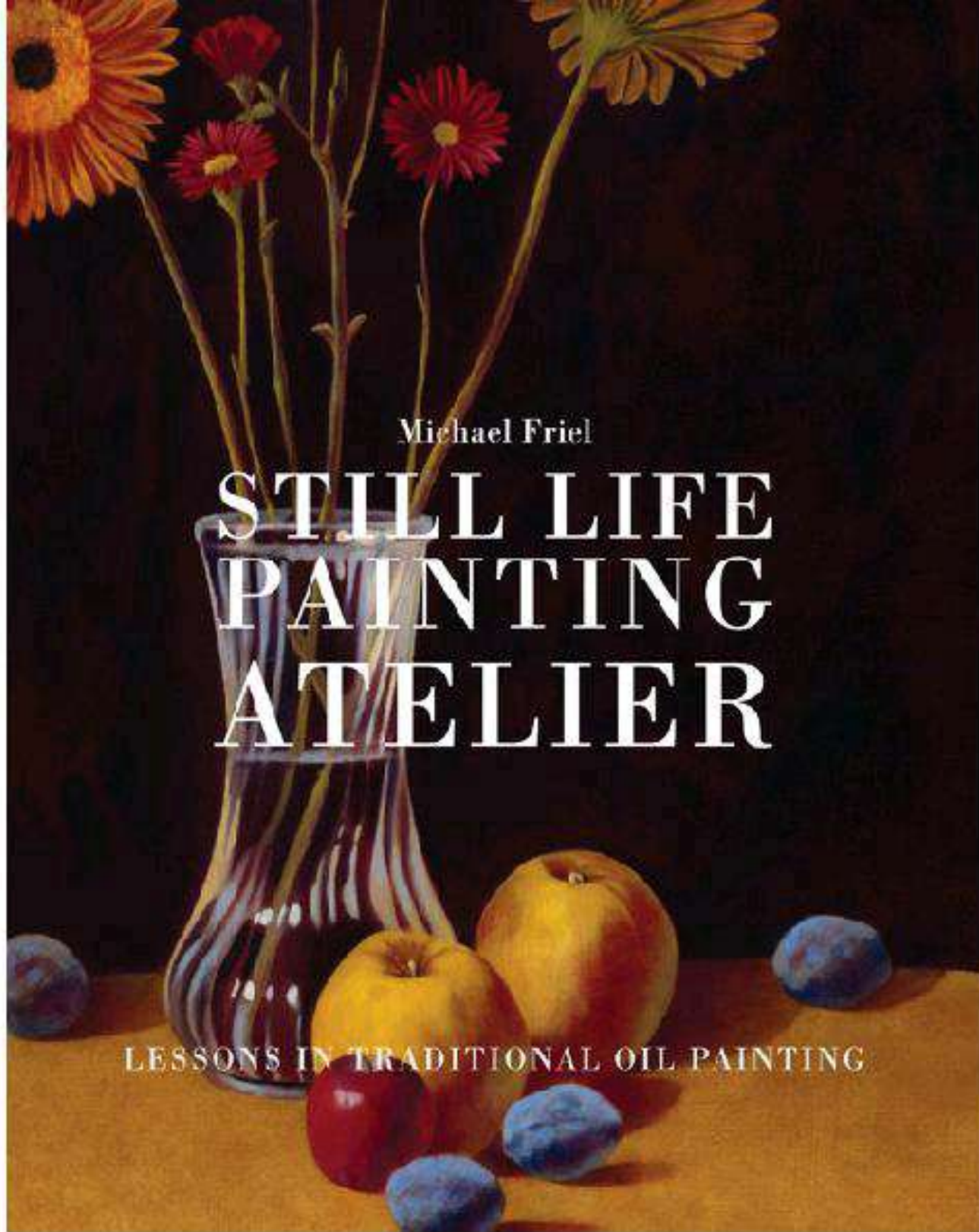
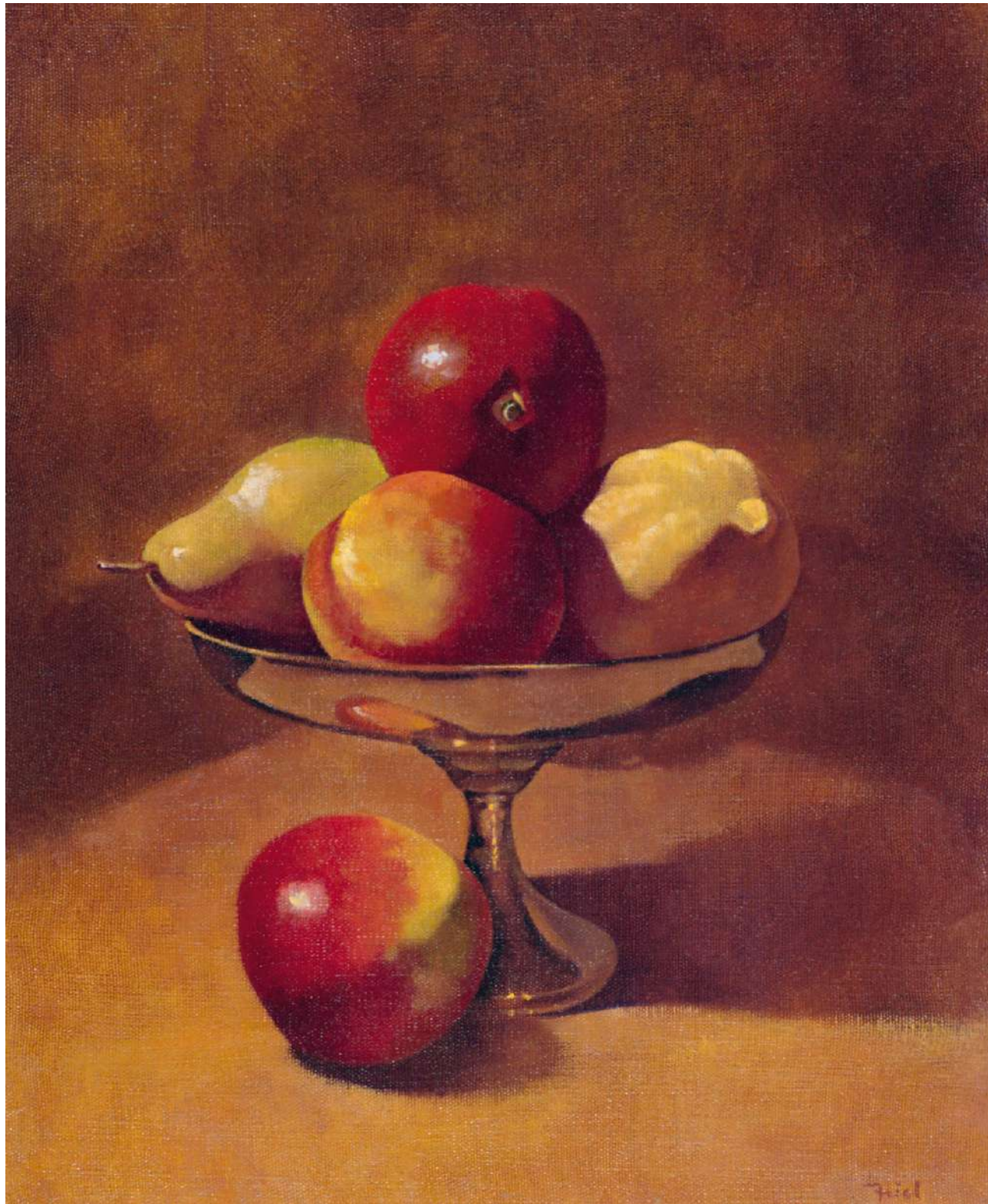






Still Life with Fruit, 2004, oil on canvas,
20 × 16 inches (40.64 × 50.8 cm), private collection

STILL LIFE PAINTING atelier

AN INTRODUCTION TO OIL PAINTING

MICHAEL FRIEL

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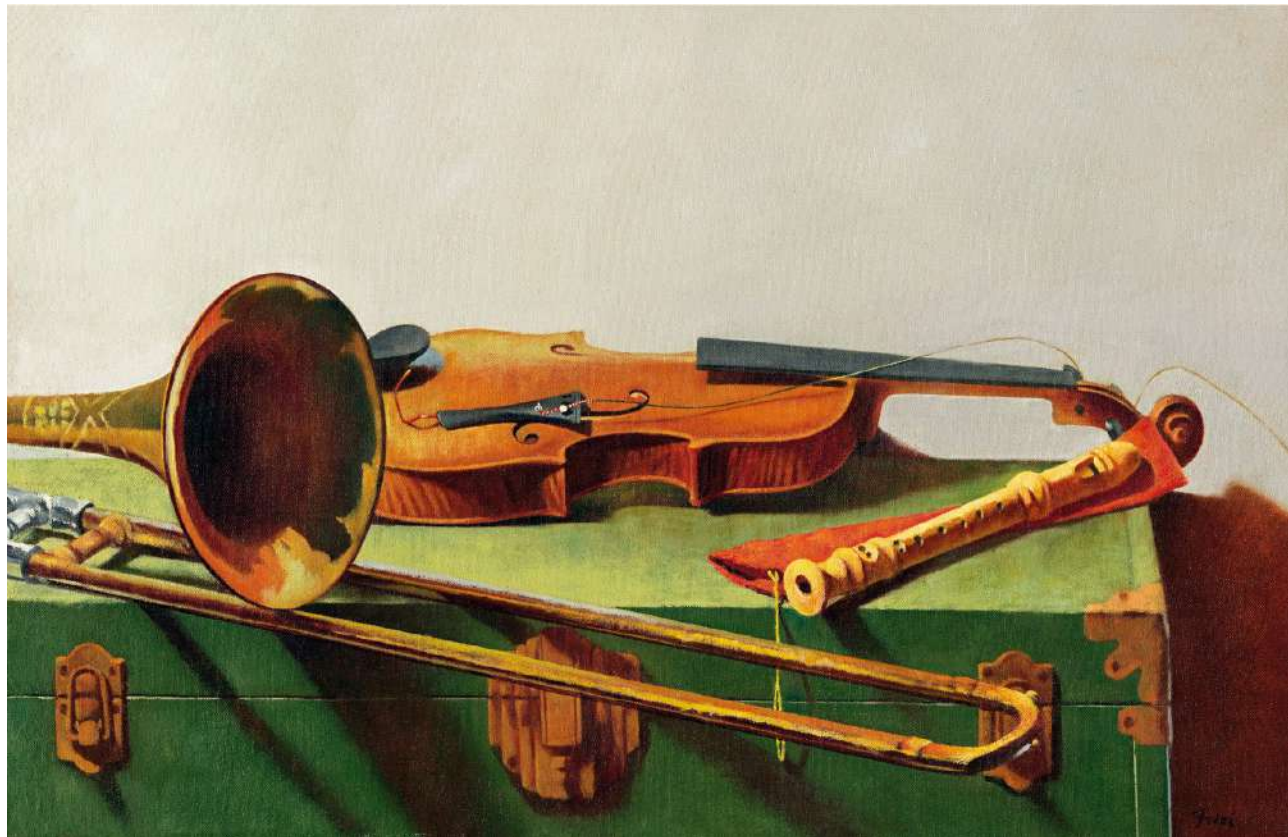
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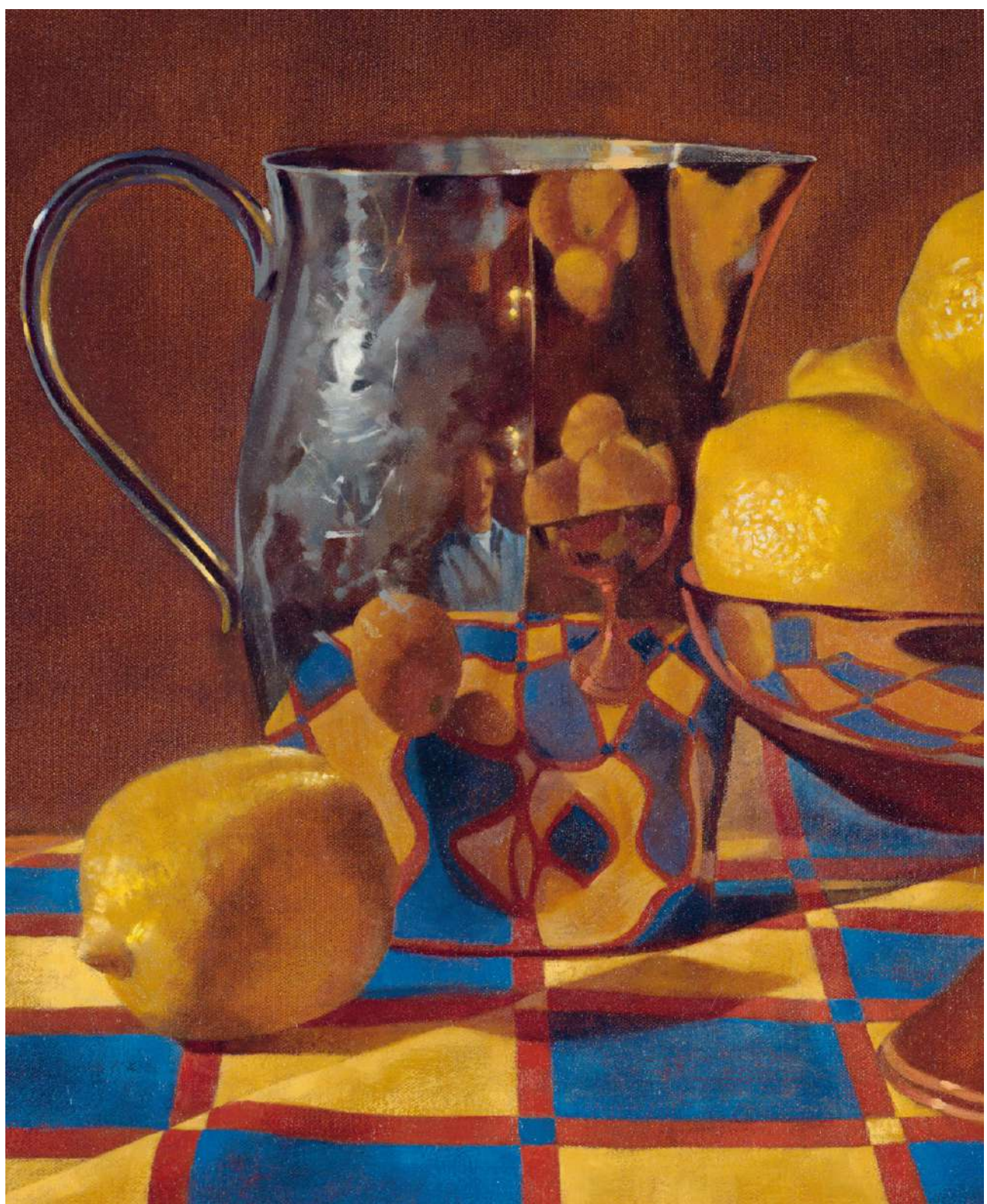
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Musical Instruments, 1999, oil on canvas,
20 × 30 inches (50.8 × 76.3 cm), private collection

TO MY WIFE, MEGANN DEVINE, AND MY PARENTS, CONSTANCE AND ROBERT FRIEL

I would like to express my gratitude to my wife, Megann Devine, for contributing her editing skills, as well as for her support and patience during the writing of this book. I would also like to thank my editor, Alison Hagge, for the many improvements she made to the book while preparing it for publication; Candace Raney, for her belief in this book; Cary Cartmill and Ron Dalton, for their professional photography services; and the directors of Gage Academy, Pamela Belyea and Gary Faigin, for providing me the opportunity to develop and teach the instructional material presented in this book.



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Bouquet, 1987, oil on paper,
30 × 23 inches (76.2 × 58.4 cm), collection of Constance and Robert Friel

INTRODUCTION

STILL LIFE IS A FORGIVING GENRE. It does not demand the personal likeness of a portrait. Nor does it require the accurate proportions of the human figure. And, unlike a landscape, it does not change with the weather. Instead, the still life is a genre that provides the artist with time to study and the opportunity to look closer. The still life can become what the artist wants it to be. It can be a simple grouping of white bottles or a complex arrangement of glass, metal, and wooden objects. It can be a purely formal subject, set up for the purpose of studying drawing and painting techniques. Or it can be a platform for emotional expression, incorporating personal symbolism and imagery.

When I was a painting student, a professor of mine once remarked that most painters go through a still life period. His words must have left an impression on me: My “still life period” has been going on for nearly two decades now. During that time, I have continuously painted the still life and taught painting using the still life. What I have learned along the way has developed into a series of foundation oil painting classes. Students in my classes work from the still life, but my goal is to teach them oil painting. For more than a decade, I have had the pleasure of developing and sharing the ideas presented in this book with many students. In all that time, the still life and the techniques of oil painting have never failed to fascinate me.

This book begins by providing you with information that will help you get started painting. The first three sections of the book share ideas to help you set up an oil painting studio and cover, among other topics, lighting, equipment, and studio safety. Information is also provided on your painting materials, including paints, palettes, brushes, solvents, mediums, and supports. There are also step-by-step instructions on preparing your canvas and paper for oil painting, and a section on setting up and lighting your still life.

We then move on to still life painting lessons, five in total, each with clear and concise step-by-step instructions and illustrations. As in my classes, while the still life is the subject, the lessons introduce the basic the techniques of oil painting.

We begin by exploring still life composition through thumbnail sketches, and use preliminary drawings to gain accurate proportions. We also study the characteristics of light and shadow by using an underpainting, and learn the basics of color theory and color mixing with both limited and full palettes. We learn how to use a variety of brushes in order to create sharp and soft edges, and we cover techniques that are helpful when painting metal and glass. Finally, we apply glazing and scumbling techniques to bring luminosity and texture to the still life painting.

These still life lessons cover a wide range of painting techniques, but each painting demonstration is presented in a logical sequence and builds on the skills acquired during the previous lesson. I encourage you to continue to practice, and to customize the different techniques explained in this book to fit your own interests. When you are finished with this book, I hope that you will have gained a comprehensive knowledge of oil painting and improved your painting skills along the way. And of course, I hope that your still life period is a rewarding one.



Still Life: Daylight, 1995, oil on canvas,
18 × 23 inches (45.7 × 58.4 cm), collection of Pamela Belyea and Gary Faigin



PART I

YOUR STUDIO

SETTING UP A PLACE TO PAINT may not be as pressing an issue if you are taking a painting class and have an equipped classroom studio. But even if you are taking classes, you should try to have a place where you can continue to practice painting outside of class. Like so many other disciplines, when it comes to painting, practice is the best teacher. You should have a place where you can log in the painting hours and improve your skills. Whether you are carving out a corner of your basement or renting your own studio space, the following information will help you set up your studio so it becomes a productive, comfortable, and safe environment in which to work.

A DEDICATED WORK AREA

Ideally, your studio should be in a work area that is dedicated solely to the purpose of creating art. This is not always possible, especially if you are painting in your home. But you should avoid working in a multipurpose area that requires you to break down your equipment and materials after each painting session. Setting up and putting away your easel, painting materials, and still life before and after each session can take up a lot of your time and energy. Instead, if you can designate an area that can be used at all times as your studio, it will help you maintain creative momentum and productive working habits.

RUNNING WATER

Your studio will need running water, preferably from a utility sink. Having a sink in your studio will make it possible for you to wash your hands while you work, clean your brushes, and wipe up the occasional spill. A sink will also come in handy for projects such as priming your canvases and stretching paper to board. If your studio is in your home, the closer the sink is to your work area, the less chance you will have of tracking paint throughout the house. Oil painting gets messy at times, and having a sink nearby will help you maintain a clean studio. Of course, this isn't always possible, so don't let not having a nearby sink discourage you from painting.

LIGHTING

Your studio should have good lighting. This includes overhead lighting for the room as well as lighting for the still life and your easel.

NATURAL LIGHT

Natural light, preferably with northern exposure, is an ideal way to light an art studio. It can also

provide a soft illumination to the still life. Northern exposure is favorable because it changes less throughout the day than eastern, southern, or western exposures, but be aware that north light still changes with the weather conditions and times of the day. If you are working from natural light, turn off any artificial lights in the studio, and use natural light to illuminate both your still life setup and your easel. The images on [this page](#) and [this page](#) were painted in natural light.

ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

While artificial light is more dependable than natural light, it is perhaps not as aesthetically pleasing. Shadows are higher in contrast, so you lose the subtlety that natural light provides. Furthermore, incandescent bulbs give off a warm, yellow light, which can affect your color mixing. Nevertheless, with artificial light, you can work at all hours of the day and night, so many artists choose this option. Full-spectrum incandescent lightbulbs that duplicate natural sunlight are available at most art supply stores. Use one spotlight to illuminate your still life and another for your easel. You can find inexpensive spotlights at hardware stores, but make sure that the lamp's fixture can withstand the wattage of the bulb that you are using. High wattage is really not necessary. To minimize glare I prefer using a 40-watt bulb to illuminate my easel. When working with artificial spotlights, turn off any other studio lighting, like overhead lights, that may provide an unwanted second light source in your setup. The images on [this page](#) and [this page](#) were painted in artificial light.



Still Life in Window Light, 1995, oil on canvas,
25 × 21¾ inches (63.5 × 55.3 cm), private collection

As this still life was painted in natural light, the shadows are soft and low in contrast.

STUDIO EQUIPMENT

You will need to furnish your workspace with studio equipment, including, among other things, an easel, a small table or taboret, a large table or flat working surface, and of course, still life objects. Aside from a dependable easel, most of these items can be found at a garage sale or secondhand furniture store. These are essential furnishings for your studio.

EASEL

There are many options to think about when selecting an easel. In addition, purchasing an easel can be costly, so consider using an inexpensive one while you are first learning to paint. In time, you will be clearer about which kind of easel is best suited to you. If and when you decide to spend more money on an easel, consider its sturdiness, size, portability, and the material with which it is made. Most easels are either made from hardwood or aluminum. Aluminum easels are not as classic as hardwood easels, but they are lightweight, sturdy, and relatively inexpensive.

Below is a brief comparison of the different types of easels from which to choose.

STUDIO EASELS

Studio easels are usually constructed using an “H-frame” design that features two sturdy upright posts and a horizontal crossbar. These easels are very stable, and are capable of supporting larger canvases. Some larger studio easels are also equipped with castors so they can be moved with ease throughout the studio. However, studio easels cannot be folded and put away, making them permanent fixtures in your workspace.

SKETCHING EASELS

Sketching easels are put together using a tripod design. They are designed for portability, and often come with collapsible legs that make them easy to break down and store between painting sessions, but they are not stable enough to support large paintings.

FIELD EASELS

French-style field easels combine the tripod design with a compartment where you can store your painting supplies. While a French easel is intended to be used as a field easel, it can also be used in the studio, thus making it a good purchase if you also intend on painting outside or in studios other than your own. French easels are sturdy and portable, but they will not hold as large a canvas as a studio easel.

TABORET OR SMALL TABLE

You should have a taboret or a small table next to your easel to keep your materials within reach as you work. A taboret is a small storage cabinet equipped with drawers and shelves for storing art materials and a flat surface on top for placing “in use” materials such as your palette, brushes, solvents, and mediums. A taboret often comes equipped with castors, so you can roll it around the studio, keeping it alongside your easel. Instead of a taboret, a small table will also serve the same purpose, but has less storage space. In this case, you could store your painting materials in a paint box and place it beneath the table.

FLAT WORKING SURFACE

Your studio should also have a large table, desk, or other flat working surface for doing tasks like stretching, priming, and toning canvases; varnishing paintings; or even framing pictures. Cover the surface with a sheet of cardboard to pad it. A padded surface is easier to work on and less likely to scuff or scratch your paintings. Lay Kraft paper over the cardboard, and replace it periodically to

keep the working surface clean.



Evening Still Life, 1992, oil on canvas,
24 × 20 inches (61 × 50.8 cm), collection of Constance and Robert Friel



Sunflower, 1994, oil on canvas,
30 × 24 inches (76.2 × 61 cm), private collection

STILL LIFE TABLE

Of course, you should also have a table upon which to set up your still life. The table may appear time and time again in your paintings, becoming a familiar subject in your art, so choose a table that is aesthetically interesting to you. Aside from character, height is also a factor. Make sure that the table is at a height that gives you the point of view you desire in the still life setup. If the table is low, you will be looking down on the objects, giving you a bird's-eye view of the still life, as in the image [here](#). If the table is higher up, closer to your eye level, you will be looking across the tabletop,

making it easier to convey depth in the still life, as in the image on [this page](#). You might also be lucky enough to find an adjustable table that allows you to paint from a number of heights.

SHADOW BOX

You may need to put the still life setup away between sessions. If so, you should consider having one or more shadow boxes in your studio. A shadow box is a three-sided box in which you can set up your still life. (See [this page](#).) These boxes make your still life portable since the entire box can be picked up and put away without disturbing the setup. Rather than setting the still life objects up directly on your table, you can set them up in a shadow box.

Two sides of the shadow box make up the walls or background of the still life, and the third side provides the base, or tabletop. They can be constructed from a number of materials, including wood, foam board, or cardboard, and placed on your still life table. The simplest way to make a shadow box is by cutting open a cardboard box, and leaving only three sides intact. You can also make a more permanent shadow box by nailing three sheets of plywood together.

You can use the wood or cardboard surface of the box as a background to your still life, or insert papers, boards, or fabrics to add color and pattern. Once everything is set up, the shadow box can be moved or rotated to adjust the direction of light in your still life. If you have several shadow boxes, this frees you up to have a number of still lifes set up at any given time.

DROP CLOTH AND PLASTIC SHEETING

Oil painting can get messy. Inevitably you will drip paint, spill medium, and splatter solvent. To minimize damage to that these substances can cause to your floors, lay a drop cloth beneath your work area. To further protect your floors from spilt liquid, place a layer of plastic sheeting under the drop cloth. Both canvas drop cloths and plastic sheeting can be purchased at hardware and paint stores.

STILL LIFE OBJECTS

Finally, you will need a collection of still life objects and a bookshelf or some other system of storage for them. It's useful to have your still life objects in plain view and easily accessible. It is ultimately up to you what you choose to paint, but objects such as ceramics, plastic vases, glass bottles, metal cups and creamers, fabrics, and fruit are useful for the lessons in this book. These objects have a variety of colors and surfaces that can be used in specific still life painting assignments. For more on these still life objects, see [this page](#) and [this page](#).

STUDIO SAFETY

Your studio should be a safe working environment. However, some painting materials can put your health and safety at risk when not handled, stored, or used properly. In the case of home studios, these risks also carry over to others who live in your home. Furnish your studio with proper safety equipment and follow safe studio practices to avoid exposure to any potentially harmful materials, as well as fire or other hazards. Read the labels on your art materials to determine whether or not they are hazardous, and follow their instructions carefully when using them. If you have any questions

about a product, contact the manufacturer. Below are safety guidelines you should follow when setting up and working in your studio. For more information on studio safety, see *Artist Beware* and *Health Hazards Manual for Artist*, both by Michael McCann.

VENTILATION

Vapors from solvents such as turpentine can be harmful to your health. Reducing your use of solvents will reduce the health risks in your studio. Also, keep solvent and medium containers closed when not in use, and employ only the smallest amounts needed while working.

Adequate ventilation is also important. The air in your studio should be well circulated. To encourage air circulation, open at least two windows. Place a fan facing outward in one window to direct contaminated air out of your studio; fresh air will come into the room through the second window. The windows should be located far apart from each other so that exhaust air does not reenter through the second window. Make sure that your work area is set up in such a way that fresh air, not exhaust air, passes through your breathing space. You can test to see if your studio is well ventilated by opening a door. If there is resistance when you open a door toward the outside, or it opens too easily when opened toward the inside, then there is not enough fresh air entering your studio.

