14. Alla Prima



1. Imprimatura

The term Imprimatura comes from Italian “imprimatura,” which means the first layer of paint. It is a colored layer that is applied on top of white primed canvas.

Although it is perfectly possible to start painting in oils directly on white canvas, you will be better off with an off-white background. You can apply an imprimatura layer as a very thin and transparent coat of oil paint. It is important to note that this layer has to be transparent so the white canvas would glow through it. If you do a non-transparent layer, this would no longer be an imprimatura, but a colored background.

Usually, for imprimatura Old Masters used warm Earth colors, for example, Burnt Sienna, diluted with White Spirit or Turpentine, applied with a brush all over the canvas evenly and smoothly or sporadically with visible brushstrokes.

Transparency of imprimatura plays an important role in the Old Masters’ painting method. White canvas showing through transparent and semi-transparent layers of paint takes part in the overall tonal and chromatic appearance of a painting.

Imprimatura can be applied not only on white canvas, but also on canvases with darker grounds.

Here are examples of what grounds some Old Masters used:

- **Veronese** painted on light-grey and light-blue grounds.
- **Titian** used white canvases in the beginning of his career, but later started to cover white primer with transparent red imprimatura. Later on, he preferred using darker neutral color imprimatura.
- **Tintoretto** preferred to use dark grounds – grey or brown.
- **Rubens** created paintings on white canvases, as well as light and dark-grey grounds. Some unfinished works by this master show light-grey imprimatura on white canvas.
- **Rembrandt** was painting on white canvases with transparent golden-brown underpainting, yet later in his career moved to grey grounds and dark imprimatura with an underpainting in transparent dark-brown paint.
- **El Greco** preferred doing underdrawings on white grounds, which then were covered with brown imprimatura (Burnt Umber), so white ground was visible through an imprimatura. On top, he modeled the form in lights and mid-lights using white paint, which created a pearl-grey effect that is not achievable by mixing paints on a palette.

2. Underdrawing

Underdrawing is an initial drawing that goes on a painting ground. This drawing can be done with a brush or pen and then covered with an imprimatura or an underpainting.

Such 15th century artists like Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden used underdrawing extensively. Often they “underdrew” with a brush in water-based black paint, applying hatching strokes for shading. They painted in oils on top of such fast-drying under-drawings.

Although oil paint can cover opaquely any drawing beneath, it is advisable to work on preparatory sketches not directly on a painting ground, but on paper, doing changes and redrawing as many times as required and, when the composition is ready, to transfer such a sketch on a painting ground. This would protect the whiteness of a canvas that is to be covered with an imprimatura.

Detailed and precise underdrawing is a “signature” method of the Northern Renaissance masters. It also was used widely by Florentine artists of that time.

3. Painted Sketch

A sketch painted on a painting ground is a more impressionistic approach of making an underdrawing. Such a sketch can consist of outlines in one color or even some areas of a composition blocked-in with colors. Such method of underdrawing was often used by Venetian Renaissance Masters.

4. Block-in

Block-in is the approach of making an initial step of a composition in oils when certain areas of design are covered in one or several colors of paint. It is more than making a simple under-drawing with outlines. By blocking-in, entire areas of design can be covered with oil paint. While it is still technically “drawing with a brush,” it is also a first step of actual “painting” of proportions, tonal values and colors of the composition.

5. Underpainting and Underglazing

Underpainting or underglazing is an initial step of actual painting. As indicated by its name, an underpainting is a painting layer that will be covered by top layers of denser or opaque oil paint. And the name “underglazing” indicates that this layer is painted in preparation for transparent glazings to go on top.

The multi-layer painting technique with use of underpainting and underglazing was pioneered and mastered by Titian in the High Renaissance.

Underpainting and especially underglazing were deliberately painted in lighter tones than the final design should be. This is to accommodate the shift in tone when transparent and semi-transparent layers of paint will make painting appear darker.

Because an underpainting is covered with semi-opaque and opaque oil paint, the color of this layer is not critical. Top layers, which are called an “overpainting,” will cover and correct chromatically the underpainting. That is why the Old Masters did underpainting in warm Earth colors, saving cold and blue colors for later steps.

For underglazing, the choice of color was carefully planned so optical mixing of colors of underglazing and glazing layers

would give the desired effect.

Underpainting or underglazing can be painted in one color as well as in multiple colors.

A properly done underpainting or underglazing contributes to the overall painting process. If an artist finds that the overpainting has to fight and cover underneath layers, then it is a clear sign that under-layers are not serving the intended role.

6. Dead Colors or Monochrome Underpainting (Grisaille)

Dead-color is an underpainting or underglazing executed in neutral colors. The primary purpose of dead-color in oil painting is to establish the form by depicting tonal values of objects and the relationship between dark and light areas of painting.

Dead-coloring was quite important for the Old Masters' painting method. It was even described as an obligatory painting step in Hertogenbosch guild rules dating back to 1546.

Quite often the Old Masters did monochromatic (tints of one color) or achromatic (black and white) dead-coloring. A monochrome underpainting has another name – grisaille, which means painting in shades of grey.

Apart of grisaille, the Old Masters used various colors for dead-coloring - blues, greens, browns and mixture of those colors. Without warm light colors the appearance of human flesh was somehow not alive, hence probably the name – dead-color. Dead-color, being an underpainting or underglazing, was painted in lighter tones than the finished painting would be, to allow further deepening of tones by applying overpainting and glazes on top.

7. Glazing

Glazing is a technique of painting in very thin transparent layers of oil paint. This technique is as old as the oil painting medium itself. Glazing is usually applied on top of underglazing in one or multiple coats. Because every coat of glazing is transparent, colors of under-layers are showing through, contributing to the overall appearance of a painting. This effect is called an optical mixing.