RESPIRATORS AND DUST MASKS

In circumstances where you do not have adequate ventilation, you should wear protective equipment such as a respirator or a dust mask. A respirator will filter out vapors from solvents. When using a respirator, make sure that the accompanying cartridge matches the contaminants with which you are working. Respirators should fit properly and the cartridges should be replaced frequently. A respirator will not fit or work properly over facial hair. Only use respirators that are approved by the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety. Check manufacturer's instructions for proper fit and maintenance of respirators.

Dust masks do not filter out harmful vapors or fumes, but they can keep you from inhaling dust particles that are generated during activities such as sanding. This is especially important if you are sanding a ground that contains lead paint.

PROTECTIVE BARRIER CREAMS AND GLOVES

When handling oil- or solvent-soaked rags, or wet paint, always wear protective barrier creams or gloves. Harmful materials such as solvent and lead paint can be absorbed through broken or chapped skin, and turpentine can be absorbed through healthy skin. Protective barrier creams and gloves can reduce the risk of skin absorption of harmful materials. Check the manufacturer's label to be certain that the barrier cream or glove will protect you from exposure to the materials that you are using.

FLAMMABLE MATERIAL STORAGE

You will need a metal flammable-liquid storage cabinet and a metal self-closing wastebasket for dirty rags. Keep flammable solvents and liquids away from studio exits or sources of heat or ignition. Discard solvent-soaked rags and paper towels in a metal trash can with a self-closing lid, and empty

it daily. During the warm summer months, store flammable materials in a cool environment to reduce the risk of spontaneous combustion. Always keep a fire extinguisher in your studio, and keep all hazardous materials out of the reach of children.

HOUSEKEEPING

Clean up any spills immediately. Spilled solvents and soiled rags left out in the studio can release fumes throughout your studio and contaminate your work space. Clean your work area after every painting session. Never pour solvents or other art materials down the drain. Check with your local government agency for guidelines on proper disposal of hazardous materials.

UNHEALTHY STUDIO HABITS

You can inadvertently ingest painting materials when doing habitual activities such as pointing the tip of a brush to your mouth, holding a brush in your teeth, or chewing your fingernails. You should also avoid eating, drinking, smoking, or any other behavior that could cause you to ingest toxins while working in the studio.



Fruit Piece, 1998, oil on canvas,

16 × 18½ inches (40.6 × 47 cm), collection of Josephine Devine



PART II

YOUR MATERIALS

THE MATERIALS INCLUDED in this section are based on the particular set of materials that I have come to use in the studio and in painting classes. I hope this information provides you with a clear technical understanding of these materials, and how they are applied to the practice of oil painting. I encourage you to explore other materials as you develop your own techniques. Most of the materials discussed can be found in any art supply store. While purchasing all of these materials at once can be a daunting expense, you can instead choose to acquire the materials as needed while you work through the lessons in this book.

DRAWING MATERIALS

You will need an assortment of drawing materials for sketching ideas, making preliminary drawings, transferring preliminary drawings to canvas, and in some cases fixing preliminary drawings on your canvas. It is also nice to have these drawing materials near your easel while you paint just in case you need to correct or redraw any part of the still life painting.



Drawing materials: sketchbook, chamois skin, pencil sharpener, kneaded eraser, soft vine charcoal, and graphite pencil

SKETCHBOOK

A sketchbook is useful for making quick studies of your still life. It also comes in handy for jotting down notes and ideas, and painting small color charts. I usually use a 9 × 12–inch sketchbook with regular or recycled paper.

LAYOUT BOND PAD

Layout bond is a good paper to use when making preliminary drawings of your still life. Its smooth, durable surface is ideal for making clean line drawings that can be transferred to canvas. I like to use

a 19 × 25–inch layout bond pad.

TRACING PAPER

Layout bond paper is slightly translucent and can be used for tracing, but if you prefer a more translucent paper, purchase a pad or roll of tracing paper. In either case, it is convenient to trace with either paper when correcting and refining your drawings.

T SQUARE

A 24-inch or longer T square is useful on the occasions when you want to draw a clean, straight line or to check measurements in your drawing. Its straight edge also comes in handy when trimming paper and canvas.

DRAWING BOARD

You will need a board on which to clip your layout bond paper. Premade drawing boards with clips are available in art supply stores. You can also clip your drawing pad to a sheet of smooth Masonite, plywood, or even the back side of an old canvas board using two Bulldog clips.

GRAPHITE PENCILS

Purchase several soft (2B, 4B, or 6B) graphite pencils for drawing and sketching. The 2B pencils leave light sharp lines, while the 6B pencils create darker soft lines, and the 4B pencils are in between the two.

PENCIL SHARPENER

Keep a handheld or mechanical pencil sharpener within reach of your easel. Most of the still life drawings done in this book are line drawings, and maintaining a sharp pencil will help you keep the lines fine and precise.

SOFT VINE CHARCOAL

Vine charcoal is used to transfer drawings done on paper to canvas. It leaves light lines that can be easily corrected or erased. Vine charcoal comes in varying degrees of hardness, but only soft vine charcoal will transfer successfully.

KNEADED ERASER

This soft, gummy eraser is used to erase pencil and charcoal. Keep your kneaded eraser clean by kneading it into itself. It can be shaped into a fine point, making it ideal for erasing small areas of a drawing that are difficult to reach without smudging other areas. And it can be flattened out to erase broad areas quickly.

CHAMOIS SKIN

This soft, porous piece of leather is used for blending and erasing charcoal. It also erases charcoal

effortlessly and comes in handy when cleaning charcoal smudges after a drawing has been transferred to canvas.

WORKABLE FIXATIVE

Workable fixative is sometimes used to preserve the preliminary drawing after it has been transferred to canvas. Oil paints can be applied over a fixed drawing without affecting the drawing. Workable fixative is flammable and has harmful vapors; spray your drawings outside or somewhere where there is adequate ventilation.



Still Life with Shell, 1993, oil on canvas,
30 × 36 inches (76.2 × 91.4 cm), collection of Pam and Tony Russo

PAINTS

The colors recommended in this book include ivory black, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, viridian, sap green, titanium white, cadmium yellow light, yellow ocher, burnt sienna, Indian red, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, and burnt umber. I find that I am able to mix most colors I need with this set, so I consider it to be a full palette. However, the definition of a full palette varies from painter to painter. I encourage you to experiment with new colors and add or subtract from this set to suit your interests as you become more experienced at painting.

The set described above does not include every color, but it is capable of mixing most. For instance, violet can be made by mixing alizarin crimson and ultramarine blue. In addition, a variety of bright and neutral orange hues can be mixed by any combination of the reds with the yellows. Burnt sienna is a warm earth color that works well for dark orange color mixes.

Some artists prefer to mix black rather than use a black pigment. (This can be done with a combination of ultramarine blue and burnt umber or ultramarine blue and burnt sienna.) Still, many great painters, including Titian, Rembrandt, Manet, and Renoir, used black. Ivory black is cool in temperature, and when mixed with white produces a blue gray. This blue gray can then be mixed with yellow to yield a neutral green, or with red to produce a subtle violet.

Oil paints come in both artist and student grades. While artist-grade paints are more expensive, I recommend that you use these. Student-grade paints have a lower pigment load. In my experience, this makes them unsuitable when mixing colors. Purchase most of your colors in 37ml tubes. However, I think it is a good idea to buy burnt umber and titanium white in 150ml tubes. Burnt umber is used frequently when preparing canvas tones and underpainting. Titanium white is used often when tinting colors. In each case, it is nice to have a large tube of these paints.

OPAQUE, TRANSPARENT, AND SEMITRANSSPARENT PIGMENTS

This color set includes a variety of opaque, transparent, and semitransparent pigments. In general, transparent and semitransparent colors work well when you want to apply a thin wash of color over an area, and opaque colors are best when you want more coverage. Most manufacturers will label the color opaque, transparent, or semitransparent. If this is not the case, you can test the level of transparency by painting a swatch of the color on a sheet of glass then holding the glass in front of a light. Opaque colors will not allow light to pass through, but semitransparent and transparent colors will. The level of transparency or opacity is based on the characteristics of the particular pigment that is used when making the paint. As a result, the opacity or transparency of a particular pigment is usually consistent from manufacturer to manufacturer. You can mix any semitransparent or transparent color with an opaque color to give it better covering power. It is more difficult to make an opaque color appear transparent.

NOTE

In this set, ultramarine blue, viridian, sap green, and alizarin crimson are transparent. Ivory black, burnt sienna, and burnt umber are semitransparent. And cerulean blue, cadmium yellow light, yellow ocher, Indian red, cadmium red medium, and titanium white are opaque.

WHITE PIGMENTS

In most cases, I use titanium or mixed white, and have noted them accordingly throughout this book. However, when it comes to white pigments, four different options are available to the oil painter.

FLAKE WHITE

Flake white is a heavy and soft opaque pigment that produces warm tints. Its texture is great for applying thick strokes of paint—a quality reminiscent of Old Master paintings. However, flake white contains lead. Extreme caution should be taken when handling any pigments that contain lead to avoid skin contact or ingestion. Also avoid inhaling any dust generated from it. Lead is a cumulative poison. As small amounts accumulate in the body, the poisonous effects increase. Many flake white replacement products are currently available by paint manufacturers. I recommend using one of them.

NOTE

Zinc white is semitransparent, while flake white, mixed white, and titanium white are all opaque.

ZINC WHITE

Zinc white is cool in hue, with a creamy texture. It has a low tinting strength, meaning it does not have a powerful influence on colors with which it is mixed, making it a good white to use when tinting colors. Zinc white is also semitransparent, making it useful in glazing. Zinc white does not contain lead and is considered nontoxic.

TITANIUM WHITE

Titanium white was introduced as an artist's pigment in the early twentieth century. It is made using titanium dioxide and, like zinc white, is also nontoxic. Titanium white is the most opaque and brilliant of the white pigments, but it also has a high tinting strength and tends to overpower the colors with which it is mixed.

MIXED WHITE

Mixed white is made from a blend of titanium dioxide and zinc oxide. This product combines the opacity of titanium white with the low tinting strength of zinc white. The result is an opaque, nontoxic white that does not overpower colors when tinting them.



Palette with paint, double palette cup (containing solvent and medium), painting knife, and cloth rag

COLOR WHEEL

A color wheel is a great resource to have in your studio. While it is a valuable tool for color mixing, it can also be used as a reference for color composition. Many color wheels feature information about color terms and definitions, color mixing, gray scales, and color schemes. You can purchase a color wheel at most art supply stores.

The organization of most color wheels is as follows: Twelve colors are placed along the outside of the circle. These include the three primary colors: red, yellow, blue; the three secondary colors: orange, green, and violet; and the six tertiary colors: red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-violet, and red-violet.

The color wheel is also organized by temperature—the warm colors are red, orange, and yellow; the cool colors are green, blue, and violet. Color temperature progresses in a circular direction around the color wheel, with the warmest color being red-orange, and the coolest color being blue-green. Colors that are next to each other, like blue and green, are analogous, while those that are opposite each other, like blue and orange, are complementary.

When any two primary colors are mixed, they produce a secondary color. When a primary color is mixed with a secondary color that is next to it on the color wheel, they produce a tertiary color. For example, red mixed with violet produces red-violet. When two complementary colors are mixed, they neutralize each other. When all colors are mixed together, they produce black.

Most color wheels available at art supply stores come with a rotating dial that displays the results of color mixes. For example, the dial shows what a color looks like when mixed with red, yellow, and blue. The dial may also show what a color looks like when tinted with white or shaded with black.



This twelve-step color wheel shows the primary, secondary, and tertiary colors.

Matching Paints to the Color Wheel

Your set of paints for the lessons in this book includes a more complex selection of colors than the twelve colors illustrated on the color wheel. However, each color you use and mix can be located somewhere on the color wheel. If you identify where each color belongs on the color wheel, you will be able to better understand how to mix it with other colors.

To do this, first sketch a diagram that represents the color wheel on a piece of paper. It's not necessary to use color, but simply draw a color wheel and write down where the twelve colors belong. Then, write down where the colors of your set of paints are located within the color wheel.

Here are some pointers to get you started: Cadmium red medium, cadmium yellow light, and cerulean blue are close to primary colors. The red-violet alizarin crimson and the blue-green viridian are closer to tertiary colors. Yellow ochre is a neutral yellow and burnt sienna is a

neutral red-orange.

Continue the process with the remaining four colors on your palette. You will find that some areas of the color wheel are not represented in your palette, so see if you can mix the missing colors with those in your existing color set.



Mixed Fruit, 2004, oil on canvas,
16 × 24 inches (40.6 × 61 cm), private collection

PALETTE AND ACCESSORIES

A palette is a flat surface on which you lay out and mix your colors. Palettes, such as the one shown on [this page](#), are traditionally made from wood; however, they also come in other materials such as paper, plastic, and glass. Whichever material your palette is made of, it should have a flat, nonporous surface that can be cleaned easily. The surface should also be a color that does not distract or interfere with your color mixing. Many painters prefer white palettes, while others use neutral gray or wood-toned palettes. Your palette should also be large enough for you to lay out all of your colors, and still have room to mix. However, if you intend on taking your palette outside of your studio, make sure that it is small enough to be portable.

I use a rectangular wooden palette, about 12 × 16 inches in dimension. This size provides enough room for me to lay out and mix colors, and fits conveniently inside my paint box and palette box, making it portable. This size palette is available either unfinished or finished with a coat of varnish. I purchase the unfinished palettes, and season them with linseed oil before their first use. To do this, I apply linseed oil to the raw wooden surface, and use a rag to rub the oil into the grain before wiping

away any excess oil. This makes the palette surface less porous, reducing the amount of oil color that's absorbed into the raw wood. After a number of uses, the surface grain seals and takes on a neutral brown tone, becoming a much better surface with which to work. I usually paint against a brownish toned canvas, so I prefer to mix colors against the brown tone of a wooden palette instead of a white palette. Paints are laid out along the perimeter of the palette, and colors are mixed in the center.

PALETTE CUP

Palette cups are small metal containers (suitable for solvent and/or medium) that clip to your palette. They come as single or double cups, in various sizes, with and without screw caps. I use a small double palette cup without screw caps. I clip it to the upper-right side of my palette, and keep solvent in one cup and medium in the other. While painting, you can dip your brush into either cup and thin your paint with solvent or medium. When you are finished with your painting session, pour the contents of the palette cup into your dirty solvent container and wipe it clean with a rag. To pour out contents from the double cup without spilling, wear vinyl or latex gloves and cap one of the cups with your palm, while you pour the other side out.



Small double palette cup

PALETTE KNIVES AND PAINTING KNIVES

Palette knives and painting knives serve a number of purposes for the painter. They are used to mix and manage colors on the palette, clean the palette, and both apply and remove paint from the canvas. These knives have thin, flexible steel blades that are easily wiped clean, and come in a wide range of sizes and shapes.

Palette knives have blades that extend directly from the handle. Some blades are flat, while others are bent at an angle. This angle is intended to keep your hand from smudging the wet palette when mixing the paint.

Painting knives have blades that are connected to a small bar that bends below the handle. This design makes it easier to apply paint to the canvas. The shape of painting knives' blades vary, but they are often triangular or diamond shaped.

While the two knives are different in design, both are suitable for either painting or mixing paint. I actually prefer to mix colors with a small- to medium-sized painting knife. The angle of the blade, which is meant to provide more control when apply painting to the canvas, also makes it easier for me to mix and manage colors on the palette. This is especially the case when there are a lot of colors on my palette.



Palette knife (left) and painting knife (right)

RAGS AND PAPER TOWELS

Oil painting requires a nearly constant cleaning of brushes and palette. Using an effective rag to clean your brushes, wipe your palette, and even work the paint on the canvas, will make a big difference in your painting experience. I keep at hand a number of clean cotton rags that have been cut from old T-shirts. Paper towels don't measure up to cotton rags, but using them for nonpainting tasks, such as cleaning your palette at the end of a painting session, will save the number of rags that you go through.

STUDIO SAFETY NOTE

Discard used rags and paper towels after every painting session. Do not wash used rags, either by hand or in the washing machine. Oil- and solvent-soaked rags and paper towels left in your studio will emit fumes and should be considered flammable or combustible. Store used rags in a self-closing, metal waste container and dispose of them frequently.

Storing Your Paints

When you are finished with your painting session, it is a good idea to transfer your unused colors to a disposable paper palette. The paper palette can then be stored in a sealable palette box. Storing your colors between sessions in this way keeps them wet longer than if they were left on the palette. This is also convenient if you need to travel with your colors to another painting location. The next time you paint, transfer the colors from the paper palette back on to the wooden palette.

To clean your palette, use a palette knife to scrape off any remaining paint from its surface. Then, pour a small amount of solvent (turpentine or odorless mineral spirits) on the palette, and wipe it clean with a rag.



Palette box, with paints on palette paper inside

BRUSHES

Oil painting brushes come in a variety of bristle types, shapes, and sizes. The majority of oil painting is done using hog bristle brushes. However, soft brushes, made of natural hair or nylon, are invaluable for specific circumstances such as glazing, painting details, and blending. In addition, both house painter's brushes and varnish brushes serve their own, unique purposes. Brushes have a significant impact on your technique, and when you use the right brush, it becomes easier to express your vision.

HOG BRISTLE BRUSHES

Standard oil painting brushes are made using hog bristles. Hog bristles are stiff and resilient, making

them ideal for handling heavy loads of oil paint. These brushes also have a flexible spring, making it easy to lay down expressive strokes.

Hog bristles are flagged—meaning they split at the tip into two or three points. This allows for better paint retention and a smooth brushstroke. In a better-quality brush, the bristles are interlocked, meaning they curve inward toward the center of the tuft, thereby retaining its shape. Lesser-quality hog bristle brushes are made with straight bristles that do not interlock.

Hog bristle brushes are great for most oil painting applications, and some oil painters use them exclusively. However, there are limitations to using only hog bristle brushes. It is difficult to apply a smooth wash or glaze with a hog bristle brush, because the bristles are coarse and tend to leave their marks in the paint. Furthermore, the tips of hog bristle brushes don't come to a sharp point, which makes it difficult to use them to paint fine details.



Hog bristle brushes

SOFT-HAIR AND SYNTHETIC BRUSHES

Soft brushes are made from a variety of natural hairs, including sable, badger, squirrel, and ox, as well as blends of sable and synthetic fibers. Soft-hair brushes are favored for their unique combination of softness and resilience. Somewhat less expensive, synthetic soft brushes are made using nylon. The highest-quality soft-hair brushes are made with pure kolinsky or red sable. Sable hairs have very long, narrow tips and wide bellies or midsections, which provides the brush with excellent spring while maintaining a fine point.

Soft-hair brushes deposit paint onto the canvas gently, making them the ideal brush for applying smooth areas of color and blending paint. The tips of soft-hair brushes hold together at a point, making it easier to paint clean, sharp edges and fine details.

Extra care should be taken when using soft-hair brushes. When used on a canvas surface,

especially one with an acrylic gesso, soft-hair brushes can wear away and become damaged. Always sand an acrylic-primed canvas before painting on it. Using an oil ground on a canvas that has been sanded smooth is less harmful to a soft-hair brush. Unfortunately, oil painting solvents can also harm the brushes by causing the hairs to dry out. Keeping this in mind, don't invest a lot of money on your soft-hair brushes, especially when you're first learning to paint. They are expensive, especially those made with sable. I like to have a small round and flat brush on hand for detail work, and one or two medium or large brushes for glazing, and a fan blender.



Soft-hair brushes

HOUSE PAINTER'S BRUSH

House painter's brushes are relatively inexpensive and come in handy when priming and toning canvases. They can also be used to block in large areas of paint and blend color. I use a 2-inch house painter's brush with natural bristles. It is not advisable to use the same brush for different media, so I always have at least two house painter's brushes on hand: one for applying acrylic gesso and acrylic grounds, and one for oil media.



House painter's brush

VARNISH BRUSH

Consider investing in a high-quality brush to be used exclusively for varnishing. A varnish brush is a flat with very soft hair or synthetic fibers that allows a smooth and even flow. It is important that the brush does not release its hair while you are applying varnish. Loose hairs can be combed out of the brush before use, but if it continues to shed, it should be replaced.



Varnish brush

Evaluating Brush Sizes and Shapes

Both hog bristle brushes and soft-hair brushes are available in a range of sizes and shapes. As with the bristle type, the size and shape of a brush you use also play a key role in the kind of marks you make in a painting. Once again, using the right tool for the right job makes it easier to express your vision.

brush sizes

Oil painting brushes come in a variety of sizes. Larger brushes are useful when laying in broad masses of color, medium brushes are ideal for painting mid-sized areas, and smaller brushes are effective when putting in details. Your brush collection should include a number of small, medium, and large brushes.

Brushes have numbers printed on the handle to designate their size. Lower numbers correspond to smaller brushes and higher numbers correspond to larger brushes. Unfortunately, these numbers do not stand for a specific unit of measurement, and this numbering system is not standardized. In addition, hog bristle brushes run larger than soft-hair brushes. For instance, a #8 soft-hair brush is much smaller than a #8 hog bristle brush. This can be confusing when buying brushes that are identified only by their number. To avoid any misunderstandings, I will describe

the brush sizes used in this book as being small, medium, or large.

brush shapes

The standard brush shapes are round, flat, bright, and filbert. The shape of the brush you use dictates the type of stroke you leave in your painting. Before the mid-nineteenth century, oil painters used round brushes exclusively. Rounds work well for most paint applications; drawing lines, filling in color, and painting edges. Small round brushes are also essential for painting details.

Flat brushes are long and rectangular in shape. Like rounds, flats have many uses, but leave a squared-off mark. Brights are similar to flats in shape, but they are about half the length. This results in a stiffer brush that is good for carrying heavy loads of paint and creating sharp edges. Filberts are flat with a dome-shaped tip; these versatile brushes are ideal for many painting applications. Some artists also include a fan brush in their set. Fan brushes are not used to apply paint, but to blend it after it has been applied to the canvas.



Brush shapes (from left to right): round, flat, bright, filbert, and fan



Old Violin, 1995, oil on canvas,
41 × 33 inches (104.1 × 83.8 cm), private collection

Purchasing Your Brushes

Investing in a set of brushes can be expensive. Below is a recommended brush set. However, it is not necessary to purchase your complete set in one visit to the art supply store. You might start with a basic set of hog bristle brushes. This set would include small and medium rounds, a medium flat, and medium and large filberts. As you learn to paint, you can add brushes to fill in the gaps, adding soft-hair or nylon brushes, fan brushes, house painter's brushes, and varnishing brushes as needed.

hog bristle brushes

- small round
- medium round
- medium flat
- medium filbert
- large filbert

soft-hair or synthetic brushes

- small round
- small flat
- medium round
- medium flat
- large filbert
- medium fan

other brushes

- two 2-inch natural-bristle house painter's brushes
- varnishing brush



To avoid damage to the tips of your brushes, store them upright in a container with the bristles exposed to the air.



Peaches, 2002, oil on canvas,
14 × 18 inches (35.5 × 45.7 cm), Pentz Collection

Caring for Your Brushes

The condition of your brushes will have a great influence on your painting. Brushes that are not cleaned or cared for properly may become loose at the handle, dry stiff with paint, lose their spring, shed hairs, or wear away at the tip. Each one of these conditions can get in the way of your painting technique. The opposite is true for brushes that are cared for well. They seem to make the painting experience more enjoyable, if not easier.

To properly clean your brushes, follow this easy process:

First, wipe the oil paint from the brush using a rag or paper towel. Then, dip the brush into the jar of solvent. Swish the brush around in the solvent to release the oil color from the brush. Remove the brush from the solvent and wipe it dry with a clean rag. If necessary, repeat this step several times, until as much color as possible has been removed.

Next, run the brush under lukewarm water, and gently rub the brush tip against a bar of soap until it begins to lather. Swirl the lathered tip in the palm of your hand before rinsing it in the water. Release any remaining excess water from the brush by shaking it several times then use your fingers to reform the shape of the tip. Place the brush to dry in a jar with the tip upright and exposed to the air.

In addition, below are some tips that will keep your brushes in good working order for a long time:

Always sand acrylic-primed grounds smooth with fine sandpaper prior to painting. Brushes, especially those made with soft hair, will wear down when used on rough surfaces.

Never dip a dry brush into paint. Instead, always dip the brush first into solvent or medium. This allows the paint to be distributed evenly through the brush. The only exception to this rule is when using a brush to blend color on the painting. If the bristles of the brush are already wet with solvent, they will leave unwanted streaks. So when blending, it's best to keep the brush dry.

Avoid wetting the handle when dipping a brush into solvent. Brushes are frequently rinsed in a jar of solvent during and at the end of a painting session. The solvent can eventually cause the handle to crack and loosen from the ferrule. To avoid this, fill your solvent jar to a level that only reaches the brush tip and its ferrule, but not the handle. Don't leave your brushes in the solvent jar to soak for too long.

Clean your brushes after every painting session. When you are finished painting, rinse your brushes in solvent, and clean them with soap and lukewarm water. When brushes are left overnight without being cleaned, paint can dry and harden on the handle, ferrule, and bristles. Solvents that remain in the tip of the brush will also cause the bristles to dry up and wear away.

Avoid storing your brushes in a way that will cause the tips to be bent out of shape or otherwise damaged. After cleaning your brushes, place them in a container with the tip up and the handle down. This both allows the tip to dry exposed to the air and avoids causing any damage to the bristles.

MAHLSTICK

A mahlstick is a thin, lightweight rod with a leather pouch at one end that painters use as a bridge, or support, while painting fine details. The name comes from the Dutch word *maalstok*, meaning "painter's stick." It is held slightly away from the surface of the canvas, while the painting hand rests against the bar to avoiding smudging the paint. Mahlsticks come in wood or aluminum, and are usually about 2 or 3 feet long. Some are made with collapsible sections that can be taken apart and stored in a paint box. The leather pouch minimizes any smudging or damage to the work as the artist rests the tip against the canvas. You can make your own mahlstick by capping a dowel measuring a half inch in diameter by 48 inches in length with a rubber or plastic chair tip.



Mahlsticks: store bought (top) and homemade (bottom)

SOLVENTS

Solvents are used for thinning oil paint and varnish, for cleaning brushes and other painting materials, and as an ingredient in oil painting mediums. You should have a jar of solvent nearby as you work for rinsing your brushes. Keep a lid on the jar when it is not in use to prevent fumes from spreading. When you are using solvent to thin your paint, keep a small amount of clean solvent in your palette cup. It is not necessary to discard your solvent after it has become dirty. Instead, you can recycle it by pouring the used solvent into a dirty-solvent container, and allowing it to settle overnight. After the sludge settles to the bottom of the container, pour the clear portion of the solvent into a second container reserved for clean solvent. You can clean and reuse the solvent over and over in this way until it eventually evaporates. The sludge left in the dirty container should be wiped up and disposed of properly.

PURE GUM TURPENTINE

Pure gum turpentine is an all-purpose solvent. It is made from an oleoresin, or thick viscous fluid, that is distilled from pine trees. It has a strong odor and clear color, but will turn yellow with time. It can be used to thin paints and varnishes, as an ingredient in painting mediums, and for general cleanup.

ODORLESS MINERAL SPIRITS

Odorless mineral spirits is a petroleum-based substitute for turpentine, sold under many brand names. Many painters prefer odorless mineral spirits to turpentine because it has little or no odor. Like turpentine, odorless mineral spirits has a clear color, but will not yellow over time. However, it is not as strong a solvent as turpentine. It can be used to thin paints and clean brushes, but should not be used to thin varnish.



Solvents: pure gum turpentine (left) and odorless mineral spirits (right)

STUDIO SAFETY NOTE

Never pour solvent or other art materials down the drain. Check with your local government agency on proper guidelines for the disposal of artist materials.

Using a Mahlstick

Hold the bottom of the mahlstick with your nonpainting hand while resting its upper end against the top edge of the canvas. In this way, the tip of the mahlstick will not damage or smudge the surface of the painting. Hold the bar nearly parallel to the canvas, and rest your hand against the bar while working on the details of the painting. The mahlstick can also be used as a straightedge. Hold it horizontally, resting one end against the side of the canvas with the rest of the stick about an inch away from the painting's surface, then pull the brush along the length of the mahlstick. This technique will result in straight horizontal lines. Hold the mahlstick vertically or diagonally for straight lines in those directions. While dragging the brush along the bar, it is not a bad idea to give a subtle wiggle or movement to the brush to keep the line from being too rigid.



A mahlstick can be used to support your hand while you paint details.



You can also use a mahlstick as a straightedge.

LINSEED OILS

Linseed oil is the principal binding vehicle used in oil paints. It is made from the seeds of flax plants, and has a medium or pale golden color. Linseed oil is used in most oil paints, except for some white pigments and other light colors, where it is sometimes replaced by the paler safflower and poppy-seed oils. Keep a small amount of linseed oil in your palette cup for the times you want to extend the flow of your color. You can also use a rag to apply a thin sheen of linseed oil to a dry canvas to make it slick. Two grades of linseed oil are available on the market: cold-pressed linseed oil and refined linseed oil.

COLD-PRESSED LINSEED OIL

Cold-pressed linseed oil is made by pressing the seeds of flax plants. It is relatively expensive, because this process does not produce a high yield. However, it is considered the superior form of linseed oil, as it provides superior flexibility and strength to the paint film.

REFINED LINSEED OIL

Refined linseed oil is made by steam-heating the flax seeds before they are pressed. This is a more economically efficient way to produce linseed oil, and results in a higher yield. But this process leaves impurities in the oil that require refinement. To remove the impurities, the oil is treated with sulfuric acid and neutralized with an alkali solution.



Linseed oils: cold-pressed linseed oil (left) and refined linseed oil (right)

BODIED LINSEED OILS

Bodied linseed oils are oils that have been thickened by exposure to heat, sunlight, or oxidation. While they are too viscous to be used as a binder in oil paint, they are useful ingredients in painting mediums. If you intend on mixing your own painting medium, purchase a small container of bodied

linseed oil, such as stand oil or sun-thickened linseed oil.

STAND OIL

Stand oil is made when linseed oil is heated in airtight kettles at 550 degrees for fifteen hours or more. As a result, the oil undergoes a chemical reaction that transforms it into a highly viscous, honeylike consistency. Of all the linseed oils, stand oil is the least prone to yellowing. It provides a strong, pliable film to your paint, allowing brushstrokes to level out into a smooth enamel finish.

SUN-THICKENED LINSEED OIL

Sun-thickened linseed oil is created when a combination of equal parts water and linseed oil are left in a flat container and exposed to the sun for several weeks. During this time, the oil separates from the water, removing its impurities. Exposure to the sun bleaches the oil to a lighter color, and exposure to the air causes it to oxidize and thicken. Because it is partially oxidized, sun-thickened linseed oil dries faster than stand oil and is more likely to leave brush marks.



Bodied oils: stand oil (left) and thickened linseed oil (right)



Fruit Piece, 1998, oil on canvas,
16 × 20 inches (40.64 × 50.8 cm), collection of Josephine Devine

VARNISHES

Some varnishes, such as damar, are made from natural resins, however, many modern varnishes are made from synthetic resins. Varnish can serve several purposes in oil painting—for instance, as a picture varnish, retouch varnish, and mixing varnish—as discussed below.

DAMAR VARNISH

Damar varnish is made from a natural resin that is gathered from fir trees in Indonesia and Malaysia. It can be purchased in crystals and dissolved in turpentine, or it can be purchased in a ready-to-use liquid form. It produces a glossy finish, and can be used as a picture varnish, thinned and used as a retouch varnish, or used as a mixing varnish. One drawback to damar varnish is that, over time, its film can eventually turn yellow and become brittle. If this should happen, the varnish can be removed and replaced with a fresh coat.

SYNTHETIC VARNISH

Synthetic varnishes are made from synthetic resins. These varnishes are more permanent than damar varnish, and will not harden, become brittle, or turn yellow with age. Some synthetic varnishes also provide protection against ultraviolet light. Synthetic resins cannot be mixed with oils, and therefore synthetic varnish should not be used as a mixing varnish.



Varnishes: (from left to right) damar varnish (which is useful as a picture varnish, retouch varnish, and mixing varnish), synthetic picture varnish, and retouch varnish.

Using Varnish

Varnish serves several purposes in oil painting. As a picture varnish, it unifies and protects the surface of a finished painting. As a retouch varnish, it revives the dry color of a painting that needs to be reworked. And as a mixing varnish, it is used as an ingredient in a painting medium.

picture varnish

When an oil painting dries, some of its colors remain glossy while others turn matte (also referred to as “sunken”). A final coat of picture varnish over your entire painting will unify its finish by bringing back the wet appearance of sunken colors. Picture varnish also protects the painting from dirt, dust, and other pollutants. Some picture varnishes even filter out harmful ultraviolet light rays. Before applying picture varnish, wait six to twelve months for the painting to completely dry.

retouch varnish

Retouch varnish is a varnish that has been thinned with a greater than usual proportion of turpentine. Because it is so thin, retouch varnish can be applied to a painting that has not yet completely dried. A light application of retouch varnish (either brushed or sprayed on) will revive sunken areas, making it easier for you to match colors if you need to retouch or resume work on a recently finished painting. Retouch varnish will also temporarily protect and unify the surface of the painting before it’s ready for the final picture varnish.

mixing varnish

A mixing varnish serves as an ingredient in painting mediums. In this role, varnish both adds gloss to the color and speeds the drying of the oils. Only natural resin varnishes, like damar

vanish, that are miscible with oils should be used as a mixing varnish. See [this page](#) for a medium recipe that use mixing varnish.

NOTE

Picture varnish is available in gloss and matte finishes. A picture varnish protects the surface of an oil painting from dust and grime. To clean an oil painting, professional art conservators use a mild solvent to remove the dirty varnish, before replacing it with a new clean coat.



Untitled, 1995, oil on canvas,
31 × 40 inches (78.7 × 101.6 cm), collection of Pharmaspec

MEDIUMS

A medium is used to thin your oil paint. Thinning with solvent alone breaks down the paint film, whereas using a medium extends the paint film without harming its adhesion or binding properties. Mediums also have an effect on the finish and drying time of your paint. As with varnish, both traditional and modern synthetic mediums are available.

TRADITIONAL OIL MEDIUMS

Mediums can be purchased readymade at most art supply stores, but it's not difficult to make your own. Most mediums are made from a combination of bodied linseed oil and resin. The oil extends the paint film, while the resin facilitates its drying. Solvent is also added to thin the consistency of the medium, and sometimes a siccative—or liquid drier—is added to speed up the drying process. The recipe featured on [this page](#) is easy to make, and is the medium I like to use.

ALKYD MEDIUMS

Alkyd resin is a synthetic resin that was first used in house paints and varnishes in the 1930s. The alkyd resin used in artists' materials is combined with a drying oil, and is called an oil-modified alkyd resin. It performs in a similar way to linseed oil, so it can be combined with traditional oil colors.

Alkyd mediums have gained popularity with artists in recent decades. They are made using a milder solvent than is used with a traditional oil medium, and do not have the same strong odor of turpentine. They are also nonyellowing and provide good color retention. Alkyd mediums increase the transparency of colors, making them ideal for glazing mediums, and they produce a strong flexible paint film. They also accelerate the drying of oils. While pigment and environment have an effect on the drying time, in many cases oil color thinned with alkyd medium will dry within one or two days.



Alkyd mediums: Winsor & Newton Liquin (left) and Gamblin Galkyd (right)

STUDIO SAFETY NOTE

Solvents, varnishes, and cobalt drier are flammable and should be stored in a metal, nonflammable material storage cabinet away from any source of heat or ignition, and clear of studio exits. The vapors from solvents, varnishes, and cobalt drier can be harmful to your health. Keep your studio properly ventilated, and keep containers of these materials closed when not in use. Use only the smallest amounts needed while working with these materials.

Using the Mediums

If you are using both traditional oil and alkyd mediums in the same painting, never apply an alkyd medium over a traditional oil medium. The alkyds medium will dry before the oil medium, causing structural problems in your painting. Instead, if you are using both mediums, use the alkyd medium first, and layer over it with a traditional oil medium. An example where you might use both mediums would be if you want your initial layers of paint to dry quickly, before switching to a slower drying medium in the final layers. However, for a more stable painting, it's best to use just one kind of medium.

Making Your Own Medium

This recipe is for an all-purpose painting and glazing medium found in *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* by Ralph Mayer, published by the Viking Press.

To make the medium, pour the ingredients into a glass jar and close the lid tightly, then gently shake the jar until the ingredients are mixed together. Keep a small amount of medium in your palette cup, and dip your brush into it when you want to thin your paint. If you are preparing a color for a glaze, pour a small pool of medium on your palette, and using a palette knife, slowly mix it with the color until you get the desired consistency.

You can make adjustments to the flow of the medium by changing the proportion of varnish. Increasing the proportion of varnish will make the medium feel tackier, while decreasing its proportion will make the medium feel slick. The medium can also be thinned further by adding up to two more ounces of turpentine. Sun-thickened linseed oil may also be substituted for stand oil.

materials

- 1 fluid ounce damar varnish (5-pound cut)
- 1 fluid ounce stand oil
- 5 fluid ounces pure gum turpentine
- about 15 drops cobalt drier [optional]

NOTE

Cobalt drier is a siccative that is added to oil paints or mediums to accelerate their drying time. However, it is also flammable and toxic. I use this recipe without including cobalt drier, and have never found the need to speed up its drying time.



Oil Study, 1987, oil on paper,
13 × 16 inches (33 × 40.6 cm), private collection

This is the one of a series of three loose studies I painted of a jar of Tylenol next to a glass. The objects were placed in a small shadow box made of foil mat board, causing the colors to reflect throughout the still life. Small studies such as this and the one featured on [this page](#) are a great way to experiment and develop lively brushwork.

SUPPORTS

Support is the term used for the surface on which you paint. Oil painters work on a variety of supports, including wood panel, canvas, canvas board, and paper. Both rigid and flexible supports provide different experiences to the oil painter, and some painters combine stability with texture—for instance, by mounting canvas onto a wood panel.

In general, stretched canvas (or wood panels, if that's your preference) should be reserved for your finished paintings. However, there are times when you want to sketch out an idea, or practice a new technique without jeopardizing a canvas that you have put time and money into. Canvas board and paper are both inexpensive and require little or no preparation, making them both ideal supports for studies. No matter what your preference or current working method is, it is good to be familiar with all of the various options.

NOTE

As a supplement to stretching your own canvases, it is a good idea to have on hand several small canvas boards or paper supports, approximately 8×10 inches to 14×18 inches in dimension, for studies and other explorations.

WOOD PANEL

The original support of choice by oil painters was a wood panel made from hardwoods, including oak, birch, and poplar. Masonite is a contemporary pressed board that is also used for panel painting. A panel is considered a rigid support. It provides a stable and smooth surface that is ideal for painting details. Many contemporary painters continue to prefer panel supports, which they either make themselves or purchase readymade.

CANVAS BOARD

Canvas board is primed, lightweight cotton canvas that has been mounted to a paper board. It is inexpensive, ready to use, and available in standard sizes. While it is very convenient for studies, it is not an adequate support for finished paintings. I use canvas boards for oil studies, color charts, and classroom demonstrations.

PAPER

Paper is really more suited for drawing and water-based media than for oil painting. In fact, it is not considered a permanent support for oil painting and as such is better used for studies. It absorbs the oil, causing the colors to dry to a dull, matte finish. Still, as it is inexpensive, it is a popular support with oil painters. When painting on paper, use a heavyweight watercolor, drawing, or printmaking paper.



Oil Study, 2005, oil on canvas board,
12 × 16 inches (30.5 × 40.6 cm), private collection

This is one of two oil studies I did in preparation for *Still Life with Self-portrait* (featured on [this page](#)). Here, I wanted to try out a color scheme that used variations on yellow, orange, and blue-violet—the color scheme I decided to use on the finished painting.

NOTE

Oil studies are a great opportunity to experiment with new subject matter and painting techniques. They also give you the opportunity to try out color schemes, compositions, and new painting techniques before committing yourself to a larger finished painting.

STRETCHED CANVAS

Canvas first became popular with oil painters in Venice during in the sixteenth century, as a lightweight and portable alternative to wood panels. Once completed in the painter's studio, a painting on canvas could be rolled up and delivered to its intended location. This allowed painters the opportunity to both spend more time in the studio and work on larger paintings.

A canvas is a flexible support. The tension of the canvas responds to the pressure of the brush, and the canvas weave is a great surface for building up textures of paint. I prefer to paint on canvas. I enjoy the texture of its weave and the flexibility, or give, a stretched canvas provides.

Canvas comes in a variety of grades. Its weight is measured in ounces per square yard, and its thread count is based on the number of threads per square inch. Canvases with the highest thread counts are the most durable. The threads are woven in a single weave, with one thread in each

direction; double weave, with two threads in each direction; and combination weave, with a single thread in one direction, double in the other. Rough surfaced canvas is good for paintings with a lot of texture, and smooth texture is good for paintings with fine details.

NOTE

For the lessons in this book, I recommend that you work on stretched canvases that are between 14×18 inches and 20×24 inches in dimension.

LINEN AND COTTON

Linen is the traditional fabric used for artists' canvases. It is produced from fibers of the flax plant, the same plant from which linseed oil is made. Linen is durable, and its weave has a tight, beautiful surface texture. Linen expands and contracts with changes in the humidity. On a rainy day, a stretched linen canvas will become loose. And on a dry day, it will tighten up.

Cotton canvas is made from threads spun from fibers of the cotton plant. While it is not as strong as linen, cotton canvas remains stable with changes in the humidity. Cotton canvas was first used by artists in the 1930s. It is much less expensive than linen canvas, and remains a popular choice for oil painters today. While most linen weights are generally considered professional quality, only 12-ounce or heavier cotton canvas is recommended for serious painting.



Linen (lower left) and canvas (upper right)

STRETCHERS

Canvases are mounted on stretchers. A stretcher is a framework that is made of four strips of wood called stretcher bars. A stretcher has an elevated outer rim that keeps stretched canvas from touching the rest of the framework. Stretcher bars are joined by mitered tongue-and-groove corners without the use of glue or nails. This allows the stretcher to remain flexible, so that small plastic or wooden shims, called keys, may be inserted into slots inside the joints of the stretcher, and tapped to expand the stretcher while increasing the tension of the canvas. Standard stretcher bars come in

various lengths and are about $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide and $\frac{3}{4}$ inch deep. These are adequate for canvases up to about 24×36 inches, but heavier-duty stretcher bars should be used for larger canvases.



Stretcher bars



Oil Study, 1987, oil on paper,
15½ × 12¾ inches (39.4 × 32.4 cm), private collection

Stretching Your Own Canvas

You can purchase canvases that are already stretched, primed, and ready to paint on, or you can prepare your own. Prestretched and primed canvases are acceptable for student work, but they are usually made with a lighter grade of canvas. If you prepare your own canvases, you will benefit from improved quality and selection of materials and an infinite variety of dimensions.

materials

4 stretcher bars

measuring tape

canvas

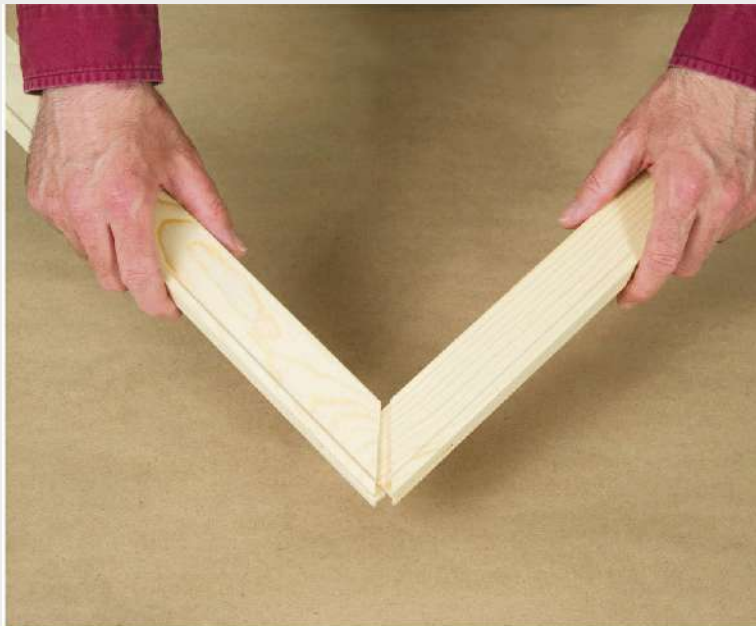
scissors or utility knife

heavy-duty staple gun with 1/4-inch staples

canvas pliers (optional)

slotted (flat) screwdriver

hammer



STEP 1 ASSEMBLE THE STRETCHER.

Build a stretcher by joining four stretcher bars together at the mitered ends. Do not glue or staple the corners—the tongue-and-groove joints should remain adjustable.



STEP 2 CHECK TO SEE IF THE STRETCHER IS SQUARE.

Measure the stretcher diagonally from corner to corner to check if it is square. If the stretcher is square, the dimensions will be the same. You can also check to see if it is square by fitting it against a square doorjamb.



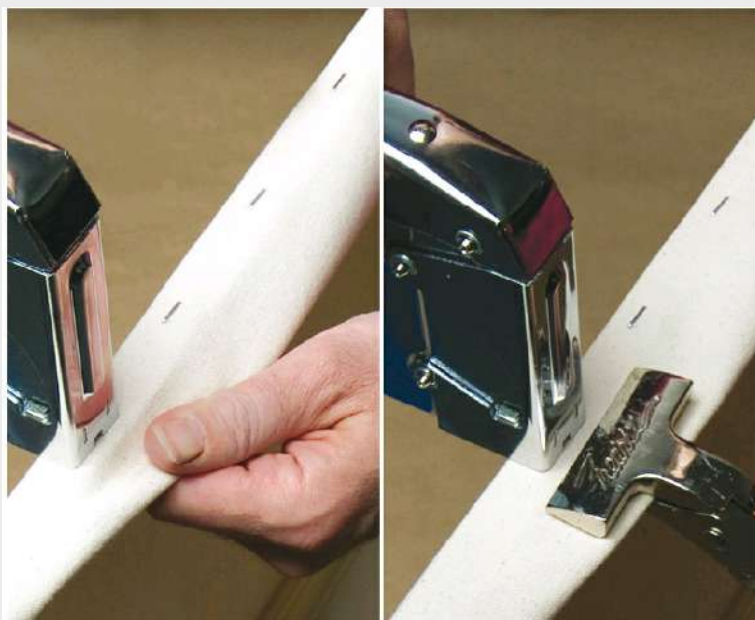
STEP 3 CUT THE CANVAS TO SIZE.

Place the canvas on a clean, flat surface. If the canvas is already primed, lay the primed side facing down. Then, place the stretcher on the canvas, aligning it with the horizontal and vertical weave of the canvas. Use a pair of scissors or a utility knife to cut the canvas, allowing about a 3-inch margin around the outer edge of the stretcher.



STEP 4 DRIVE IN THE FIRST STAPLE.

Lift the stretcher bar and canvas so they are in an upright position. Fold the canvas over the top side of the stretcher drive the first staple into the center of the bar. During the process, any errant staples can be removed with a slotted screwdriver.



STEP 5 GRIP THE CANVAS EITHER BY HAND (LEFT) OR WITH CANVAS PLIERS (RIGHT).

When pulling the canvas, grip it with your thumb and forefinger while placing your knuckle against the stretcher bar for leverage. If you prefer not to grip and stretch the canvas by hand, you can instead use canvas pliers.



STEP 6 DRIVE IN THE SECOND STAPLE.

Rotate the stretcher and canvas to the opposite side, and pull the canvas taut over the center of the bar until a crease appears on the front of the canvas between the first staple and your thumb and forefinger. Then, drive the second staple into the center of the bar.



STEP 7 DRIVE IN THE THIRD STAPLE.

Rotate to the third side of the stretcher. Using the same stretching technique from Step 5, pull the canvas over the bar until two more creases appear to form a triangle on the front of the canvas, and then drive the third staple in the center of that side.



STEP 8 DRIVE IN THE FOURTH STAPLE.

Rotate the stretcher over to the fourth side, and pull the canvas over the bar until the triangle shape formed between the staple points becomes a diamond shape, then drive in the fourth staple.



STEP 9 CONTINUE TO ADD STAPLES.

Return to the first side that you stapled, and continue to stretch the canvas while driving two more staples, each about 2 inches on both sides of the center staple. Then, flip the stretcher bar, stretch the canvas while driving two staples into either side of the center staple on the second side. Continue rotating the stretcher from side to side as you progressively add staples from the center toward the corners. While stretching the canvas, apply a consistent tension to the canvas. The weave should stay close in alignment with the stretcher. Stop short of driving the last staples at the corners until the corners have been folded (Step 11).

NOTE

If, at any point in the process, you discover that the canvas is too tight, too loose, or stretching unevenly, remove the staples using a slotted screwdriver and restretch the canvas correctly.



STEP 10 FOLD OVER AND STAPLE EXTRA CANVAS.

At this point, there should be about 1½ inches of extra canvas remaining around the four sides of the stretcher. This extra canvas may be cut away with a utility knife, but I prefer to fold it over and staple it to the back of the stretcher. This extra canvas will make it much easier to restretch the painting if the need arises in the future.



STEP 11 TUCK IN THE CANVAS (LEFT) THEN FOLD AND STAPLE IT TO THE STRETCHER (RIGHT).

Tuck the canvas in at the corner, and fold it over the stretcher bar. Staple the folded canvas into the back side of the stretcher.



STEP 12 DRIVE IN THE REMAINING STAPLES.

After folding the corners, lift the stretched canvas back upright, and drive staples into the remaining corners on all four sides.



STEP 13 TAP DOWN THE STAPLES.

Using a hammer, lightly tap the staples or tacks down on all four sides.

Stretching Your Own Paper

Before it can be used as a support for oil painting, paper should be stretched on to a board with gummed watercolor tape, and then primed with acrylic gesso. Stretching the paper will prevent it from buckling when it is primed. It's also easier to paint on the paper when it is fastened to a rigid surface. Leave the paper on the board as you work on the painting, then remove it after you are finished.

If you intend to paint a series of studies on paper, consider stretching several sheets of paper at a time. You can stretch paper on one side of a board, and then allow it to dry before stretching another sheet of paper on the opposite side of the board, doubling the number of studies you can paint. While watercolor boards that are used for stretching paper are available at art supply stores, I find that small sheets of half-inch-thick plywood are less expensive and work just fine.

materials

paper

watercolor board*

gummed watercolor tape

sponge

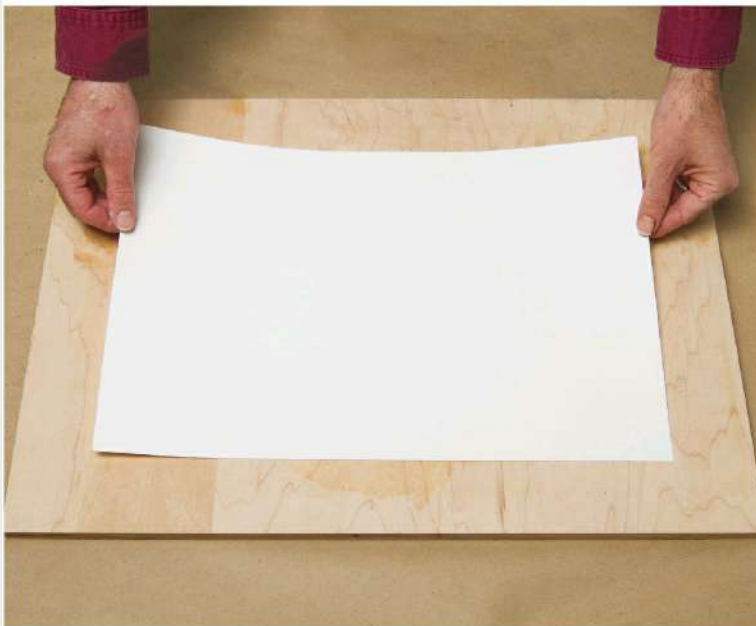
utility knife

**If you have trouble finding watercolor board, you can use a half-inch thick sheet of plywood.*



STEP 1 WET THE PAPER.

Carefully dip the paper in a sink full of lukewarm water, wetting both sides completely.



STEP 2 PLACE THE PAPER ON THE WATERCOLOR BOARD.

Lay the wet paper squarely on the watercolor board and smooth out any ripples with your hands.



STEP 3 WET THE TAPE.

Use a damp sponge to moisten the gummed side of the tape.



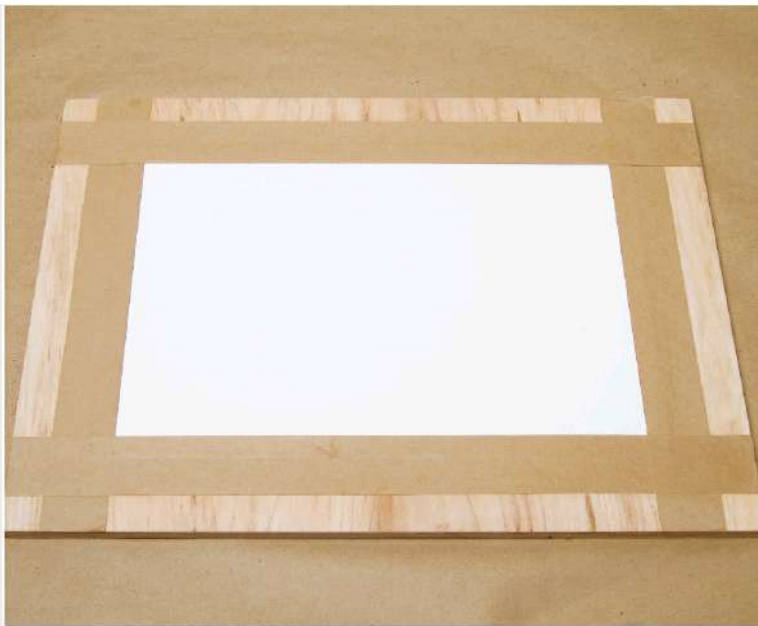
STEP 4 TAPE THE PAPER TO THE WATERCOLOR BOARD.

Place the tape along all four sides of the paper to securely adhere it to the board.



STEP 5 TRIM THE EXCESS TAPE.

Cut off any tape that extends beyond the board with the utility knife.



STEP 6 ALLOW THE PAPER TO DRY.

Let the paper dry overnight on a flat surface.

Priming Your Support with Oil Ground

Whether you are working on panel, canvas, or paper, it is necessary to protect the support from deterioration that can be caused by oils. A primer will provide a barrier, keeping the support from being in direct contact with the oils. It will also reduce absorbency and provide a uniform, bright white surface on which to paint.