Unlike in the direct method of painting, where layers of oil paint are opaque and light reflects from the very top final layer, in the indirect method of transparent glazing light can penetrate as deeply as white canvas under layers of glazes, underglazing, and imprimatura. This gives a unique appearance that cannot be achieved by mixing oil paints directly on a palette or canvas.

Some oil paints are suited better for this technique than others. The best results give transparent and semi-transparent paints. These are usually dark pigments and therefore every layer of glaze would shift the tone down. That is why an artist has to keep in mind that an underglazing has to be a bit lighter in tone.

The underglazing, as well as every sequential coat of glazing, has to be sufficiently dry before the next layer of glazing is to be applied. This makes the glazing technique very slow. An

artist can do tens of glazing layers; each requires at least three or more days or drying time. However, there are painting mediums like Liquine that speed up drying time, making a layer of glaze touch-dry the next day. If a layer of glaze is not dry enough, it might be washed out by the next layer. Of course, such modern mediums as Liquin were not available at the time of the Old Masters. They often used Stand Linseed Oil as a medium of choice for the glazing technique. This medium is thick, glossy and transparent – exactly what is required for the glazing painting method.

8. Scumbling

Scumbling is an optical-mixing painting method where oil paint is applied thinly using a dry-brush technique, so the under-layer is partly visible through multiple gaps between paint marks. Unlike glazing, where optical mixing happens with the light reflecting through transparent layers, scumbling can be done with opaque or semi-opaque paints as long as such coat of paint doesn't cover thickly and opaquely the layer beneath. While glazing is usually done in darker paints over lighter under-layers, scumbling works well when a lighter paint goes over darker tones.

The “secret” of applying a scumbling layer is to use an almost dry stiff brush with very little paint on it; unlike in glazing, where diluting with medium and using a soft brush work the best.

9. Velaturas

Velaturas is another way of achieving optical mixing in oil painting by working in translucent milky glaze layers. It can be done as a monochromatic grisaille. Think of velaturas as a scumbling in semi-transparent diluted light colors, which is a kind of glazing technique that is different from conventional glazing because it is done with lighter colors over darker underpainting.

Velaturas can be used to adjust both color and tone of various painting areas.

10. Turbid medium effect

The turbid medium effect means how different tones and colors appear through turbid media. It was noticed that light backgrounds seen through turbid medium would appear yellowish, and darker tones seen through a turbid medium that had been lightened would appear blue.

For example, when white glaze goes on top of a dark background, it creates a bluish haze effect. This works well when blue skies are painted in a light blue mixture of paint over tan or light brown underpainting. Such an effect is also amplified when light blue sky is painted over a warm brown.

The turbid medium effect can also be used for painting human flesh. Both Rembrandt and Rubens used it to great advantage by first modeling darker tones, using brown colors (mostly umbers) and then applying lighter flesh tones next to shadows (usually a mixture of lead white and small amounts of vermilion and/or yellow ochre), spreading a very thin layer of paint over darker underpainting.

Another application of the turbid medium effect can be seen in Van Dyck's paintings. He used ultramarine in the half-tones of the flesh.

11. Fat over Lean

“Fat over Lean” is one of the main rules in oil painting according to which every sequential layer of paint has to contain more oil (be fatter) compared to ‘lean’ layers underneath that have to contain less oil.

The Old Masters did paintings with ‘lean’ under-layers, such as imprimatura and underpainting. To reduce oil content, they mixed paints with spirit or turpentine. As work progressed to upper layers, they added more oil, reducing turpentine in the mix.

Lean layers dry faster than fatty ones; so, when the “Fat over Lean” rule is not observed, a top layer, drying faster, would cause the under-layer to wrinkle and possibly crack. This would also result in oils from the top layer sinking down, making the painting surface dull and faded.

There's no precise formula of how much oil should be added into a mix of paint for each layer. Artists usually do it by eye; judgment of medium comes from experience.

12. Pentimenti

A pentimento (plural pentimenti) is an alteration in a painting. Such overpainting is often done by an author to correct the composition during the process of painting, or even paint a new picture on top of an old one. The term pentimento comes from Italian, meaning repentance.

In the Old Masters paintings, pentimenti can be detected due to some oil paints becoming more transparent with time, revealing the original composition showing through; or by means of X-rays or infra-red photography.

13. Oiling out

Oiling out is the method of restoring dull or sunk colors to their original tone and hue by rubbing into such dull surfaces concentrated oil medium.

Dull areas on a surface of painting can appear when a paint layer is applied on top of an under-layer that is touch-dry while being wet inside. When drying, the top layer would shrink and break the film of the layer below. Oil medium in such a case would sink down, leaving dull patches on the surface.

Linseed Oil can be rubbed with a piece of cloth, brush or hand into dull surfaces, and excess of oil should be wiped out. For blue passages, Walnut Oil can be used because it yellows less. Also, applying a thin coat of Retouching Varnish is a good way to restore dull areas.

14. Alla Prima

The term *alla prima* comes from Italian and means “at first attempt.” It is the method of oil painting when an artwork is done in one session or while all paint layers are still wet. *Alla prima* approach differs dramatically from traditional multi-layer painting technique. It is a direct method of painting because glazing is not applicable over wet surfaces.

The great advantage of *alla prima* is speed, because an artist doesn't have to wait for every layer to dry. Also, a painting in *alla prima* has only one wet layer, which dries evenly and is less proven to cracking that can appear if different rules of multi-layer painting are not followed.

Although the indirect painting method is a “signature technique” of the Old Masters, some artists used *alla prima* with the best results, including Frans Hals, Rembrandt, Diego Velázquez and others.

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