Oil priming involves two different materials: First, size is applied to the support, then white oil ground. Each serves a unique purpose.

Traditionally, sizing was done with rabbit skin glue. However, today supports can also be sized with a PVA (polyvinyl acetate) size. The sizing reduces the absorbency of the canvas or paper, making it more receptive to paint while also protecting it from any deterioration caused by the oils.

Traditionally, several coats of white lead oil pigment were applied over the glue sizing, serving as an oil ground. However, white lead is toxic and today many nontoxic oil grounds are available, including white oil paints (such as titanium white or mixed white), alkyd-based white paints, and oil gesso primers. Alkyds dry faster than oil paints, are more flexible, and will not yellow over time.

materials

unprimed stretched canvas or other support

rabbit skin glue or PVA size

double boiler (for rabbit skin glue only)

small bucket (for PVA size only)

2-inch house painter's brush

oil ground*

solvent (turpentine or odorless mineral spirits)

palette knife

fine-grit sandpaper

**Options include oil- or alkyd-based white paint or oil gesso primer.*

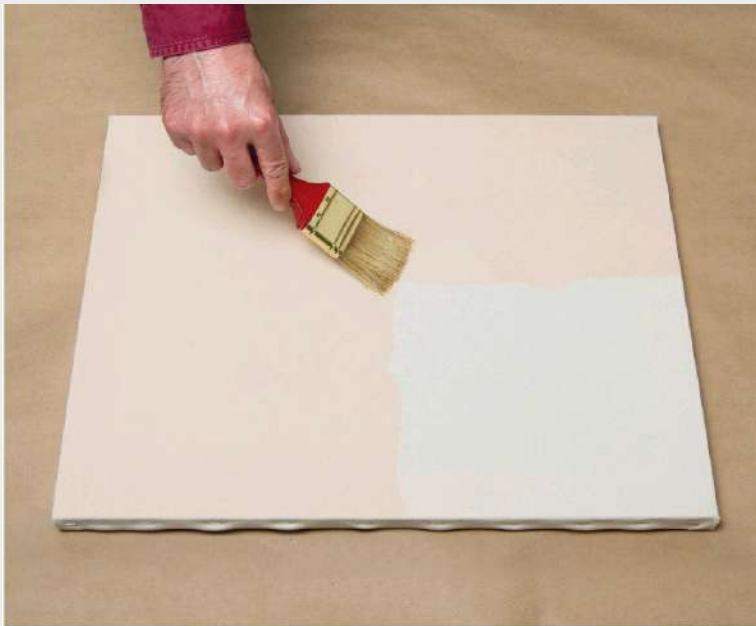
NOTE

You can prime any of the supports discussed on [here](#) using either a traditional oil ground or an acrylic gesso.



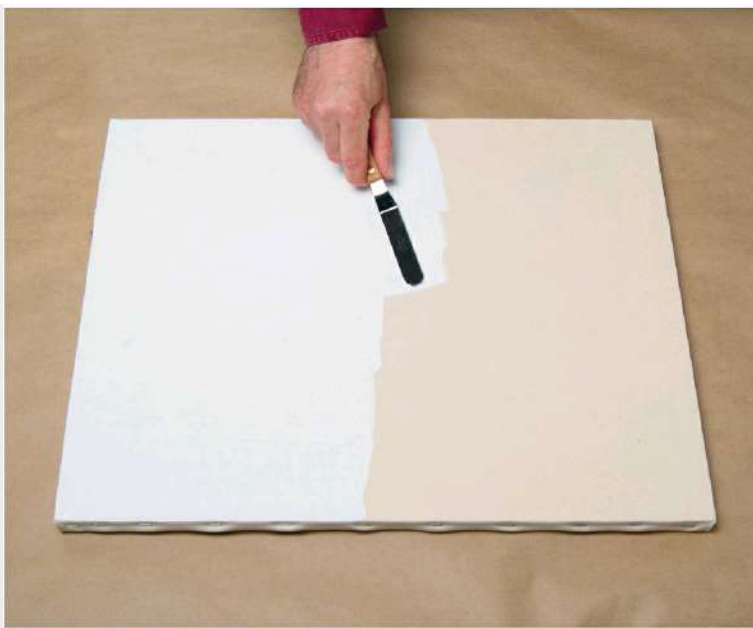
STEP 1 PREPARE YOUR SIZE.

If you are using rabbit skin glue, heat water in a double boiler and dissolve the rabbit skin crystals (pictured above). Do not let the water reach a boiling point. Allow the rabbit skin glue to cool to a workable temperature before applying. If you are using PVA size, dilute it with lukewarm water in a small bucket.



STEP 2 APPLY THE GLUE SIZE.

Use a house painter's brush to apply the size to the support. Make sure that the glue penetrates the weave of the canvas, leaving no missed spots or pin holes. One coat is sufficient unless you are sizing an extra porous canvas, which will require two coats. Allow the size to dry before applying the oil ground.



STEP 3 APPLY THE OIL GROUND.

Dilute the oil ground with turpentine or odorless mineral spirits until it becomes a workable consistency capable of penetrating the weave of the canvas, and then use a palette knife to spread a thin layer of it over the sized canvas.

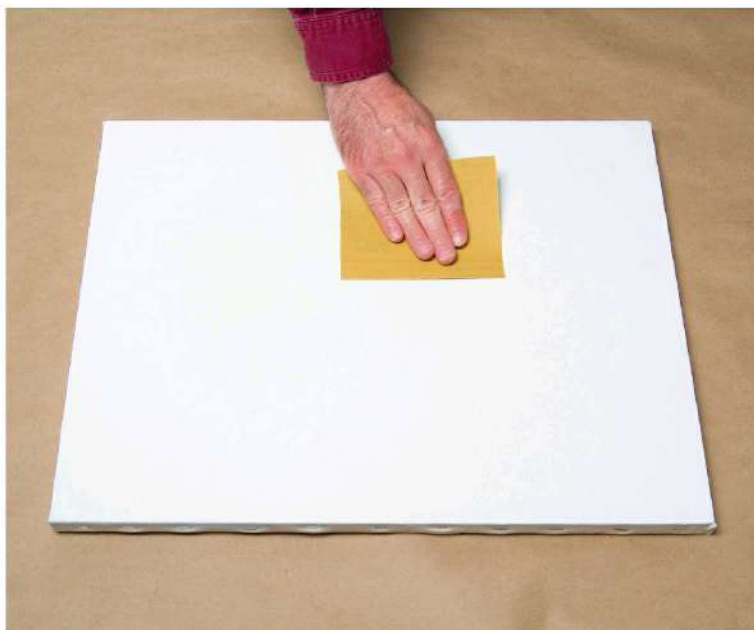
STUDIO SAFETY NOTE

When sanding oil grounds always wear a dust mask to avoid inhaling the dust particles that are generated.



STEP 4 SMOOTH OUT THE OIL GROUND.

While the oil ground is still wet, smooth out its surface with a clean house painter's brush. Allow the ground to dry.



STEP 5 SAND THE SUPPORT.

Lightly sand the surface of the ground with fine-grit sandpaper. Repeat Steps 3, 4, and 5, applying at least three coats.

Priming Your Support with Acrylic Gesso

Gesso is a term used for a traditional ground (used for rigid supports) that is a mixture of a glue solution and chalk or whiting. The word gesso is Italian and comes from *gypsum*. Modern acrylic gesso is really not a “gesso,” but actually an acrylic polymer resin. It is perfectly suited for priming both rigid and flexible supports.

Priming a support with acrylic gesso involves only one material. (Because acrylic paints are not harmful to raw canvas or paper, it is not necessary to size the support first.) Acrylic gesso is convenient to use, dries quickly, and is more flexible than traditional oil priming.

materials

unprimed stretched canvas or other support

small bucket

acrylic gesso

paint mixing stick

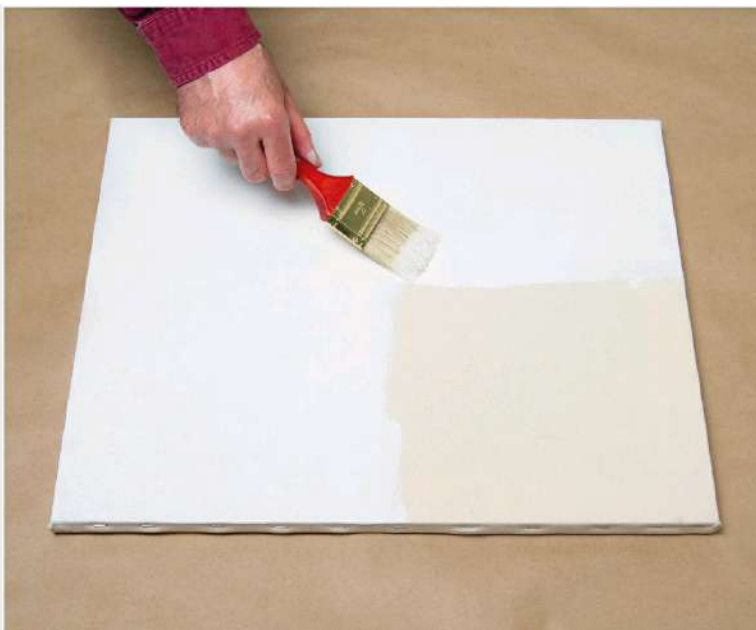
2-inch house painter's brush

fine-grit sandpaper



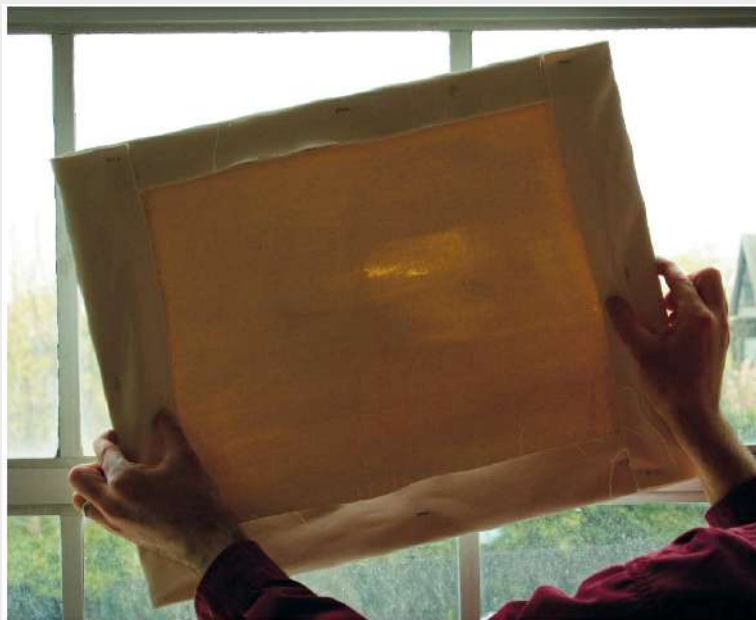
STEP 1 PREPARE THE GESSO.

In a small bucket, thin your acrylic gesso with up to 10 percent water. This will increase the flow and reduce any chance of brushstrokes remaining in the ground after it has dried.



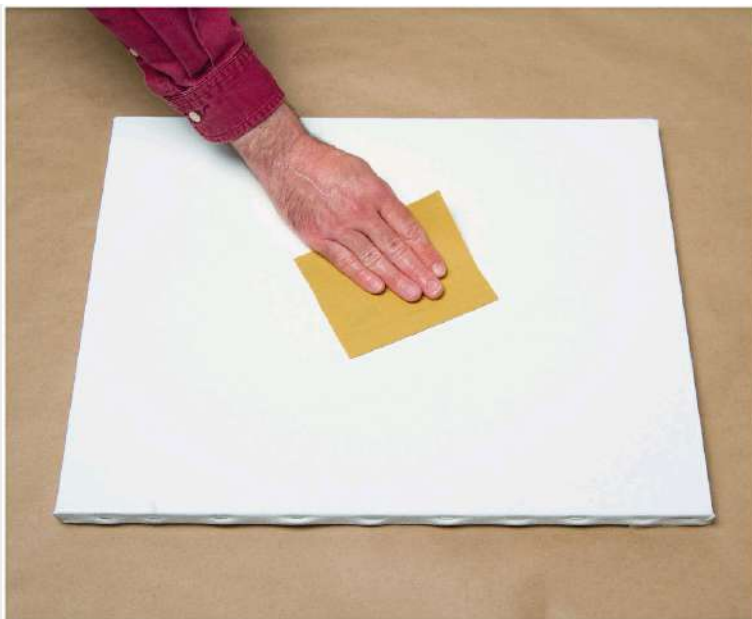
STEP 2 APPLY THE GESSO.

Using a house painter's brush, apply the first coat of acrylic gesso to the canvas.



STEP 3 CHECK FOR ANY MISSED SPOTS.

Hold the canvas in front of a window or lamp. If any light shows through, the support is not sufficiently covered. Return to Step 2.



STEP 4 SAND THE SUPPORT.

Once the gesso has dried, lightly sand the surface of the support with fine-grit sandpaper. Repeat the process, applying at least three coats of gesso.

Applying the Imprimatura

Sometimes called a “veil” or a “toned ground,” an imprimatura is the initial layer of color that is applied over the entire canvas before painting begins. An imprimatura is useful in the beginning stages of a painting because it establishes a base color (often an earth or gray tone) that is more favorable to paint on than a white canvas. Generally, a semitransparent color is used for the imprimatura because it maintains a luminous quality as light passes through and reflects from the white canvas. In addition, the semitransparent color will not cover any drawing previously done on the canvas. Opaque colors, generally tinted with white, can also be used for the imprimatura, but they neither have the same degree of luminosity nor reveal drawings below. With the exception of the first demonstration painting (which is executed on a white canvas), the examples in [Part IV](#) show canvases that have a burnt umber imprimatura.

materials

primed stretched canvas or other support

burnt umber oil paint

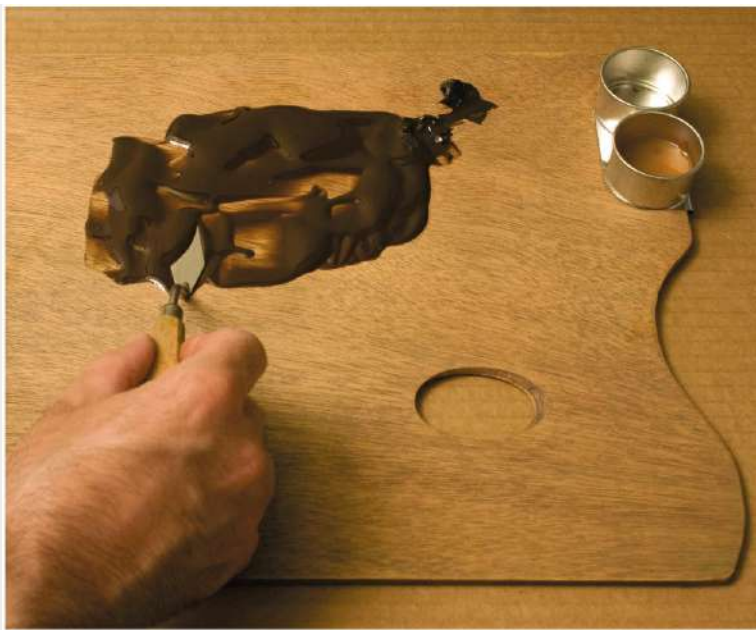
solvent (turpentine or odorless mineral spirits) or alkyd medium

2-inch house painter’s brush

painting or palette knife

NOTE

If your canvas is primed with an acrylic gesso, you can apply an imprimatura with acrylic paint instead of oil paint. Thin the acrylic paint with an acrylic medium or water, and follow the same procedures outlined below. An acrylic imprimatura is not as luminous or smooth as an oil imprimatura, but it takes much less time to prepare, and will dry in a matter of hours.



STEP 1 DILUTE THE OIL COLOR.

Thin the oil color with solvent or alkyd medium until it can be applied as a light- to middle-toned wash.



STEP 2 APPLY THE OIL COLOR.

Using your house painter's brush, apply an even wash of color over the entire canvas.



STEP 3 BLEND THE OIL COLOR.

Once the entire surface is covered, use your house painter's brush to blend and even out the color.



STEP 4 ALLOW THE OIL COLOR TO DRY.

Allow the imprimatura several days to completely dry before painting on it.

NOTE

Alkyd mediums dry quickly and can be used instead of solvent to thin the paint, making the paint film more fluid. However, traditional oil mediums dry slowly and should never be used to thin color for an oil imprimatura.



PART III

SETTING UP YOUR STILL LIFE

THE INSTRUCTIONS IN THIS SECTION are intended to help you set up the type of still lifes that are used for the lessons in this book. I have developed these techniques over the years of teaching still life painting. The objects are selected for specific painting lessons, the lighting is controlled to heighten form, and the still lifes are assembled in shadow boxes and marked so that they can be put away between painting sessions without disturbing the setup.

All this said, there are really countless ways that one can set up a still life. Sometimes the best still lifes are set up accidentally: a bowl of fruit set on your kitchen table; a shell placed on a windowsill; or a set of tools scattered on a workbench. Use the guidelines covered in this section to set up still lifes as you follow the lessons in this book, but I encourage you to explore other still life subject matter and always look for the accidental still life.

GATHERING YOUR MATERIALS

To set up your still life for the lessons in this book, you will need a shadow box, a collection of still life objects, and lighting. In addition, should you choose to use fabric, straight pins and clothespins help to secure it in place. And finally, masking tape and a tape measure come in handy for marking the setup in case it needs to be moved, taken apart, or put away between painting sessions.

BACKGROUNDS

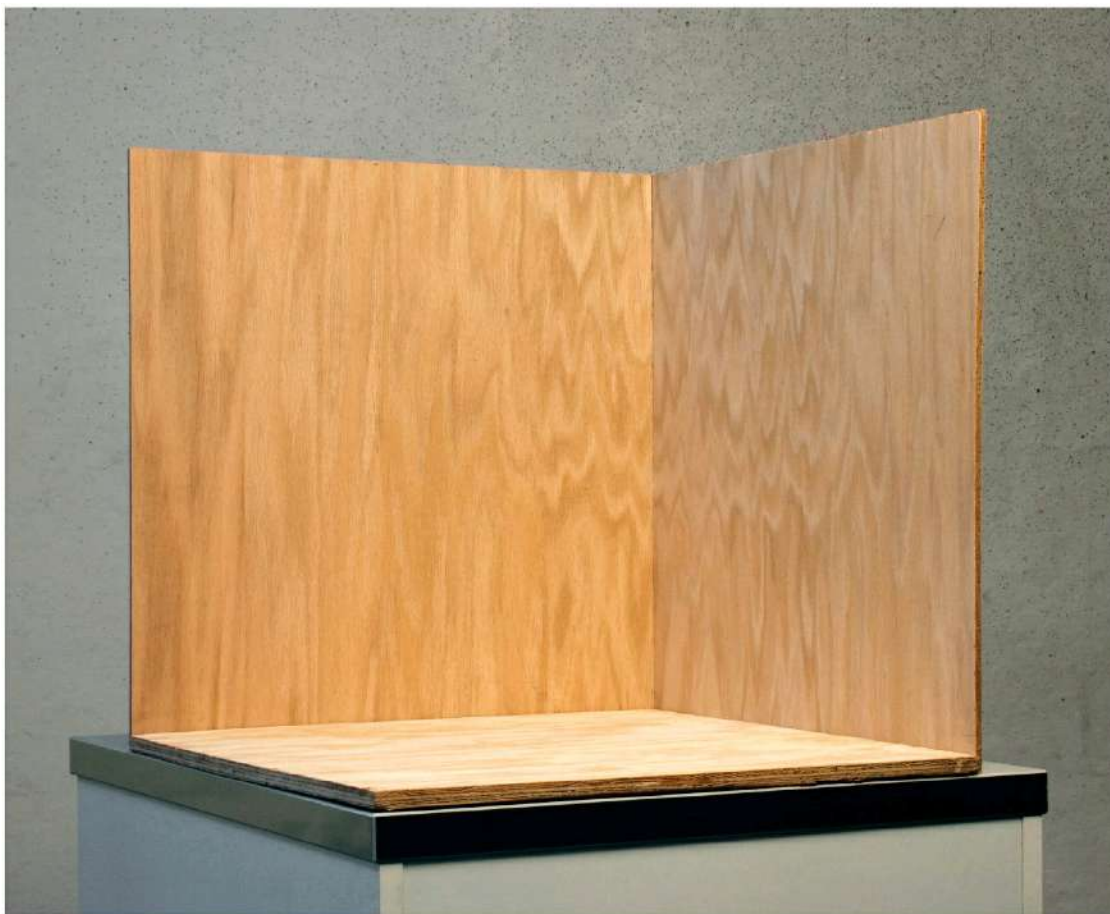
If your shadow box is made of wood, you can use its wood grain in the background of the still life. Or you can insert other materials—such as boards, papers, or fabrics—for backgrounds. Black foam board makes a good still life background; it is easy to pin fabric into, and still life objects stand out nicely against its dark tone.

FABRICS

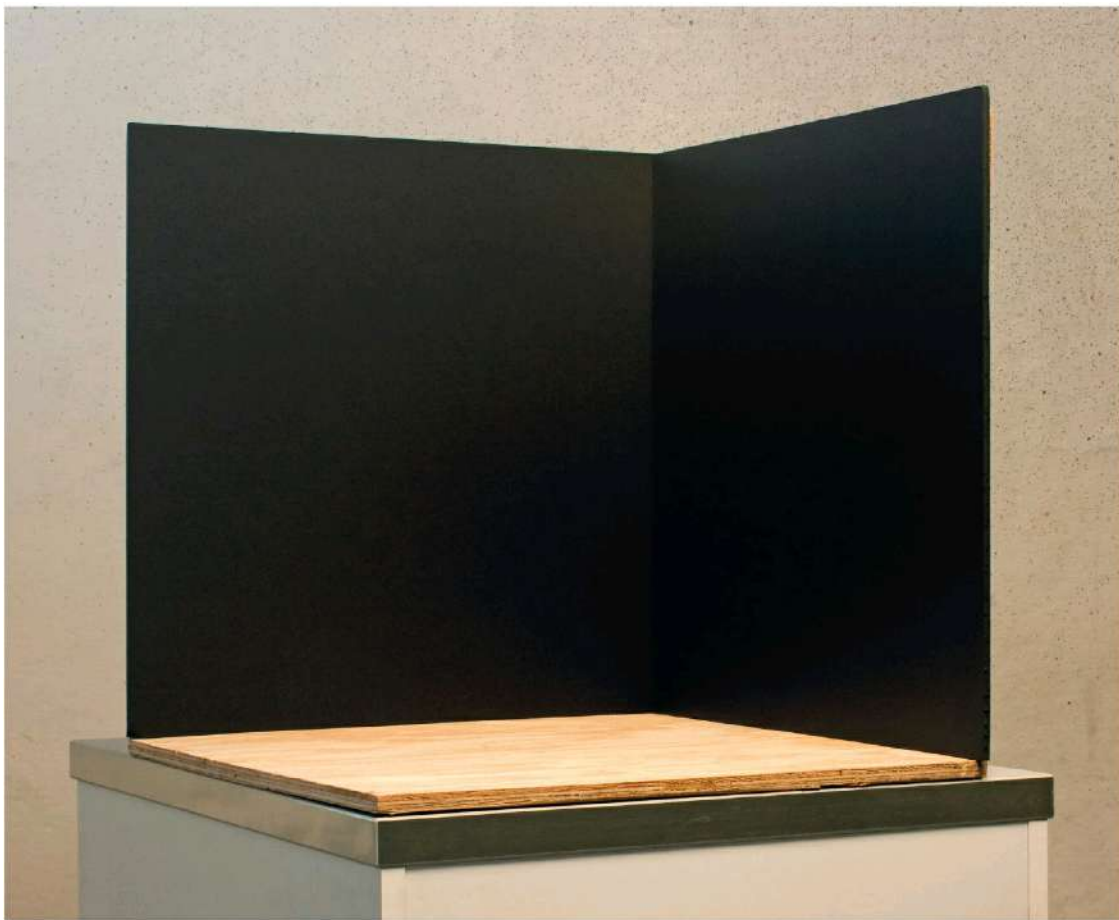
If you are including fabric in your still life, put it in the shadow box before you place the objects. You might choose to lay a piece of fabric along the base of the box, as if it were a tablecloth, and hang a piece of fabric along the walls of the box as if it were a drape. In both cases, any still life objects that are already in the shadow box would most likely be in the way. It may take a few attempts to hang draped fabric before you get an arrangement that looks good. Once you've got it the way you want it, attach the fabric to the shadow box using straight pins or clothespins to reduce any chance of it shifting.

NOTE

I usually set up the still life in a certain order. First, I insert the background, and then I arrange the fabric—the most challenging part of setting up a still life. After I have selected and arranged the still life objects, then I light the still life. It is usually at this point that the still life setup comes together.



While this shadow box was built using three pieces of plywood, you can also make a shadow box by cutting open a cardboard box and leaving three sides intact. It is not a bad idea to have a number of shadow boxes in your studio. This will allow you to set up and work on several still lifes set up at one time.



While the wood grain itself can make a nice background in the still life, you can also insert materials, such as black foam board (shown here), in your shadow box. The black background provides depth to the still life. Objects seem to stand out nicely against dark backgrounds. However, you can also bring color to the background by inserting colored papers and boards.



The fabric can be placed simply in the shadow box with little or no folds, providing a simple color background. Or, as in this case, it can be hung it like a drapery, dividing the background into large areas of light and shadow.

STILL LIFE OBJECTS

When I set up still lifes for painting classes, I choose subject matter that helps students learn specific painting techniques. The still life may be set up with the goal of working with a particular set of colors, materials, or surface textures. You can do the same as you follow the lessons in this book.

NOTE

When gathering your still life objects, consider the challenges that their shapes, colors, and surface textures may pose in the painting. Start with objects that have simple shapes, neutral colors, and matte surfaces. As you improve, expand your repertoire of still life objects to include brighter colors, more complex shapes, and a variety of surface textures.

BEGINNING-LEVEL OBJECTS

For the beginning-level painter, there are lessons in this book on underpainting, working with a limited palette, and basic color mixing. A beginning-level still life would include simple objects with matte surfaces and solid colors, such as painted bottles, matte ceramic pottery, matte solid fabric, or solidly colored fruit (such as pears or apples). Avoid bright colors and busy patterns. Instead, an arrangement of muted earth tones will be more manageable when you are just starting out.



Simple objects with matte surfaces and solid colors are good for a beginning-level still life.

INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL OBJECTS

At the intermediate level, lessons include *alla prima* painting, working with a full palette, and painting sharp and soft edges. An intermediate still life may contain glass bottles, metal cups, ceramics decorated with multicolored glazes or simple designs, brighter fabrics, and multicolored

fruit (such as peaches and nectarines). This subject matter presents the challenge of painting translucent surfaces with reflections, brighter colors, and multicolored surfaces.



An intermediate-level still life may include brighter and multicolored objects with reflective and translucent surfaces.

ADVANCED-LEVEL OBJECTS

For the advanced-level still life painter, there are lessons in glazing and scumbling, and painting textures. An advanced still life could include a variety of textures, such as metal and glass objects, velvet and satin fabrics, citrus fruits, and crusty bread. With this subject matter, you will be challenged to create smooth and rough surface textures and more advanced reflections.



For an advanced-level still life, include reflective objects with a variety of smooth and rough surface textures.

ASSEMBLING YOUR OBJECTS

The number of objects included in the still life could vary from a simple arrangement of one or two items to a much higher number. For classroom still life setups, I generally work with a range of four to seven objects. One design concept states it is always best to use odd numbers, but I've not found any significance to this rule. Beyond the objects themselves, there are other uncounted elements that also contribute to the still life composition, including the table, drapery, background, and shadows.

Varying the sizes of the objects makes the arrangement more interesting. Include a variety of large-, small-, and medium-sized objects. Consider using one dominant large object, such as a bottle or jug, with several medium and smaller objects.

Overlapping is a simple way to convey depth in the still life. Place the larger objects in the middle or background, so they do not become too dominant. Smaller objects will not dominate the arrangement, and work well in the foreground, middle ground, or background. If two objects are placed close together, overlap them slightly to avoid confusion as to which one is in front of the other.

NOTE

When arranging your still life objects, organize them into two or three groups. Have them overlap so there is a sense of depth to the arrangement.



When you assemble the still life objects, include a variety of large, medium, and small items. Consider including one large, dominant object.



Assemble the individual objects into larger groupings, and allow them to overlap. Overlapping will make it easier to convey depth in your painting.

DIRECTING YOUR LIGHTING

Lighting is the last and most rewarding step in setting up a still life. When lit, the still life seems to come to life. Whether using natural or artificial light, direct the light in such a way that the still life is lit from one side. Side lighting produces a nearly equal contrast of light and shadow, which in turn enhances the three-dimensional forms of the still life objects.

To light the still life from the side when working with natural light, position the angle of the box in relation to the window until the panel that is closest to the window is in shadow and the opposite panel is in light. To light the still life from the side when using an artificial light, position the studio lamp above and to the side of the still life. Point the lamp toward the far panel of the shadow box so that the near panel of the box is in shadow and the far panel is in light. Traditionally, still lifes have been lit from the left, but feel free to break with this tradition.

Once the still life has been set up, as with any other artist's subject, you can compose from it in any number of different ways. You can move your easel around the setup to see it from the front, side, and back lit angles. You can crop the subject in a vertical or horizontal format, up close, or from a distance. Many different compositions can be created from one setup. Selecting the objects and arranging them into a still life is only the first step of a compositional process that will continue on—from your first thumbnail sketch to the final touch of paint.

NOTE

When lighting the still life, use just one light source. Make sure that you turn off all other sources of light, such as overhead lamps or undraped windows, so they do not inadvertently affect the lighting in your still life. If you are using an easel light, try to keep its light directed on your canvas only.



Here, the still life setup is in artificial light. Notice how the setup is in high contrast and the shadows are sharp.



Here, the still life setup is in natural light. The shadows are soft and the overall contrast is low.

POSITIONING YOUR EASEL

Your easel should be positioned in such a way that you can look at your subject and painting simultaneously while working. If you are right-handed, place the easel just slightly to your left side,

so that when your arm is extended toward the canvas, it will not obstruct your view of the still life setup; if you are left-handed, place the easel to your left.

Don't sit or stand too close to the easel. Place it at about arm's length from you so you have sufficient room to work. Once your easel is in position, extend your painting arm to the four corners of the canvas. If you find that you are stretching to reach the top of the canvas, or stooping over to reach the bottom, adjust the canvas to fit your height more properly. Keep the easel perpendicular to the floor. When an easel is tilted backward, the canvas may reflect glare in your eyes. However, you can tilt the canvas slightly forward in the easel if glare continues to be a problem.

While these set-up steps may seem fussy, an awkwardly placed easel can become a distraction to your work. It's important to have a dependable easel set up in such a way that it allows you to work comfortably while focusing on your painting.



Use chalk to outline the shadows and mark the locations of the objects. If the still life is taken down or moved between sessions, you can refer to the chalk marks to keep the still life set up consistent.

MARKING YOUR SETUP

You may have the room in your studio to leave the still life set up between painting sessions. But if this is not the case, there are a number of steps you can take to ensure that it can be taken down and set back up accurately without too much disturbance to the still life. When something in the still life setup has changed—be it the direction of light, the position of an object, or even your point of view—

your painting also changes. Following these set up procedures will ensure consistency in both your still life and your painting.



Clip or pin down the fabric to secure it to the still life box between painting sessions.

THE SHADOW BOX

It is important to keep the position and height of the shadow box in relation to your viewing point consistent. If the shadow box is to be moved or put away between painting sessions, then mark its location with masking tape. If the shadow box is placed on a table, mark with tape where the table legs touch the floor. If the table height is adjustable, measure and write down the distance from the shadow box to the floor.

THE LIGHT SOURCE

If you are using a lamp to light your still life, mark with tape where the lamp stand meets the floor, and measure the distance of the lamp from the floor. Also, note the direction of the artificial or natural light in the still life by outlining the shadows of the objects in the still life with light chalk lines. These marks will come in handy when setting the still life back up. They will help you to confirm the position and angle of the light source from the previous painting session.

THE STILL LIFE OBJECTS

If you need to put the still life objects away between painting sessions, mark the locations of the objects with chalk. If you are painting perishables, you can refrigerate them between sessions. If your

still life can remain set up in the still life box, but the entire setup needs to be put away, carefully tape items down so they are not disturbed while the still life is being moved.

THE DRAPERY AND TABLECLOTH

It's nearly impossible to keep drapery undisturbed if the still life is relocated, but you can secure it to the still life box to minimize any movement. To do this, clip or pin the drapery along the top of the shadow box, along the base of the shadow box, behind the folds, and anywhere else you can without it distorting its natural shape. Never try to take down the drapery if you intend to put it back up the way it was. Maintaining the correct placement of the tablecloth is especially important if you have also used it to mark the direction of light and placement of still life objects. If you need to put the tablecloth away between painting sessions, put light chalk marks on the cloth along the edges of the table. This will make it easier to replace the tablecloth in the right position.



PART IV

STILL LIFE DEMONSTRATION PAINTINGS

THE FOLLOWING FIVE PAINTING DEMONSTRATIONS are intended to provide you with lessons that cover a broad range of oil painting techniques. For our purposes, still life will be the subject, but the techniques are not necessarily exclusive to still life painting. The lessons are meant to build upon each other, starting with fairly simple setups and methods and ending with more complex subjects and techniques. I suggest that you follow the lessons on your own in the order as they appear in the book. When finished, you may look back and find that you like one particular approach over another. At that point, continue to practice on your own and develop your painting skills.

Information is provided regarding what type of objects you might want to include in the still life, what materials are to be used, and what size of still life painting is recommended.

DEMONSTRATION

PAINTING WITH A LIMITED PALETTE

This project involves thumbnail sketching, preliminary drawing, transferring the drawing to the canvas, underpainting, and painting with a limited palette.

In preparation for this painting, gather your objects. For this still life, you will need three to five objects. These could include one large object, such as a jug or vase, and some smaller objects. With the palette in mind, choose objects that are neutral in color and that have matte finishes. You might also include some fruit. (I like to use red pears and yellow lemons because their colors are suitable to the limited palette.) Then set up your still life objects, using the techniques discussed earlier.



Demonstration Painting 1, 2009, oil on canvas,
14 × 18 inches (35.6 × 45.7 cm), private collection

MAKING A THUMBNAIL SKETCH

A thumbnail sketch is a small sketch; it need not be any larger than 2 or 3 inches in dimension. It is produced quickly, like a doodle, so that you can try out many different ways to compose your painting

in a short period of time. A thumbnail sketch may seem insignificant, but it is a very important step in still life painting. On a small scale, you are addressing some big concepts. Through a series of sketches, you decide how you will crop the still life, place the objects, and light the still life. These and other ideas can be tried out quickly in a sketch without wasting time and energy on a full-sized drawing or painting.

materials

sketchbook

graphite pencil

kneaded eraser

NOTE

Each demonstration painting comprises many individual lessons. Take your time to absorb each lesson thoroughly. Do not rush the process. It should take many days to complete each of these paintings.

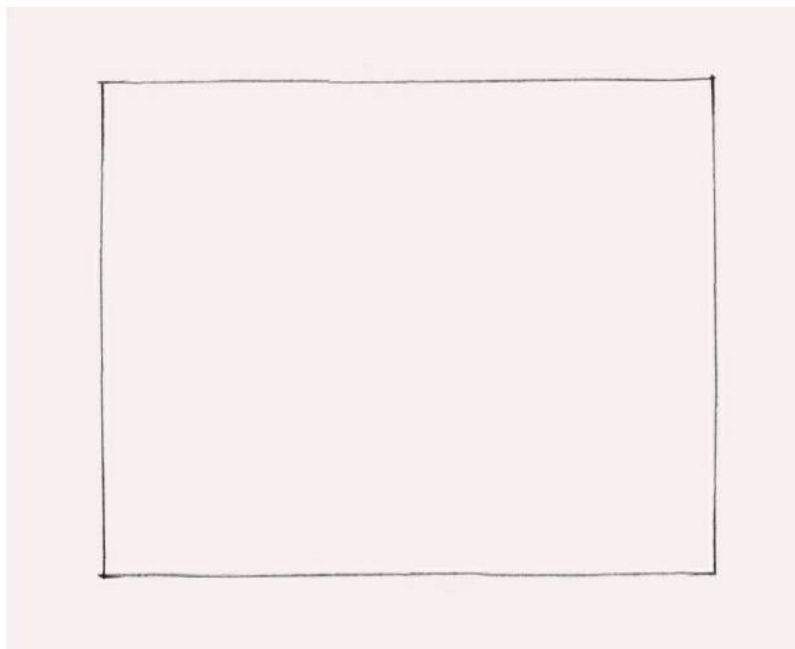
Picture Planes

Imagine the picture plane as a two-dimensional surface through which we see the still life. This imaginary surface is represented in the real world as a rectangular or other shaped border in your sketch or drawing, and will eventually become the canvas surface of your painting.

When establishing a picture plane, you encounter some initial questions regarding how you will compose your painting. For instance, what shape will the picture plane be? Will it be horizontal or vertical? Will it show the entire still life, or will it crop in closely on particular objects? Do some of the objects bleed off the edge of the picture plane? Explore various options by creating numerous thumbnail sketches.

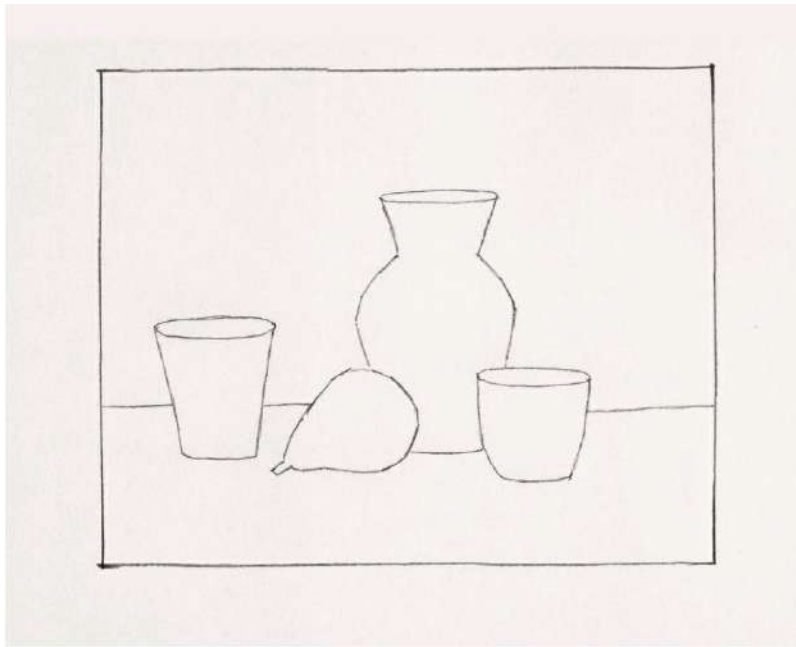


The rectangular border surrounding the still life represents the picture plane.



STEP 1 ESTABLISH THE PICTURE PLANE.

Define the picture plane for your current sketch. If your last thumbnail sketch was a vertical format, you might try a horizontal format this time. If your last thumbnail sketch cropped in close on the objects, you might now show the entire still life. The goal of creating thumbnail sketches to explore many options before you decide upon a final composition.



STEP 2 MAKE A LINE DRAWING.

Sketch a line drawing of the still life objects within the picture plane. Use only contour lines, or lines that describe the outer edges of each object. For the line drawing, the emphasis should be on shape. No matter what the content of your still life is, strive to treat every shape in your sketch with equal intent.



STEP 3 SHADE THE THUMBNAIL SKETCH.

Your painting may eventually look realistic and convincing, but it is the underlying abstract design, the pattern of lights and darks, that will make it beautiful. Start by determining the broadest masses. (For example, the background may be dark, and the tablecloth light.) Study the other objects in the still life closely to discover whether they should be light or dark. Shadows play a role in this stage. Shade your thumbnail sketch simply. The individual objects should not be modeled. Instead, keep all shading flat. This will allow you to distinguish each of the values separately, and the value pattern will be more visible.

Design Considerations

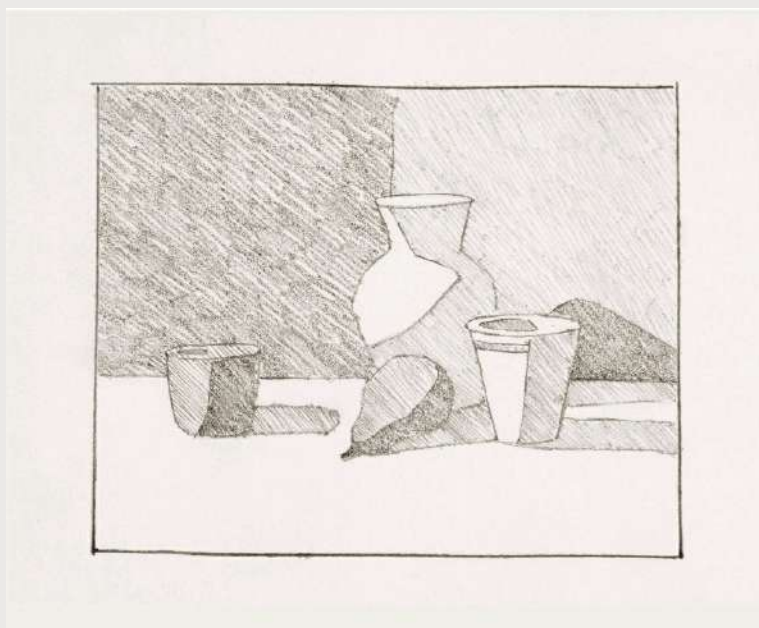
As you try out different ways to compose your still life, take into account the following three

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design considerations: balance, depth, and direction of light. There are many, many more design principles that can be applied to a composition—too many to cover in this book—so I recommend that you take a course or pick up a book on basic design if you want to learn more. Every still life is different and unique. The best way to discover a compelling still life composition is through creating a series of thumbnail sketches.

balance

When a composition is balanced, there is an equal distribution of weight, or visual weight. Imagine that the picture plane is divided by a vertical line placed right in its center. Think of this imaginary line as a central axis, and consider how the visual weight of the still life is distributed to the left and right of that axis. The composition may be symmetrically balanced, with objects of equal size placed on each side, or asymmetrically balanced, with objects of unequal size on each side. In either case, your composition should have a sense of equilibrium. Symmetrical balance conveys stability, whereas asymmetrical balance is dynamic.

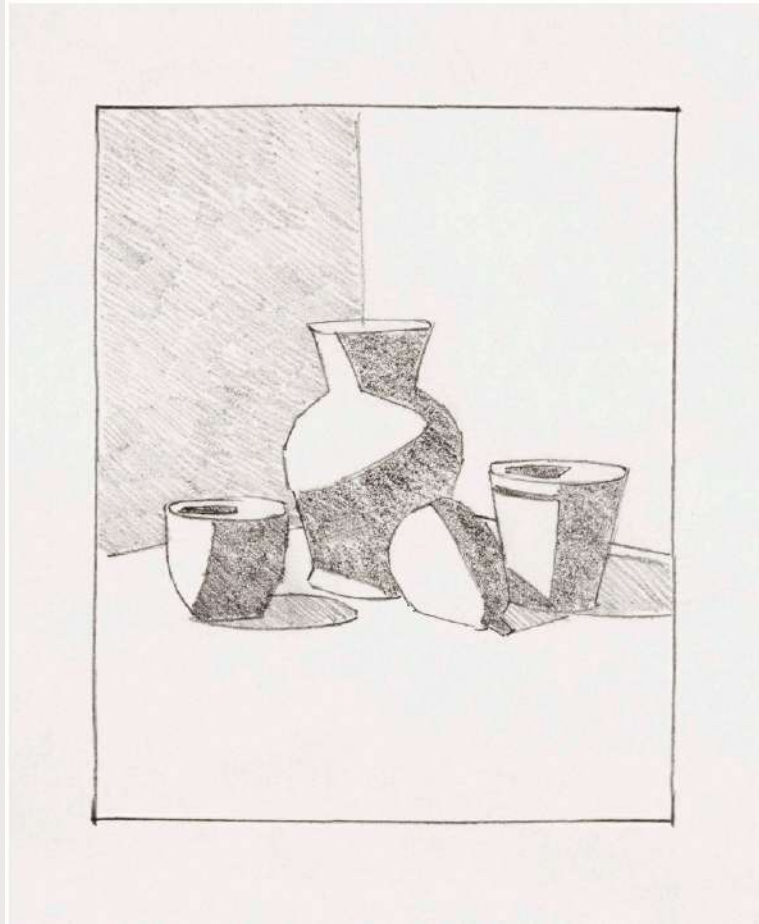


This thumbnail sketch uses the steelyard balance principle. The smaller cup on the left is placed close to the edge of the picture plane, and the larger group of objects on the right is positioned near the center of the picture plane.



In this thumbnail sketch, overlapping is used to convey depth. The pear and small cup in the foreground overlap the larger cup and vase in the background. The vertical placement of objects also shows depth. Objects that are in the foreground, such as the pear, are placed lower in the picture plane, and objects that are in the background, such as the vase, are placed higher.

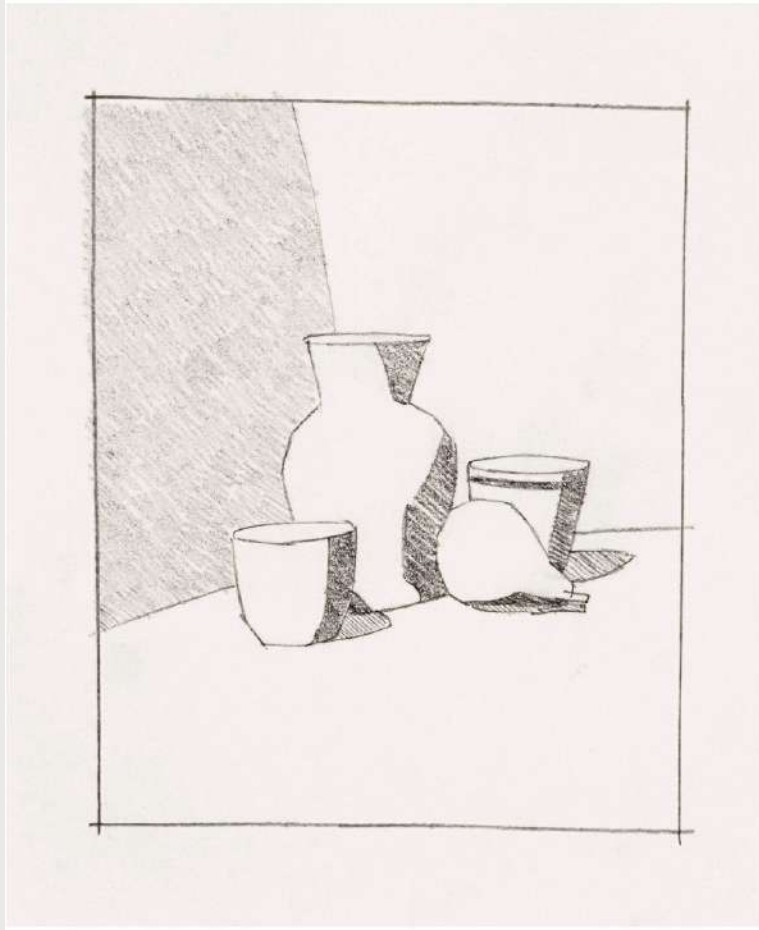
You can achieve asymmetrical balance by moving the largest object toward the center of the composition, and the smallest object toward its edge. This design principle, called steelyard, is named for a steelyard balance, a tool that is used to balance items of unequal weight. A steelyard balance has a sliding counterweight that is positioned along a beam to counterbalance the weight of its load. In the same way, you can balance objects of unequal size in your still life by moving a smaller object toward the edge to counterbalance the larger object placed near the center.



In this thumbnail sketch, the still life is lit from the side. As a result, there is an even distribution of light and shadow on the objects.

depth

Typically, a still life has a very shallow space. Even so, objects may occupy the foreground, middle ground, and background. Even the subtlest examples of overlapping will convey depth in the composition and confirm to your viewer where objects are positioned in the space of the still life. Vertical placement is another device to show depth. The lower the objects are placed on your picture plane, the closer they appear to be to the viewer.



This thumbnail sketch shows the same setup used as the side- lighting example, but it is seen from a different angle. As a result, we see the still life with front lighting. Most of the still life is in light, with very little shadow visible.

direction of light

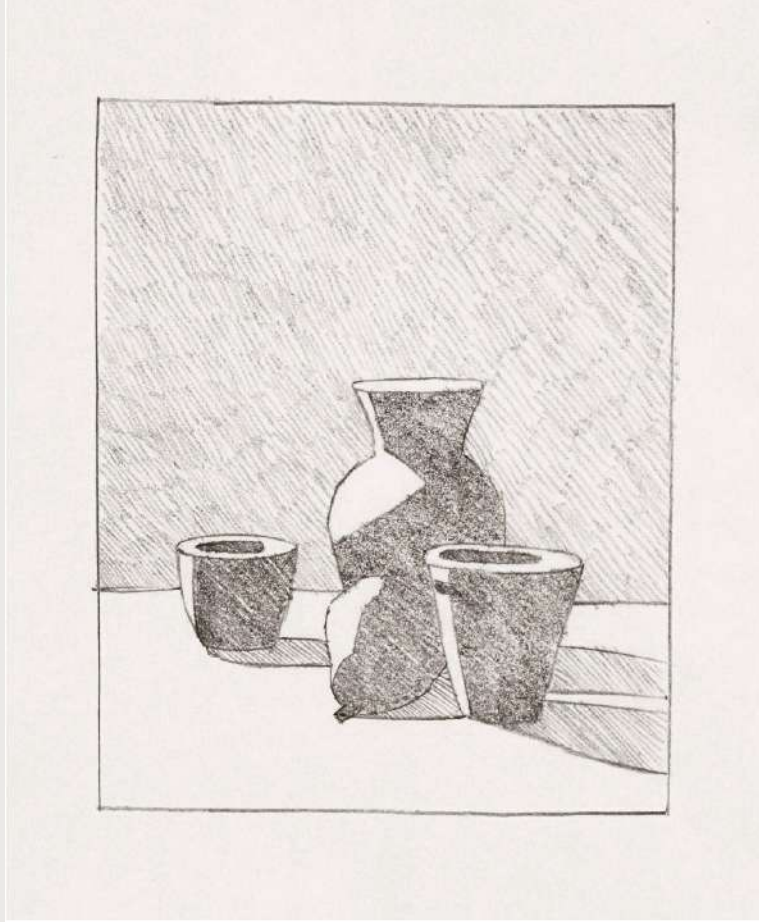
As you try out different ideas with your thumbnail sketches, consider the direction of light with which you want to paint the still life. By changing the location of your point of view—or where you are sketching from—you can sketch the still life from side-, front-, or back-lit angles. If there is not enough room in your studio to maneuver around the still life, then try out different lighting angles by changing the location of the lamp.

If the still life is lit from the side, an even distribution of light and shadow is provided. Side lighting is ideal in the way that it reveals a full range of light and shadow in the still life.

If the still life is lit from the front, you will be looking at the light side of the still life, but many of the shadows will be blocked from your point of view. This lack of shadow makes it difficult to show form and depth.

Back lighting has the opposite effect of front lighting. You see very little of the light side of the still life, and more of its shadow side. It can, however, provide drama and high contrasts to the composition.

As you sketch the still life, move around it, changing your location so that you can experience the still life as it is seen in different directions of light. While it is often assumed that side lighting is the best angle from which to paint the still life, many great compositions have been painted using front or back lighting.



This is the same setup as the thumbnail sketches on [this page](#), but this time it is seen from the angle that features back lighting. This thumbnail sketch shows less of the light side of the still life objects, and more of their shadows.



Still Life with Lemons and Oranges, 2005, oil on canvas,
16 × 20 inches (40.6 × 50.8 cm), private collection

Balance, depth, and direction of light are at work in this still life painting. The objects are balanced using the steelyard principle. While the heavier grouping of lemons is positioned near the center on the composition, the lighter single lemon provides a counterbalance by being placed close to the edge. Depth is conveyed where the copper dish overlaps the orange. The orange is also placed slightly higher than the rest of the objects to show that it is located in the background. The still life arrangement is lit with side lighting from the left, providing an even distribution of light and shadow and making it easy to show form. This image is a study for the painting on [this page](#).

CREATING A PRELIMINARY DRAWING

A preliminary drawing is more carefully executed than a thumbnail sketch. It is an accurate drawing of the still life that is equal in size to the canvas. Making a preliminary drawing allows you the time to work out the proportions and details of the still life, so that you can avoid encountering any drawing mistakes while midway through the painting.

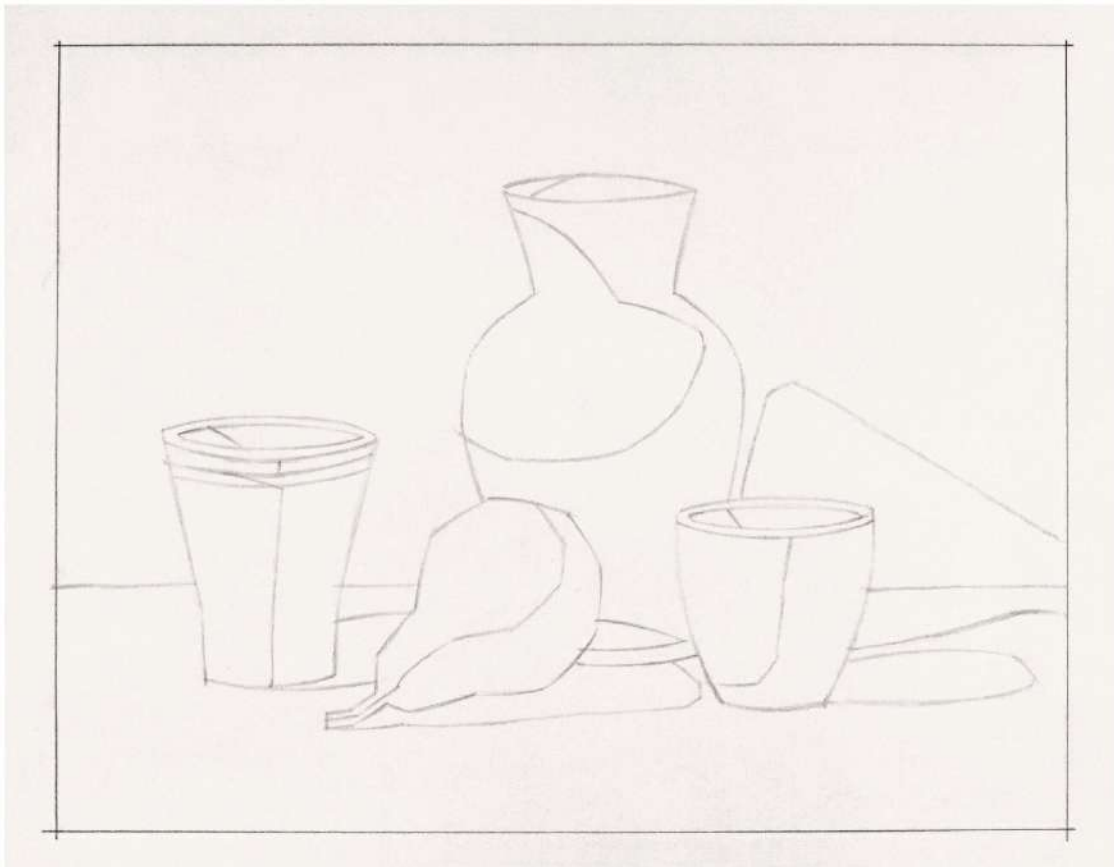
Sometimes the preliminary drawing is done in charcoal directly on the canvas. But any corrections made to the drawing on canvas can leave smudge marks. Instead, if the drawing is done on paper, corrections can be made on paper, and the finished drawing can be transferred relatively cleanly to the canvas. The paper drawing can also be saved and reused on another canvas later.

Although it is not always necessary to utilize a preliminary drawing, it is useful for when you want the proportions of your painting to be as accurate as possible. We will be using them for the lessons in this book. However, there may be other occasions when you prefer a more spontaneous approach, where you sketch directly on the canvas with oil color.

Like a thumbnail sketch, a preliminary drawing includes a picture plane, but this time the picture plane should be the same dimensions as your canvas. It also has contour lines depicting the still life and its shadow shapes. However, it is not necessary to shade the drawing. After the drawing is transferred to canvas, light and dark contrasts will be added in using oil paint.

materials

drawing board
layout bond paper
graphite pencil
kneaded eraser
tracing paper
T square



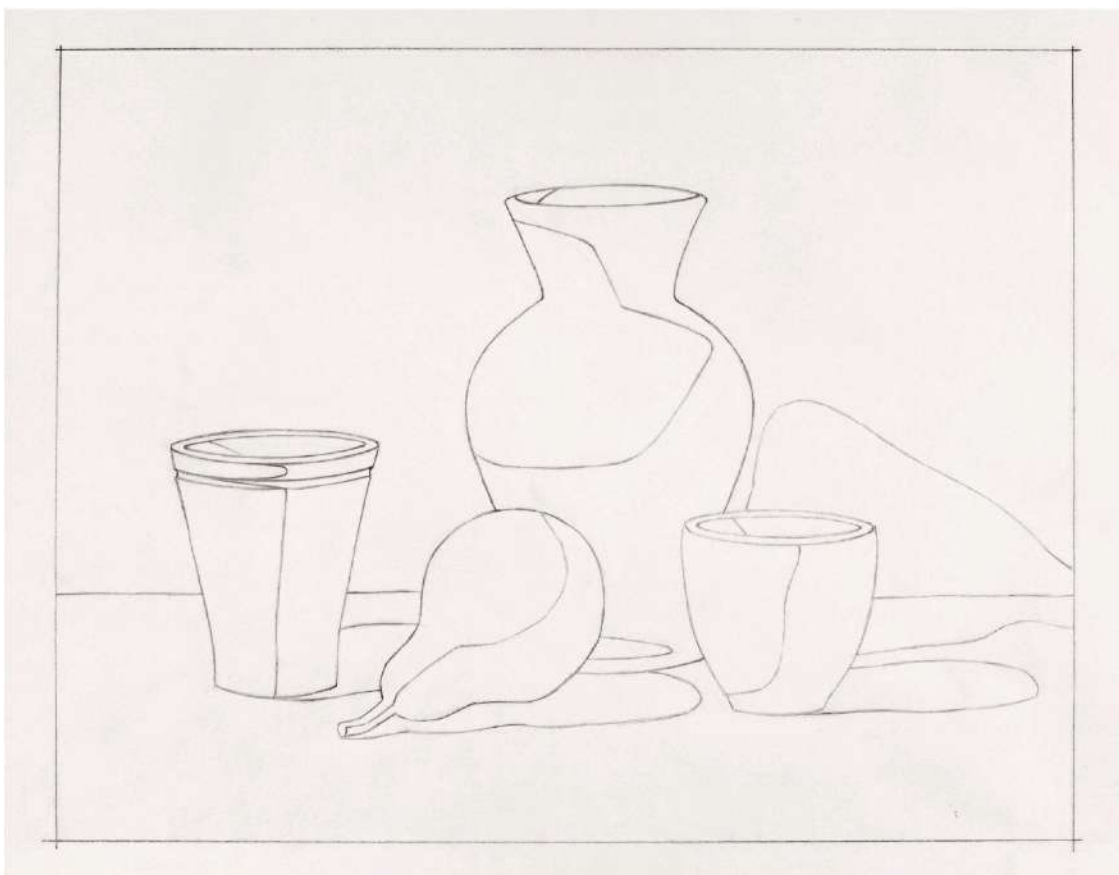
STEP 1 SKETCH THE STILL LIFE.

Draw a rectangle on your sheet of paper that represents the picture plane, or canvas. Since you will be transferring the drawing, the dimensions of the picture plane should be equal to the dimensions of your canvas. Lightly sketch only the outlines of the core shadows and the cast shadows. Do not shade them in. These shadow lines will be transferred to canvas, and shading will be done in oil after the painting is begun. Refer to your thumbnail sketch from time to time to make sure that the placement of the still life in the preliminary drawing is consistent with your final thumbnail sketch. Apply the sighting techniques listed on [this page](#) to ensure that your proportions are accurate.



STEP 2 REFINE THE SKETCH.

Refine the sketch by drawing the contour shapes of the objects and shadows with more accuracy. Ensure that any symmetrical objects are accurate using the techniques described on [this page](#). Draw over the sketched lines with strong, clean lines, and erase your sketch lines with a kneaded eraser.



STEP 3 REVIEW THE SKETCH.

Sighting the Still Life

Sighting techniques are used to determine the relative height, width, and angles of the still life objects. As you sketch, use your pencil to compare vertical, horizontal, and diagonal measurements of the still life objects. This will help you to keep the proportions of your drawing as accurate as possible.

NOTE

These sighting techniques can also be used when painting. Instead of your pencil, the handle of your brush can be used to sight proportions and angles of the still life subject matter.

vertical sighting

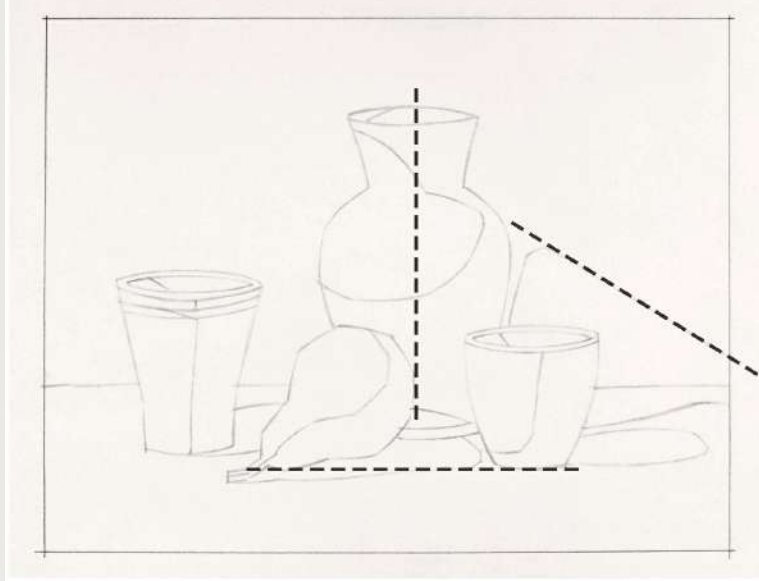
Extend your arm toward the still life while holding your pencil vertically. Note the vertical locations of objects in relation to each other. This will also help you to determine how far to the left, center, or right they are placed in the still life.

horizontal sighting

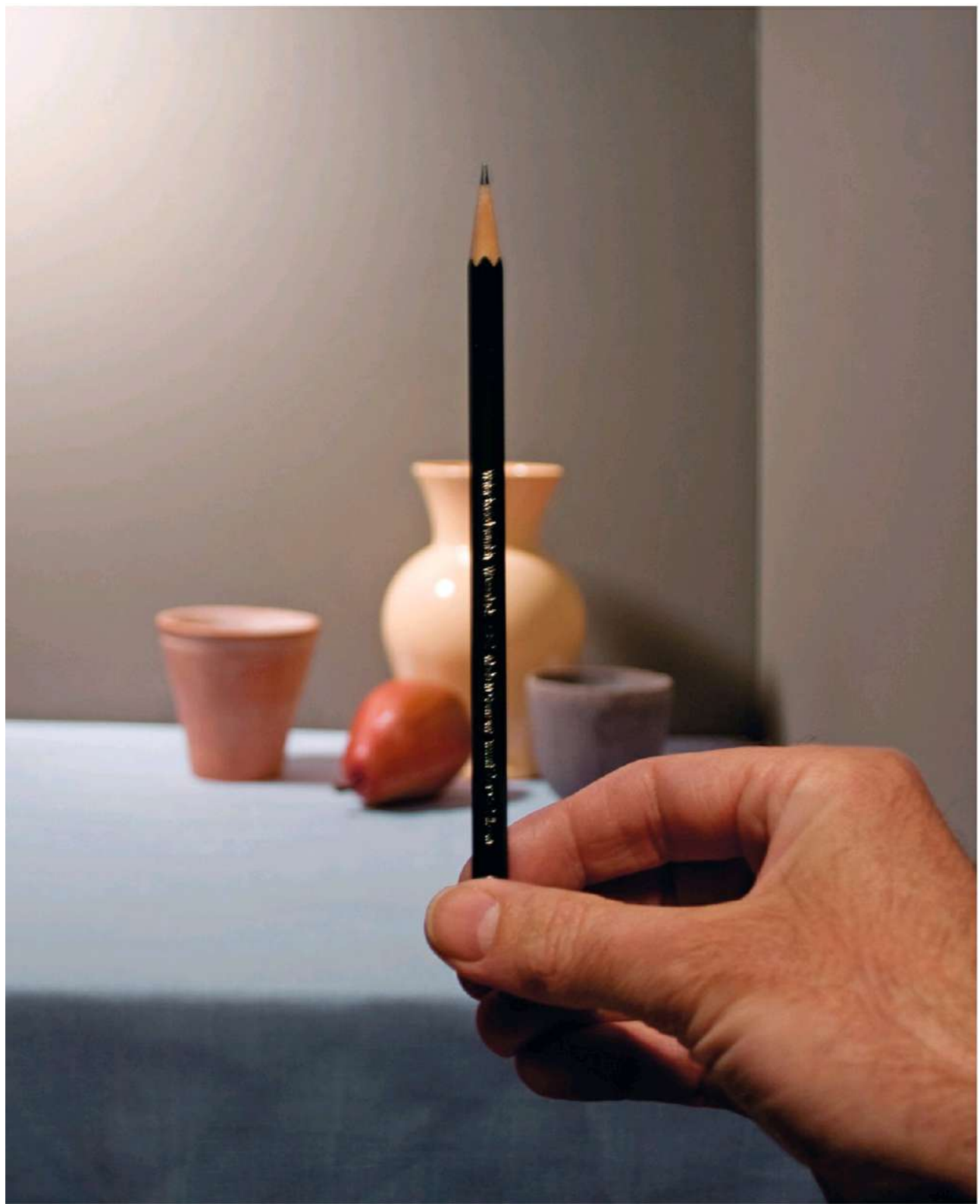
Extend your arm toward the still life while holding your pencil horizontally. Align the pencil with a still life object, and compare its height against other objects in the still life. This technique will allow you to compare the relative heights of the objects, as well as how high or low they are placed in the still life.

diagonal sighting

To site diagonal lines in the still life, extend your arm toward the still life while holding your pencil parallel to the diagonal line in the still life. While continuing to hold the pencil at that angle, pivot your shoulder until the pencil is held at the same angle, but now in front of your drawing. This is a good way to compare that the diagonal lines in your drawing.



Compare parts of the still life against each other using vertical, horizontal, and diagonal sighting techniques. The vertical dashed line shows the right side of the pear in alignment with the center of the vase. The horizontal dashed line shows the tip of the pear aligning with the base of the cup. The diagonal dashed line represents the angle of the cast shadow of the vase.



You can use your pencil to sight vertical, horizontal, and diagonal measurements in the still life setup.

MAKING SURE OBJECTS ARE SYMMETRICAL

There are many occasions in a still life when you will need to draw a symmetrical object, such as a bottle, a bowl, or a glass. It is often a challenge to draw both sides of a symmetrical object correctly, so that it doesn't look lopsided. Here is a technique you can apply in your preliminary drawing to make sure that both sides of a symmetrical object are drawn accurately.

Make sure to keep these traced drawings. They will be helpful to have on hand as you move on to painting symmetrical objects in your still life. It is not as easy to maintain the shapes and proportions

of your still life when working with brushes and wet paint. As you work on your painting, you can hold the traced drawings up against the canvas to see if any corrections are needed.

materials

drawing board
layout bond paper
graphite pencil
kneaded eraser
tracing paper
masking tape
T square



STEP 1 DRAW A VERTICAL CENTERLINE.

Using a T square, draw a vertical line through the center of a symmetrical object in your sketch.



STEP 2 CORRECT ONE SIDE.

Draw one side of the symmetrical object as smoothly and accurately as you can.



STEP 3 TRACE THE CORRECT SIDE.

Place a small piece of tracing paper over the sketch, and attach it with tape. Trace the vertical line that extends through the center of the symmetrical object, and then trace its accurately drawn side.



STEP 4 FLIP THE TRACING PAPER AND DRAW THE OTHER SIDE.

Remove the tracing paper, and flip it over so the traced line is over the opposite side of the object. Align the vertical line in the tracing paper with the vertical line in the sketch, and attach the tracing paper again with tape. Then, trace over the accurately drawn line that is on the tracing paper. The graphite on the opposite side of the tracing paper will transfer to the drawing.



STEP 5 REINFORCE THE DRAWING.

Remove the tracing paper, reinforce the transferred line, and erase any remaining lines from the rough sketch.

TRANSFERRING YOUR PRELIMINARY DRAWING TO THE CANVAS

When you have finished your preliminary drawing, transfer it to your canvas so it can be used as a guide when you begin painting. If you are working with a very detailed drawing, it's a good idea to spray a workable fixative over it after it's been transferred, so you can continue to use it as a guide while you work on your painting over time. For a more simple drawing, you may choose not to fix the drawing and allow the charcoal to dissolve into the oil color during the early stages of the painting.

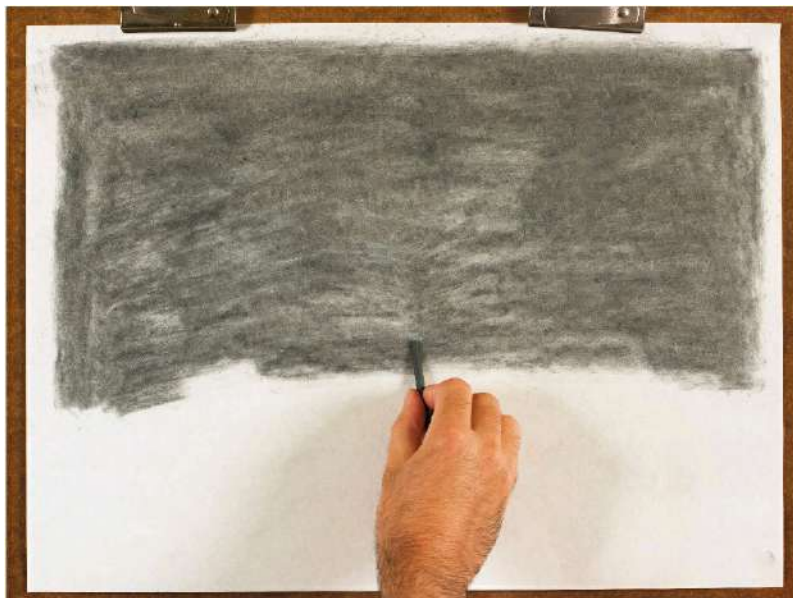
materials

- preliminary drawing
- soft vine charcoal
- chamois skin (optional)
- blank sheet of paper (optional)
- Bulldog clips
- masking tape
- canvas or canvas board
- graphite pencil

mahlstick (optional)

kneaded eraser

workable fixative (optional)

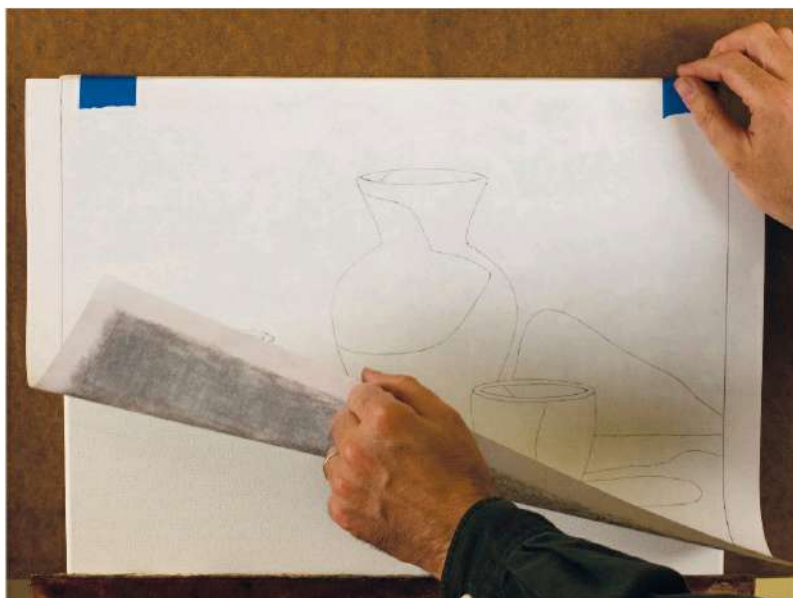


STEP 1 APPLY CHARCOAL TO THE BACK OF THE DRAWING.

Apply soft vine charcoal over the entire back side of the drawing. (Only use soft vine charcoal for this technique; medium or hard charcoal will not transfer well.)

NOTE

If you want to preserve your drawing to use it again, clean the charcoal off the back of the drawing with a chamois skin after you have transferred the drawing. You can also preserve the drawing by applying the charcoal to a blank sheet of paper rather than the drawing itself. Tape the sheet of paper to the back of the drawing, and use it to transfer the charcoal to canvas.



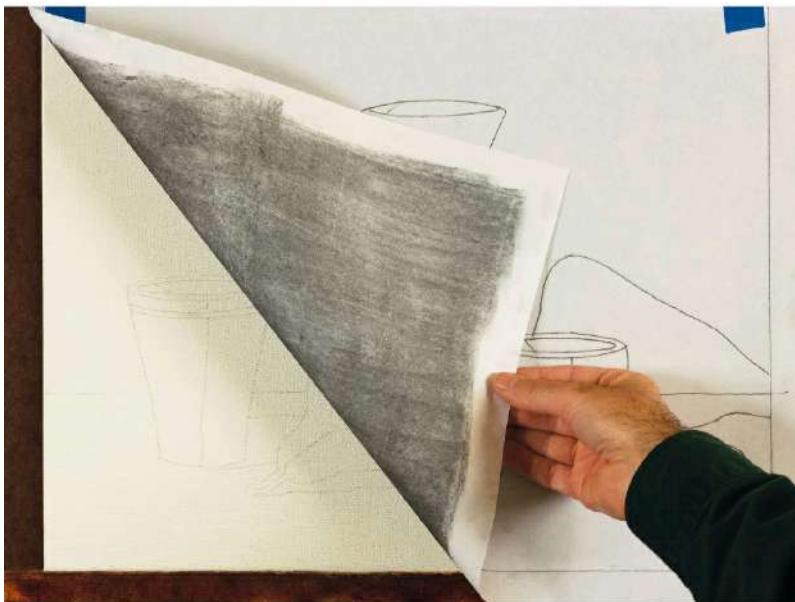
STEP 2 PLACE THE DRAWING ON THE CANVAS.

Pick up the drawing by two corners, and shake it gently so that any excess charcoal dust falls from the paper. Then, place the paper over the canvas, with the charcoal-covered side facing the canvas. Align the borders of the drawing with the edges of the canvas, and clip or tape the drawing into place along the top corners.



STEP 3 TRACE THE DRAWING.

Trace over the preliminary drawing with a pencil. As you apply pressure with the pencil, charcoal is transferred to the canvas. Any other applications of pressure to the drawing will also transfer to the canvas, so avoid resting your palm on the paper as you trace. (You might instead rest your palm on a mahlstick.) However, any charcoal that has been unintentionally transferred to the canvas can be easily cleaned up with a kneaded eraser.



STEP 4 CHECK THE TRANSFER.

Lift up the paper occasionally to see how the drawing is transferring. The transfer should appear as a light imprint of the drawing on your canvas.



STEP 5 CLEAN THE TRANSFER.

After the drawing has been transferred, remove the paper drawing from the canvas. Clean off any unwanted charcoal on the canvas with a kneaded eraser.



STEP 6 ADD FIXATIVE TO THE FINISHED TRANSFER.

Using a workable spray fixative, fix the drawing to the canvas.

STUDIO SAFETY NOTE

Use workable fixative either outside or in a well-ventilated area.

Characteristics of Light and Shadow

Before we start our underpainting, I want to discuss value contrasts and the characteristics of light and shadow. Value is a term used in art to refer to the degree of lightness and darkness. It's common to draw something by using only outlines or contour lines, but a picture looks more

realistic when it is also shaded—or drawn—using value contrasts. We are familiar with interpreting pictures through outlined contour drawings, but this is not actually how we see. Instead, we view our world through patterns of value, color, and texture.

Value contrasts are used to convey light and shadow on form. When we look at an object, we are really looking at the light that is illuminating that object. To more clearly understand how light reveals form, we should take a moment to identify the characteristics of light and shadow. When a surface is illuminated by a single light source, light and shadow separate into five distinct characteristics. These characteristics are called highlight, halftone, core shadow, reflected light, and cast shadow. Once you are able to identify the different characteristics of light and shadow, you will begin to understand how light moves through the still life and see value contrasts more accurately when creating your painting.



The characteristics of light and shadow: highlight, halftone, core shadow, cast shadow, and reflected light

highlight

A highlight is the result of direct light hitting a surface straight on. The highlight is the lightest value on an object's surface.

halftone

A halftone occurs when the surface of the object turns away from the light source, causing direct light to glance across it at an oblique angle. For this reason, the value of a halftone is not as light as a highlight.

core shadow

In a core shadow, the surface of the object faces away from the light, making the core shadow the darkest value of the object.

reflected light

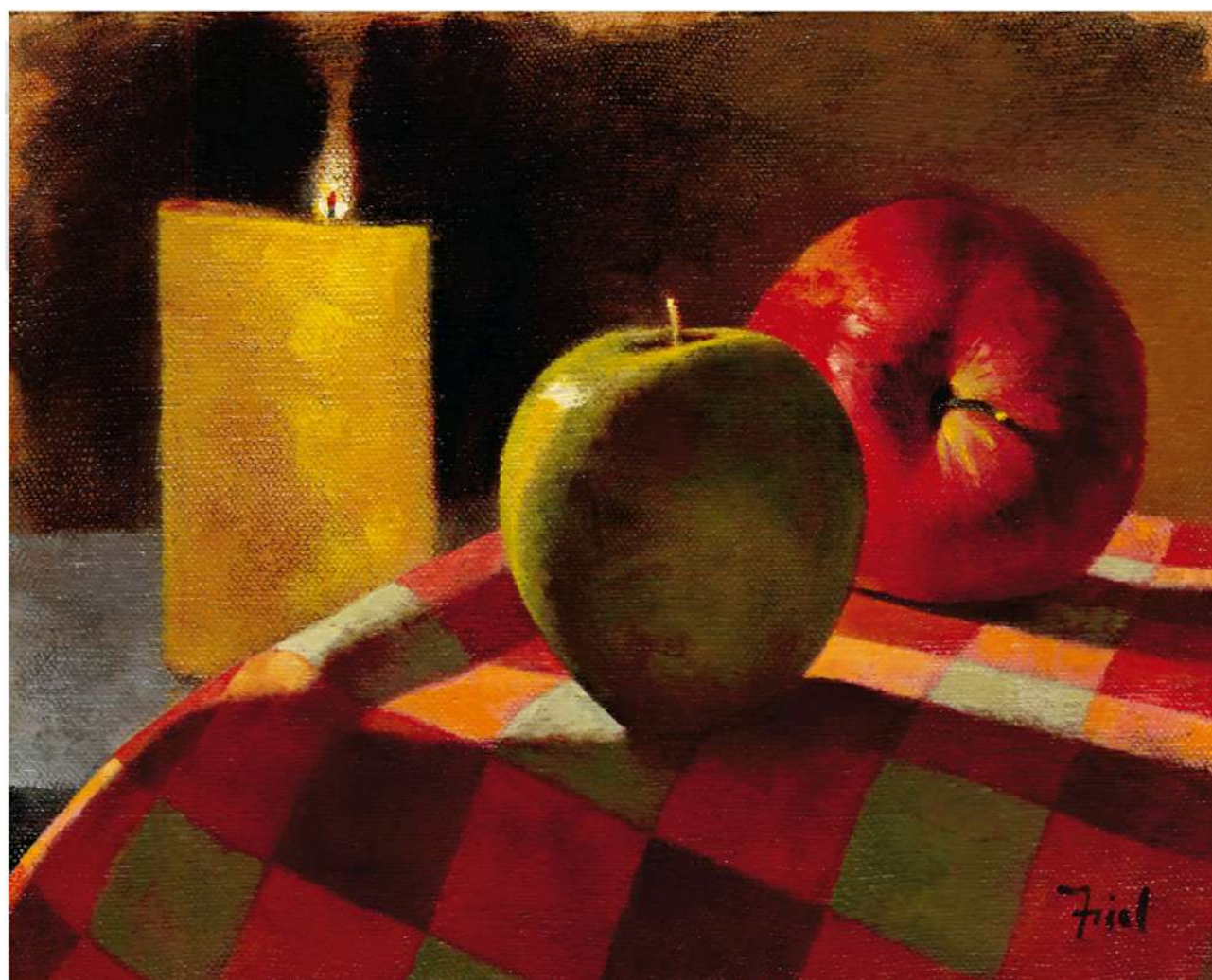
Reflected light results from indirect light that has reflected from another surface back into the shadow side of the object. The value of reflected light varies depending on both the source of the

light and the surface upon which the light has bounced, but it is never as light as the halftone.

cast shadow

A cast shadow is created when direct light is blocked by one surface, causing a shadow to be cast onto another surface. Cast shadows are darkest in value where they originate, and become lighter as they move away from the surface from which they are cast.

When looking at your still life, note the direction of the light source, and mentally divide the still life objects between their light sides and shadow sides. The light sides of the objects face the light source, while their shadow sides face the other way. Within the light side of each object, you should see a highlights and halftone, and on the shadow side of each object, you should see a core shadow, reflected light, and cast shadow. To more clearly see the reflected light, try holding a piece of paper close to the shadow side of the object to see if it reflects light into the shadow.



Apples in Candlelight, 2001, oil on canvas,
8 × 10 inches (20.3 × 25.4 cm), private collection

In this painting, notice how the five characteristics of light and shadow can be seen on the two pieces of fruit. On the left side, you can see the highlight, and the slightly darker halftones. The core shadow appears just as the surface of the fruit faces away from the light source. Reflected light from the tablecloth illuminates the areas in the shadow. The cast shadow extends to the right of the fruit across the surface of the tablecloth.

ESTABLISHING THE UNDERPAINTING

Now that we have a better understanding of value contrasts and the characteristics of light and shadow we can start our underpainting. An underpainting is a monochromatic value study used to establish the value contrasts in a painting. Once dry, the underpainting is then painted over with color, using either opaque color or transparent glazes. When you're first learning to paint, managing the many facets of color can become overwhelming. But if you are already familiar with drawing and shading, then making an underpainting is a great way to start to learn how to paint. Once you have the value contrasts established on the canvas, it will be easier to add color.

Underpaintings are usually painted with an earth color, such as burnt or raw umber. These colors are ideal because they can be easily thinned to provide a wide range of lights and darks. They also dry relatively quickly, and provide a nice base tone to the colors that are applied over them. Between the two, I prefer to use burnt umber because of the warm color it brings to the painting.

Undiluted burnt umber will be used as your darkest value, and the white of the canvas will be your lightest value. For the middle and light values, thin burnt umber on your palette with solvent. Apply the burnt umber using hog bristle brushes, as they are the better choice when working on the early stages of a painting. If you need to lighten an area that has become too dark, wipe the color from the canvas using a cotton rag. When you are finished with the underpainting, allow it to dry before proceeding to the next lesson.

materials

preliminary drawing

14 × 18-inch canvas or canvas board

burnt umber

solvent

hog bristle brushes

house painter's brush

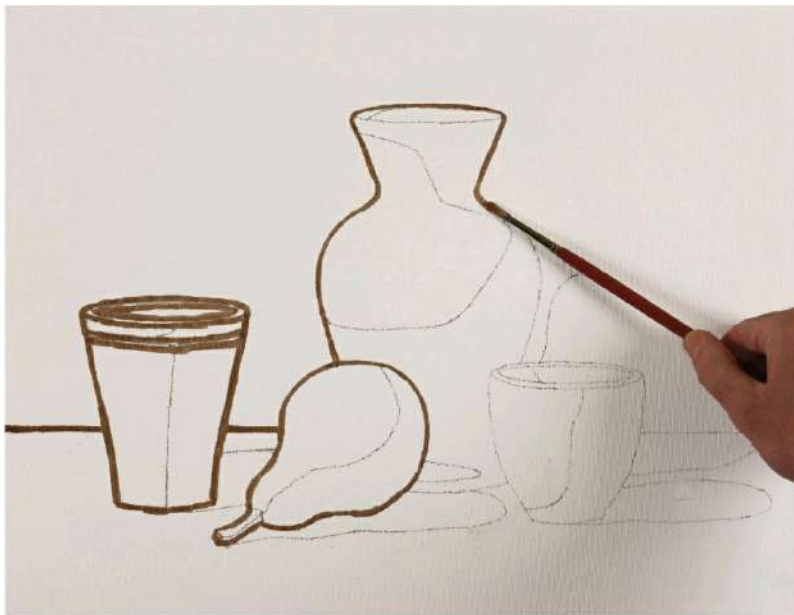
latex or vinyl gloves

cotton rag

small sheet of red Mylar

NOTE

Seeing value contrasts in a full-color subject can be challenging at first and it may take some practice. Try viewing the still life through a piece of red Mylar. I always have a small piece (about 3 × 4 inches) of Mylar near my easel. The red color filters the subject into a monochromatic arrangement of lights and darks.



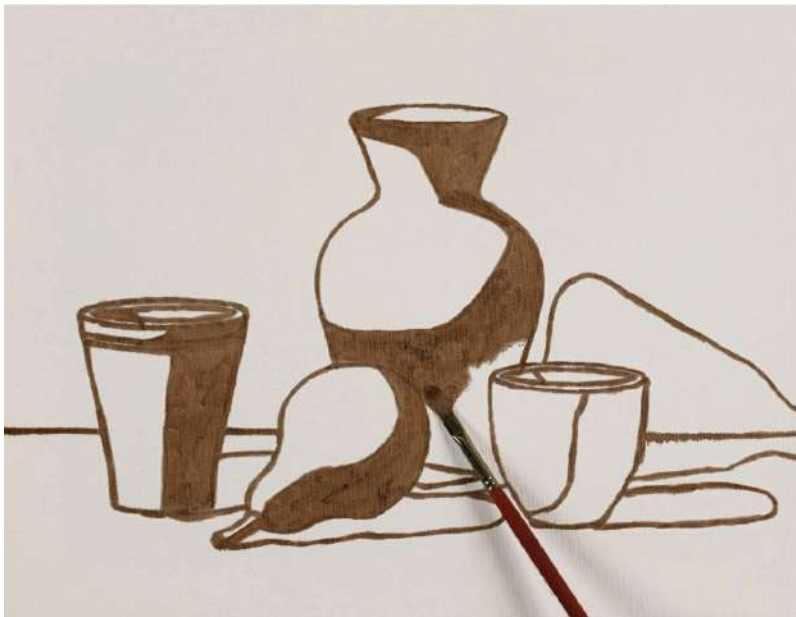
STEP 1 OUTLINE THE OBJECTS.

Draw the still life objects onto your canvas using burnt umber that has been thinned to a middle value. For now just concentrate on outlining the objects.



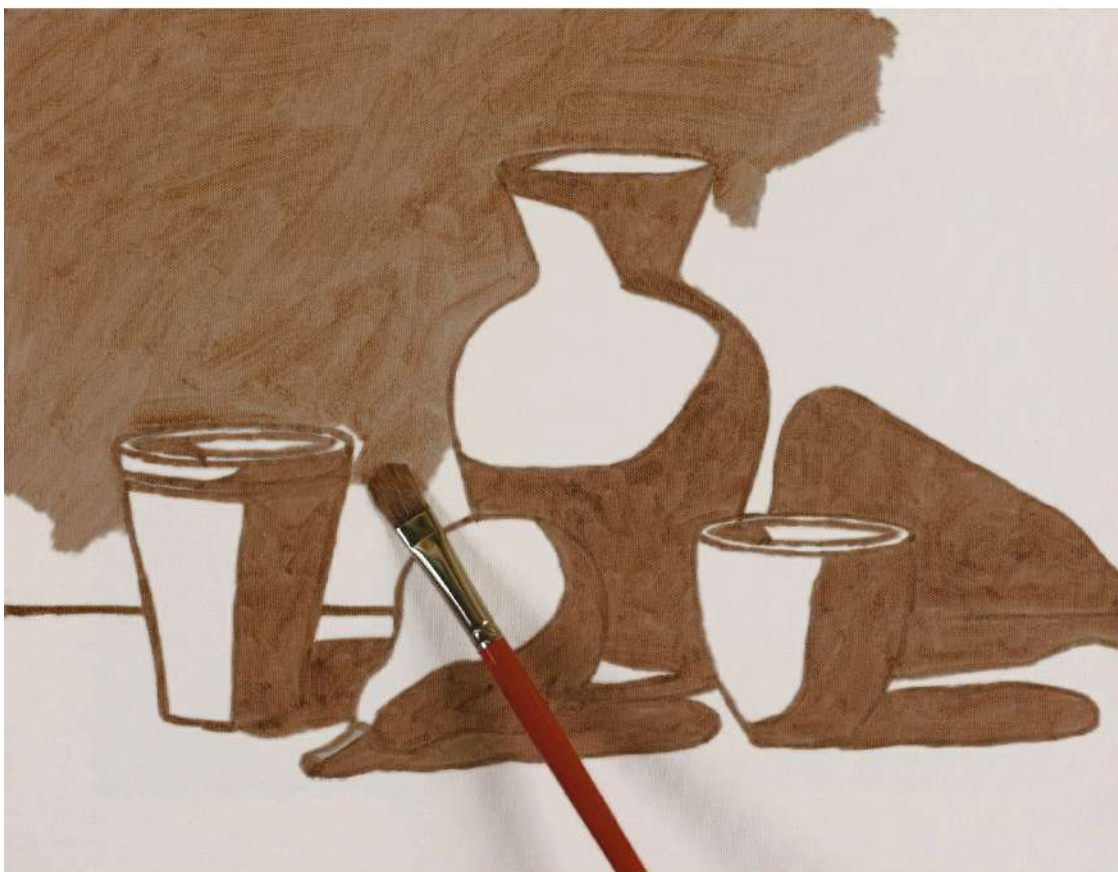
STEP 2 OUTLINE THE SHADOWS.

Outline the shadows in the still life with the same middle value.



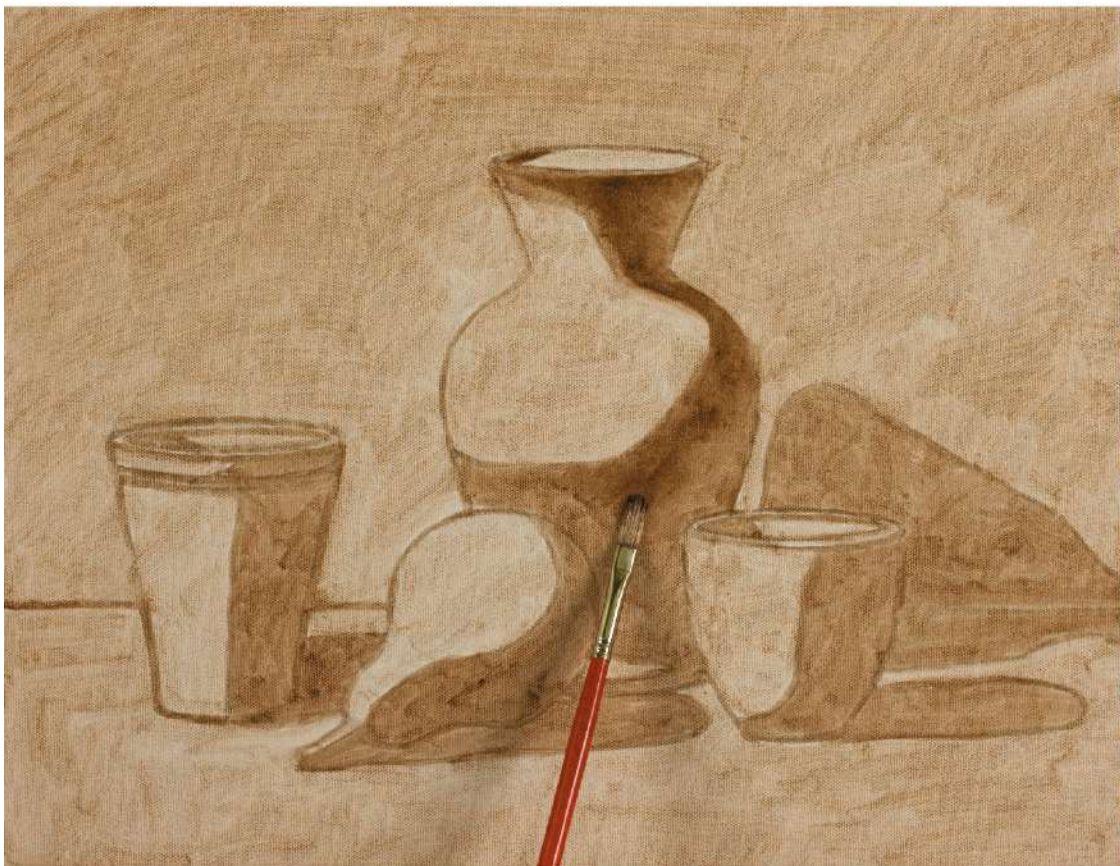
STEP 3 MASS IN THE SHADOWS AREAS.

Apply the middle value of burnt umber to all of the shadows.



STEP 4 MASS IN THE LIGHT AREAS.

Mix a lighter value of burnt umber by thinning it with solvent. Then, apply it over all of the light areas.



STEP 5 ADD THE CORE SHADOWS.

Add dark, undiluted burnt umber into the core shadows, but allow the areas of reflected light to remain as a middle value.



STEP 6 APPLY THE DARKER HALFTONES.

Mix a value of burnt umber that is slightly darker than the light value, and apply it to the darker halftones.



STEP 7 WIPE OUT THE LIGHTER HALFTONES.

Lighten areas of the halftone by wiping the paint away with a clean cotton rag.

STUDIO SAFETY NOTE
Always wear gloves when wiping color from the canvas.



STEP 8 BLOT THE HIGHLIGHTS.

Dip a rag or brush into clean solvent, and create highlights by blotting off wet paint and exposing the white canvas.



STEP 9 CONTINUE WORKING ON THE ENTIRE UNDERPAINTING.

Rework areas, adding darks, and pulling out lights as needed. When finished, there should no longer be any contour lines, just value contrasts. Keep the edges soft. They can be sharpened as needed when you add color. Also, smooth out any built-up paint. Thick strokes of paint that dry at this point in the process will remain visible in the finished painting.

The Neutral Primary Palette

Before learning to paint, most of us have already learned to draw. We are experienced at expressing our ideas through line and contrasts of light and dark—or, in other words, through value contrasts. However, oil painting involves working in color as well, which brings a whole new set of challenges. A color can be contrasted in more ways than just light and dark. For instance, it also has bright and neutral contrasts, along with warm and cool contrasts. When working with color, a painter manages contrasts of hue, tone, saturation, and temperature. This new set of color decisions can be overwhelming, and it is often the reason that a first attempt at painting results in muddy or over-saturated color.

Using a limited palette is a great way to learn to paint with color. A limited palette is a set of just a few, select colors that you use to create a painting. What constitutes a “limited” palette really depends on the point of view of the painter. I consider a limited palette to include three to five colors. A limited palette may be as simple as a selection of two colors and white.

Working with a limited palette makes it easier to control the effects of color mixing. It provides you the opportunity to learn the basics of color mixing without becoming bewildered by too many color choices. A limited palette is not only a learning tool, many experienced painters use limited palettes in the early stages of their paintings, or for their finished works.

In this lesson, we will mix a full range of color from a palette that consists only of ivory black, yellow ocher, Indian red, burnt umber, and titanium white. We will also cover some basic color theory terms, before applying color to the underpainting that we created earlier. This is a very neutral palette, one that is easy to mix and work with and that is very helpful for the beginning painter.

When using this palette, ivory black, yellow ocher, and Indian red function as neutral primary colors. Indian red serves as a red, and yellow ocher as yellow. Ivory black is very cool in temperature, so when white is added, it becomes bluish, or blue-gray. This makes it possible to mix ivory black as if it were blue, albeit a very neutral blue. Still, ivory black is cool enough to make a green when mixed with yellow, and a violet when mixed with red, so it is possible to mix these colors like any other set of primary colors to get the secondary hues: green, violet, and orange. Titanium white is used to tint, or lighten, the colors, while black is used to shade, or darken, the cool colors, and burnt umber is used to shade the warm colors.

palette

ivory black

yellow ocher

Indian red

burnt umber

titanium white

laying out the palette

Begin by laying out these colors in the following order: ivory black at the bottom left corner of the palette, and titanium white at the top left corner. Yellow ocher is placed just to the right of white, but lower on the palette. Then, moving to the right, skip a space and place Indian red to the right of the yellow ocher. Finally, place burnt umber at the top right corner. Leave about a 2-inch border between the colors yellow ocher and Indian red and the edge of the palette, so that an additional row of colors may be added later (see palette on [this page](#)). At this point we should have a black, a white, a yellow, a red, and a brown. Next, we will mix colors to create a blue, a green, an orange, and a violet.

NOTE

When following the exercises on The Neutral Primary Palette, [The Blue/Orange Palette](#), and [The Full Palette](#) sections, use the provided palette charts and color charts to help you mix the colors and lay them out on your palette. However, be aware that paints vary from one manufacturer to the next, so your results may differ slightly.



Sunday Morning, 1994, oil on canvas,
30 × 32 inches (76.2 × 81.3 cm), private collection

This image was painted using a neutral primary palette of ivory black, yellow ocher, Indian red, burnt umber, and titanium white.



The neutral primary palette is based on ivory black, yellow ocher, Indian red, burnt umber, and titanium white. A full range of hues, tints, and shades can be achieved by mixing these five colors.

mixing the colors

Start by mixing just a touch of white with the ivory black, until it becomes a blue-gray. It should look something like battleship gray. Place the blue-gray on the left side of your palette, centered vertically, above the ivory black and below the titanium white, but a couple of inches toward the center of the palette.

Next, mix the three secondary colors: green, orange, and violet. For a neutral green, mix approximately equal portions of ivory black with yellow ocher. If the color looks too dark, then it does not have enough yellow ocher. If it looks too yellow, then it does not have enough ivory black. Use the color chart on [this page](#) to guide you when mixing the color. It should look similar to a khaki green. Once you have mixed the green, place it on the vertical edge of your palette, just above the blue-gray.

For a neutral orange, mix yellow ocher with just a touch of Indian red. Indian red has a very strong tinting strength, so it has a tendency to overpower other colors when mixed with them. With this in mind, start with just a small amount of Indian red on the tip of your palette knife and mix it into about a teaspoon of yellow ocher. As you mix the color, compare it to the yellow ocher and the Indian red, and try to create a color that falls just between the two. It should look something like terra cotta. After it is mixed, place the orange just between the yellow ocher and the Indian red.

The last secondary color to mix is violet. For a neutral violet, again mix just a touch of Indian red with about a tablespoon of ivory black. It should look like plum. You can test the color by adding a little white to it. It should lighten up and take on a neutral violet color. Place it on the vertical side of the palette just below the blue-gray.

To review the colors we have so far, ivory black is in the lower-left corner, titanium white is in the upper-left corner, and burnt umber is in upper-right corner. The other colors are placed in rows closer toward the center of the palette. Starting from the bottom and moving up are mixed violet, mixed blue, mixed green. Continuing from left to right are yellow ocher, mixed orange, and Indian red. (See palette photo on [this page](#).)

creating tints and shades

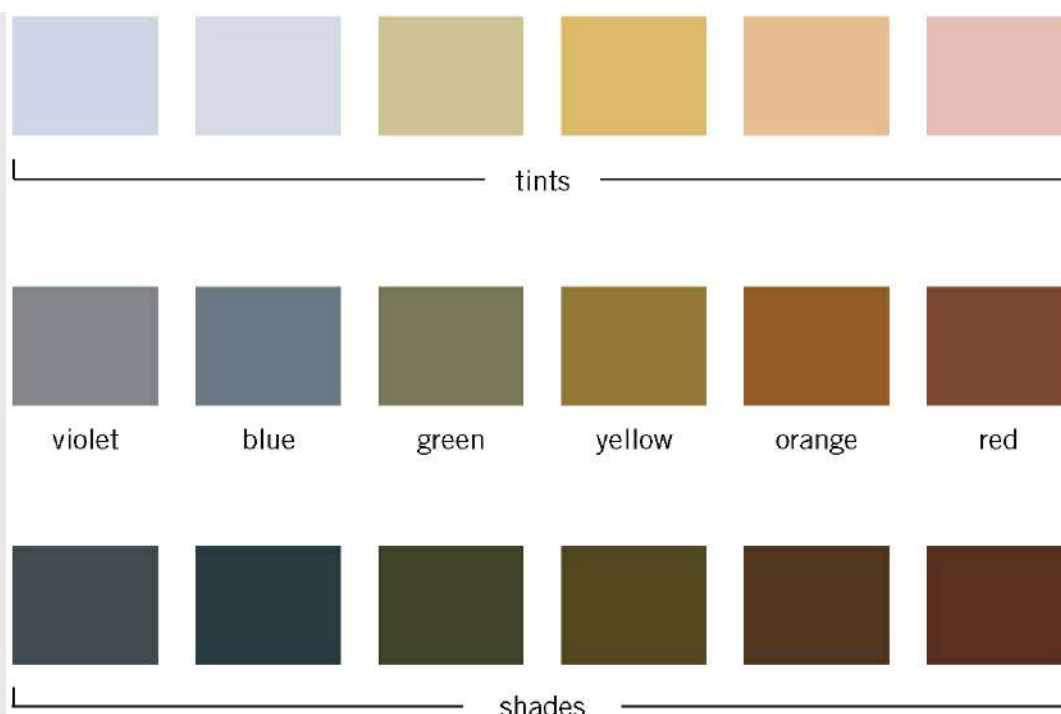
When you begin your painting, you will also need a range of lighter and darker mixes of each color. To do this, you will tint and shade the mixed violet, mixed blue, mixed green, yellow ocher, mixed orange, and the Indian red.

When tinting a color, you add white to it. When shading, you add black. However, in this palette, you will use ivory black to shade only the cool colors (violet, blue, and green), but not the warm colors (yellow, orange, and red). When used to tint warm colors, ivory black not only darkens, but also changes warm colors. This is because of its cool temperature. It turns yellow into green, red into violet, and neutralizes orange. To avoid this, use burnt umber when shading the warm colors.

Mix portions of the mixed violet, mixed blue, mixed green with titanium white to create light versions of each color. Place each tint to the right of its original color. Then, mix portions of the yellow ocher, mixed orange, and Indian red with titanium white, and place them just below their original colors.

Shade a portion of each cool color to create a darker version of it by adding ivory black. Place each cool shade to the left of the original color, closer to the left edge of the palette. Shade each warm color by adding burnt umber. Then, also place its shade above the original color, closer the left edge of the palette.

At this point, you have mixed your colors, as well as tinted and shaded them. It is always a good idea to lay out your palette and mix colors before you begin painting. This allows you to organize your colors, so that you can focus more energy on your painting as you work. This is especially true when working with limited palettes. Always premix the colors to discover what is possible, and lay them out in a particular order that makes them easy to use. Tint and shade them to see what they look like as lights and darks. While this may seem like a lot of work, once you begin painting, most everything you need will be laid out before you.



This color chart demonstrates the hues, tints, and shades that can be achieved by using a limited palette of ivory black, yellow ocher, Indian red, burnt umber, and titanium white.

making a color chart

Before you start painting, you may want to make a chart with the colors that you've just mixed. This can be a valuable resource to you in the future. I have known painters who keep different color charts organized in three-ring binders or on canvas boards. Arrange the colors in your chart into three rows. Along the center row, paint swatches of each of the mixed violet, mixed blue, mixed green, yellow ocher, mixed orange, and Indian red. Along the top row, paint swatches of the tints, each one placed above its original color. And on the bottom row, paint swatches of the shades, each one placed below its original color.

Color Terms

In the previous lesson, you created an underpainting of your still life by using value contrasts. Those value contrasts brought form to the still life. Now it's time to add color. Before you begin, there are some basic color terms you should know.

hue

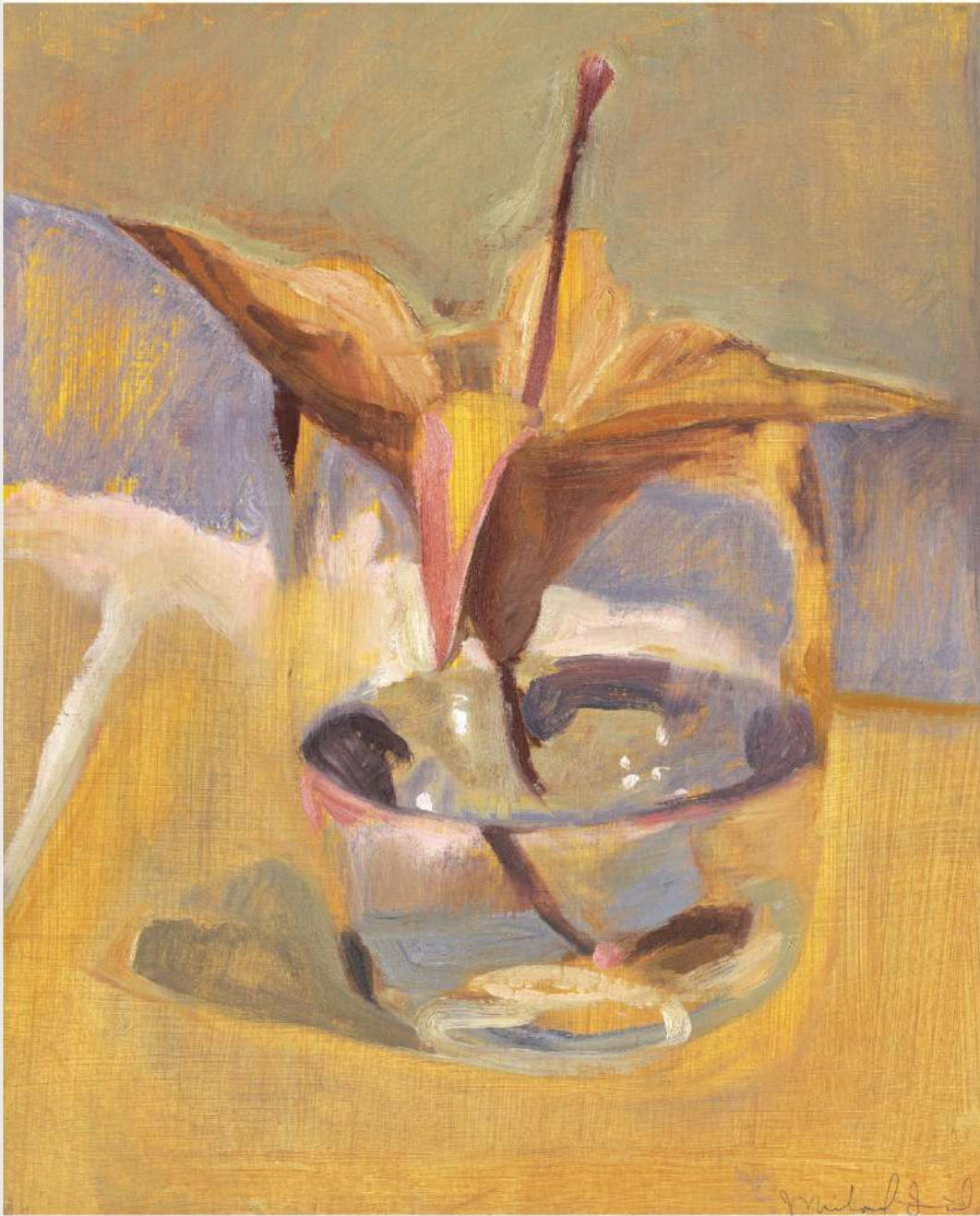
The term hue refers to the actual name of a color. For example, when you look at a red pear, you may note that it has a particular hue (i.e., red).

tone

Tone refers to how light or dark the color is. In the case of the red pear, its tone may be a light red, a dark red, or somewhere in between. Tone is the chromatic cousin to "value," the term used to describe relative lightness or darkness in black-and-white art. In our example, let's say that the tone of the pear is dark.

local color

Local color is the color of an object unaltered by light or reflection. In other words, local color is the inherent color of an object. While light and reflection make some parts of it appear to be lighter, darker, or reflect the color of another object, the local color of the pear remains dark red.



Oil Study, 1992, oil on paper,
20 × 16 inches (50.8 × 40.6 cm), private collection

This image was created with the same neutral primary palette as the painting that appears on [this page](#). In this case, the yellow ocher was used for the imprimatura. The yellow color contrasts against cool colors in the painting, making them appear brighter.

As you begin to paint, look at your still life and try to identify the local colors of the objects—a dark red pear, a light yellow vase, a light blue tablecloth, etc. Paint each object one at a time. For every object, use the colors on your palette to mix the object's local color as best you can. However, this is a limited palette, so chances are that you will not be able to mix every color in the setup. Instead you should use the palette to best represent what you see in the still life.

In the areas of reflected light, the hue of the local color is slightly altered by the hue of the reflection. For instance, reflected light from a light blue tablecloth will appear as violet in a dark red pear. You can show this in your painting by mixing the local color with the color of the reflected light.

Once you have mixed the local color, tint or shade it as needed to match the value contrasts in the underpainting. To preserve the painting's form, it is important that the tones you use match the values used in the underpainting. You can check your color by applying a small stroke of it to the underpainting, then view it while squinting your eyes. If the color blends in with the painting, then it is a good match. However, if you can still see the color stroke while squinting, then it is either too light or too dark.

Once you are sure that the tone of the color matches the underpainting, apply the local color to its subject in the still life. Apply the paint opaquely. If your paint is too dry or tacky, add medium to it by dropping a small pool of medium on the palette and slowly adding it to the color. Avoid thinning the paint too much or applying washes. As you add colors to different areas of the still life, continue to pay close attention to matching the tone of your colors to the values in the underpainting.

materials

underpainting from the lesson on [this page](#)

limited palette: ivory black, yellow ocher, Indian red, burnt umber, and titanium white

palette knife or painting knife

cotton rag

hog bristle brushes

mahlstick (optional)

solvent

medium



STEP 1 PREPARE THE COLOR.

Select an object (or an area of the painting). Mix the local color, then tint or shade it so that its tone matches the value used in your underpainting. Shown here: mixing the green of the background.



STEP 2 TEST THE TONE.

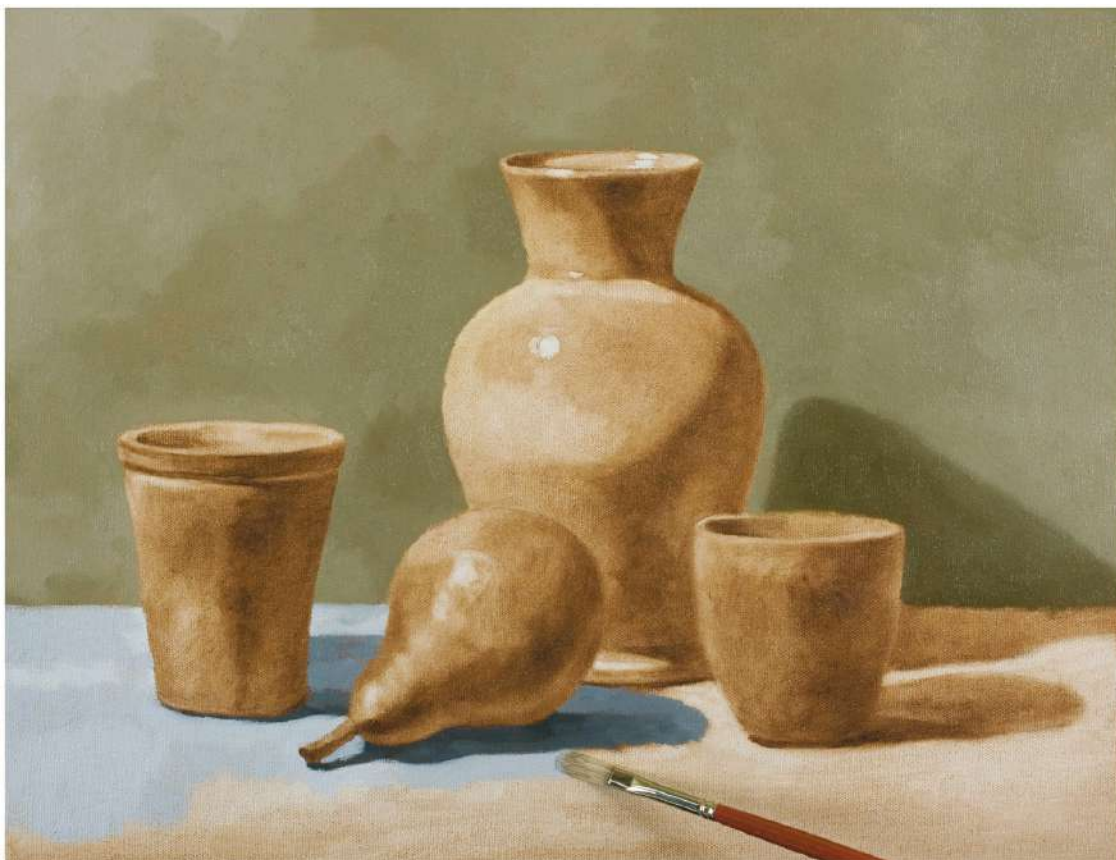
Apply a small brushstroke to the canvas, then squint your eyes while looking at it. If you can still see the color when squinting, then it is

either too light or too dark. If this is the case, scrape it off with a palette knife, and wipe the canvas clean with a rag. If instead, the color disappears when you squint (as the third example shown here), then its tone matches the underpainting.



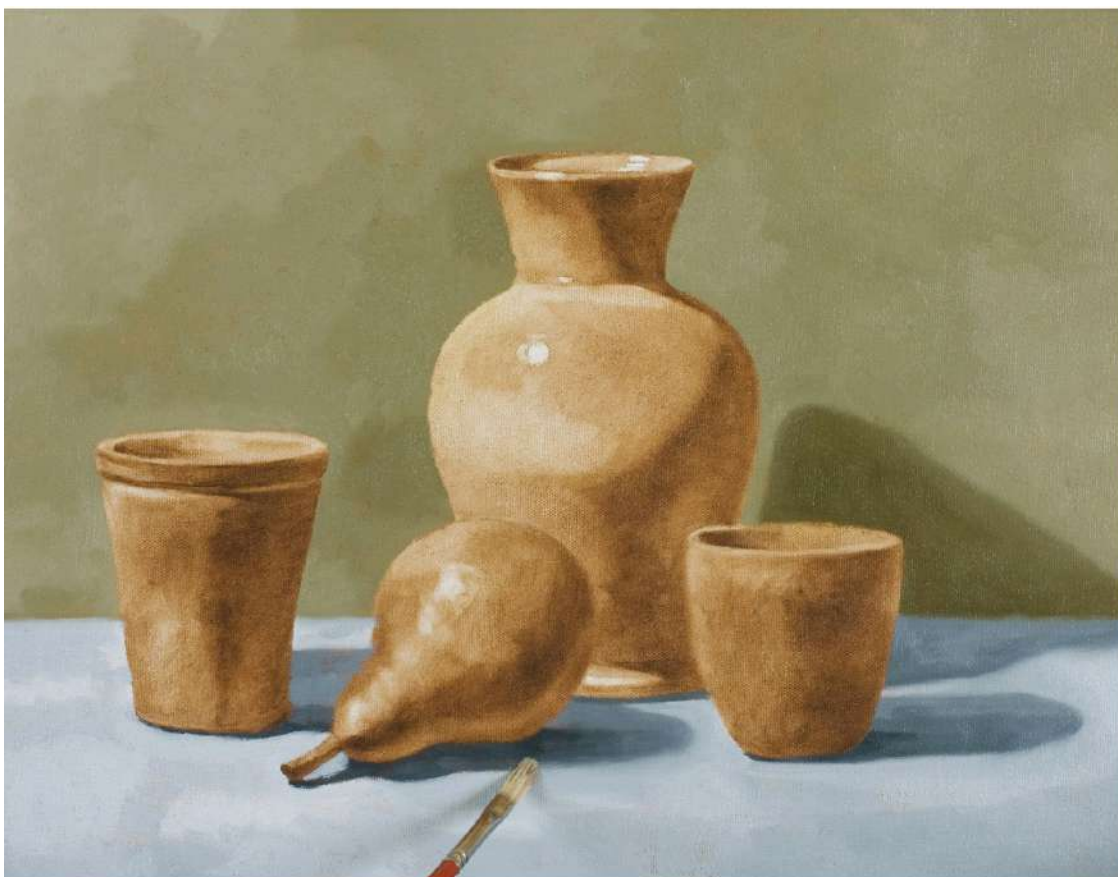
STEP 3 APPLY THE COLOR.

Once you have mixed the correct tone, use a hog bristle brush to apply the color to the canvas opaquely. Carefully tint or shade your color to match the values in the underpainting.



STEP 4 PAINT ONE AREA OR OBJECT AT A TIME.

Apply the local color to the painting one object or area at a time, until the entire still life is colored.



STEP 5 BLEND THE EDGES.

You may want to blend some edges, especially the edges of shadows. While the paint is still wet, pull a clean brush along the edge to allow the colors to blend.



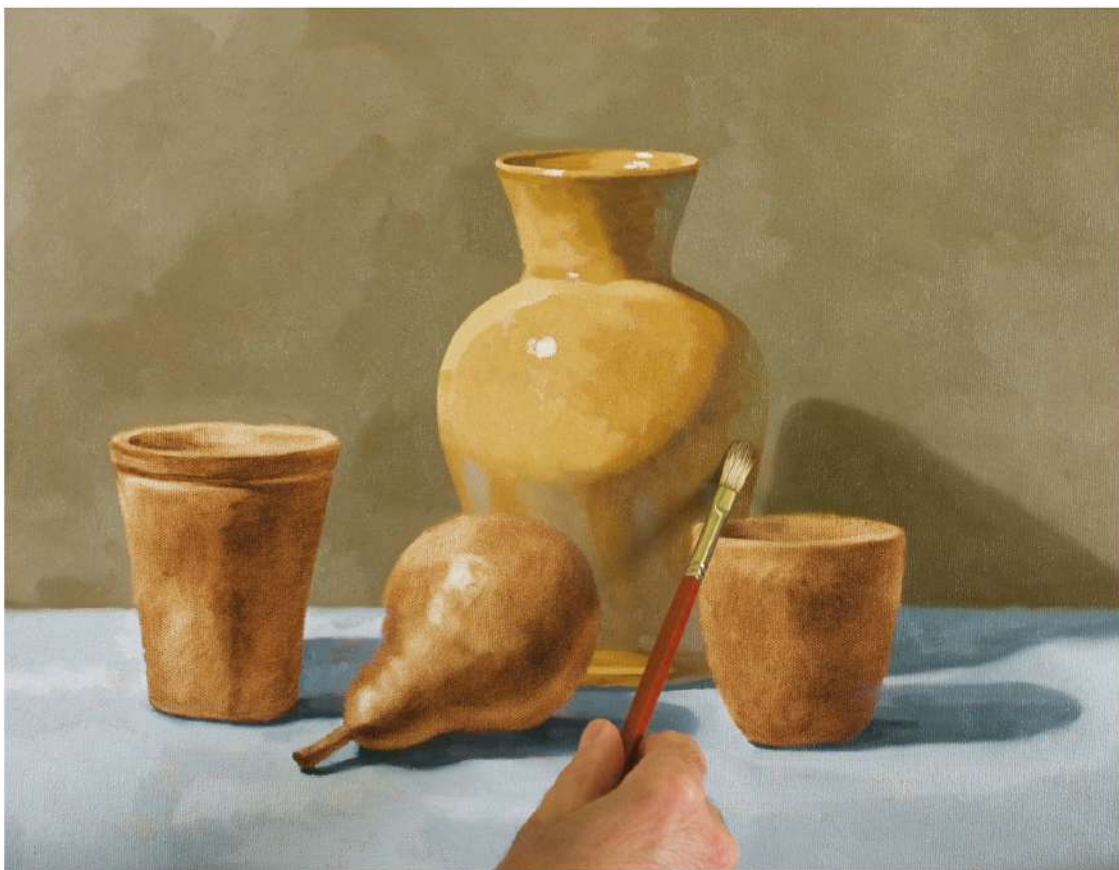
STEP 6 PAINT THE HALFTONES.

Tint the local color to match the halftones in the underpainting.



STEP 7 CREATE THE CORE SHADOWS.

Shade the local color to match the shadows in the underpainting.



STEP 8 ADD THE REFLECTED LIGHT.

Show the color of the reflected light in the shadows.



STEP 9 PAINT HIGHLIGHTS.

Using a small, round, soft-hair brush, apply the lightest tints of the local color to the highlights. You can use a mahlstick to keep your palm from touching the canvas.



STEP 10 CLEAN UP THE EDGES.

Once all objects are painted, refine the edges as desired by painting the objects and the negative shapes around them.



STEP 11 REPEATS STEPS 1 TO 10 FOR EACH OBJECT.

The completed painting should look something like this. For best results, apply the colors of this palette opaquely (do not overthin the paint) and stay true to the light and dark contrasts that were established in the underpainting.

Complementary Colors

Complementary colors are colors that are positioned opposite each other on the color wheel—for instance, blue and orange, violet and yellow, and red and green. (See color wheel diagram on [this page](#).) When placed side by side in a painting, complementary colors have the effect of bringing out each other. In painting, this is an effective way to make a color appear brighter than it really is.

Alternatively, when two complementary colors are mixed together, they become less saturated. Saturation is a color theory term that refers to the purity of a color. A highly saturated color is bright, and a low saturated color is neutral. In color mixing, complementary colors can be mixed together to create beautiful neutrals.



Apples, 2004, oil on canvas,
16 × 24 inches (40.6 × 61 cm), private collection

I initially laid out this painting using the green/red palette discussed on [this page](#) to [this page](#). As the image developed, I added alizarin crimson, cadmium yellow light, and yellow ocher to my palette. The dominant complementary colors nevertheless have a strong presence, with the color of the individual pieces of fruit being fairly saturated.



Oranges, 2004, oil on canvas,
16 × 24 inches (40.6 × 61 cm), private collection

I began this still life using the blue/orange palette discussed [here](#). As the image developed, I introduced cadmium yellow light, cadmium red medium, and alizarin crimson. Low saturated neutrals dominate the background and shadows of the image.

The Blue/Orange Palette

Another limited palette I like to use includes ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, and white. Ultramarine blue is a blue-violet, and burnt sienna is a red-orange, so they are not quite opposite each other on the color wheel, and therefore technically not complementary colors, but they work like complements when used together. When mixed together, burnt sienna and ultramarine blue neutralize each other, creating a rich black. Mixing various proportions of each color will also produce a range of blues, oranges, and neutrals in between. Working with so few colors can seem challenging, but it can also result in a painting that has beautiful contrasts of bright colors and neutral grays.

palette

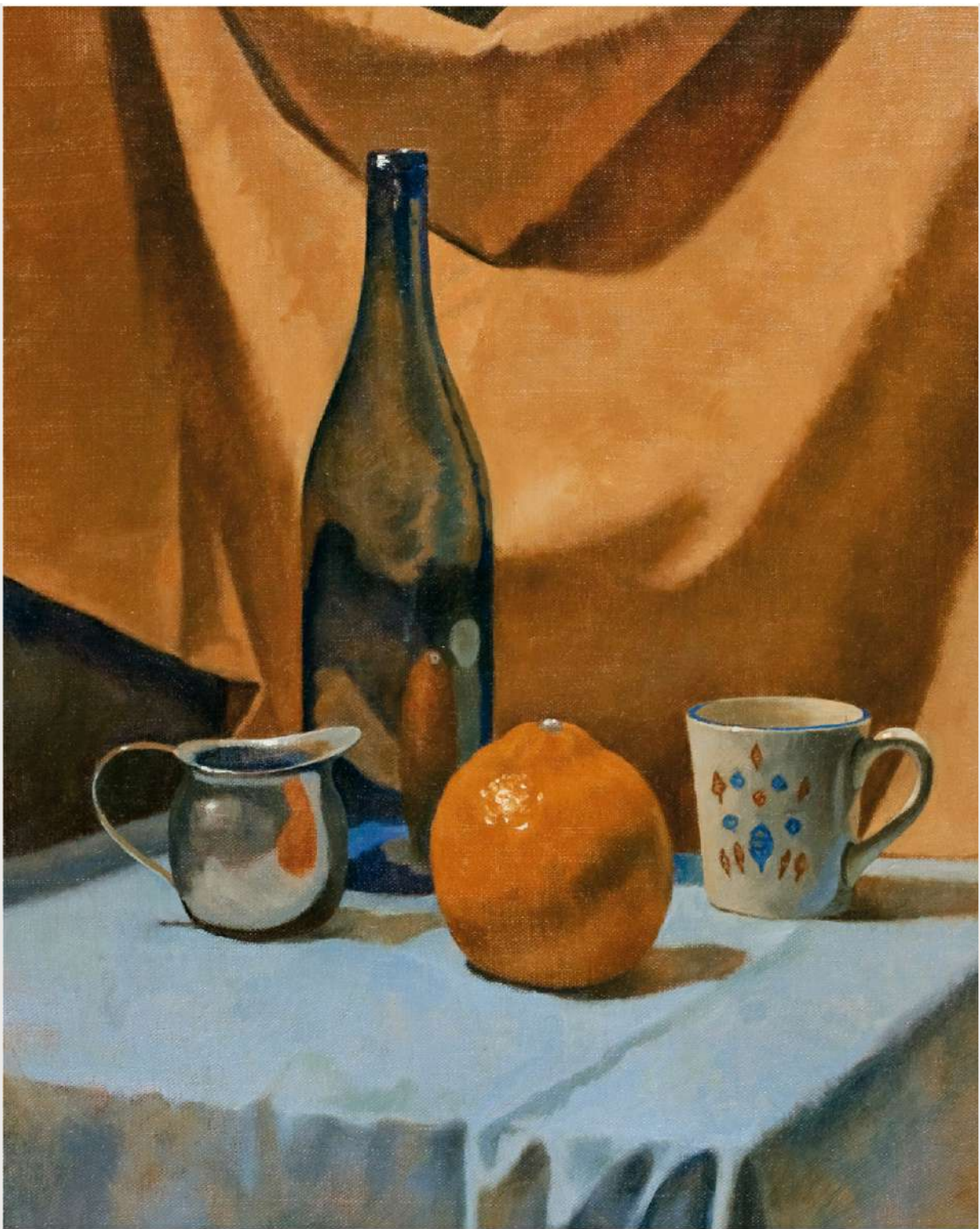
ultramarine blue

burnt sienna

titanium white



This blue/orange palette is based on ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, and titanium white. A broad range of neutral colors is created when ultramarine blue and burnt sienna are mixed. Titanium white is used to tint the colors, resulting in a row of mid tones and light tones.



Still Life in Blue/Orange Palette, 2008, oil on canvas,
18 × 14 inches (45.7 × 35.6 cm), private collection

This still life painting was created using a blue/orange palette featuring ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, and titanium white.

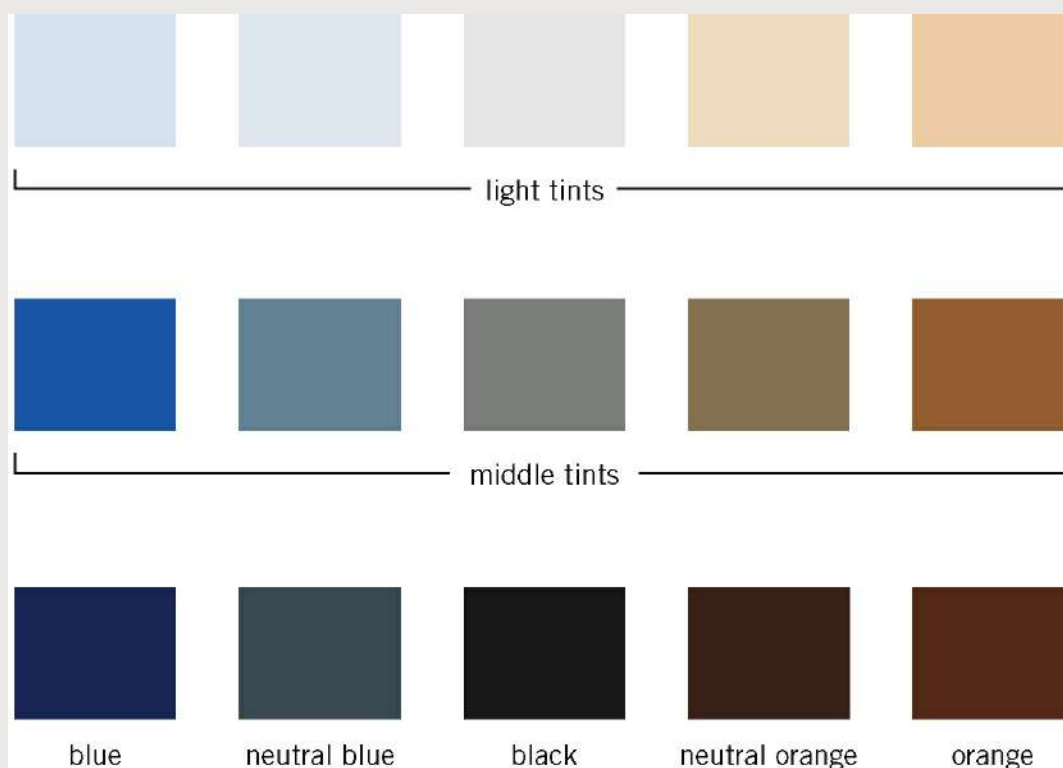
laying out the palette

I lay out this palette in a grid, instead of around the edge of the palette. While this is unconventional, it is easy to work with this palette when all of the colors are laid out this way. First, place burnt sienna on the top left corner of the palette, and then place the ultramarine blue in the bottom left corner of the palette. Place titanium white in the top right corner of the palette.

mixing the colors

Mix burnt sienna and ultramarine blue until they produce a mixed black. Check to make sure it is indeed black by tinting a small portion of the mix to see if it produces a neutral gray. If the resulting tint looks brownish, then there is too much burnt sienna, and you should add more ultramarine blue. If the tint looks like a blue-gray, then it has too much ultramarine blue, and you should add more burnt sienna. In either case, mix the colors until you have as true a black as possible and then place it on the left side of the palette, midway between the burnt sienna and ultramarine blue.

Mix a portion of the mixed black with burnt sienna until it becomes a brown (or neutral orange). Then, place it on the left side of the palette, between burnt sienna and mixed black. Next, mix a portion of the mixed black with ultramarine blue until it becomes a blue-gray, or neutral blue. Place it on the left side of the palette, between the mixed black and ultramarine blue. By now, you should have five colors arranged in one column along the left side of the palette, and white placed in the top right corner of the palette. From top to bottom, they are: burnt sienna, mixed neutral orange, mixed black, mixed neutral blue, and ultramarine blue.



This color chart demonstrates the range of neutral colors that are created when ultramarine blue and burnt sienna are mixed. Titanium white has been used to tint the colors, resulting in a row of mid tones and light tones.

creating tints

This column of colors is dark enough as is, so there is no need to shade them, but you will need to tint them. You should create at least two tints for each color. The darker tint should be a middle tone and the lighter tint should be nearly white. Arrange the tints in rows on the palette, extending from their original colors on the left side, to the lighter tints on the right.

When you are finished with the tints, you should have a grid of fifteen colors laid out on the palette, with white in the top right corner. Each of these colors makes up a series of tonal steps of tints that become lighter as they extend to the right. There are currently three tonal steps: the

original color and its two tints. This is really the minimum number of tonal steps. The more tonal steps you lay out, the more prepared you will be when you begin painting.

making a color chart

As with the previous palette, you can make a chart of this palette by organizing it into three rows. The bottom row has (from left to right) ultramarine blue, mixed neutral blue, mixed black, mixed neutral orange, and burnt sienna. The center row has the darker tints, and the top row has the lighter tints.

painting with a grid layout

When you glance at the way the colors are laid out on the palette, you can see that the colors progresses from dark along left side to light along the right side. Colors that are the most saturated, or brightest, are arranged along the top and bottom rows. And the neutralized colors occupy the center row.

While painting, you can lighten a particular color by mixing it with the lighter color to its right. You can darken a color by mixing it with the darker color to its left. You can neutralize a warm color by mixing it with a more neutral below, and neutralize a cool color by mixing it with a more neutral color above. When you mix colors that are side by side, you change their tone, when you mix colors that are above and below, you change their saturation. If you mix colors that are placed on the grid diagonally to each other, you change both tone and saturation.

As with the previous palette, pay close attention to tonal contrasts when painting with these colors. When using a limited palette you often cannot mix all of the colors that you see in the still life. However, as long as you use accurate tonal contrasts, your painting will have form and look convincing.

The Green/Red Palette

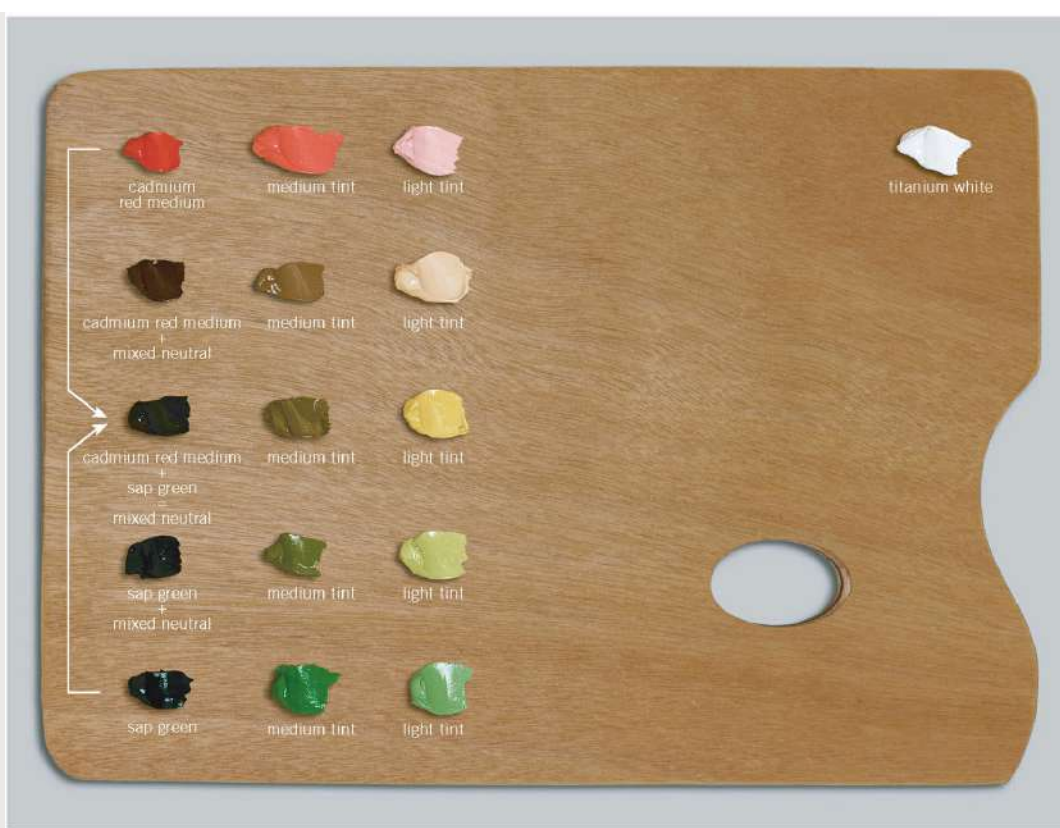
You can also paint with a green and red palette arranged in the same way. Use sap green instead of ultramarine blue, and cadmium red medium instead of burnt sienna, then lay out those colors out using the same palette organization as described for the previous palette. You will not be able to mix a black with cadmium red medium and sap green, but you should still mix as neutral a color as possible between the two. Then, use it to neutralize both the cadmium red medium and the sap green.

palette

sap green

cadmium red medium

titanium white

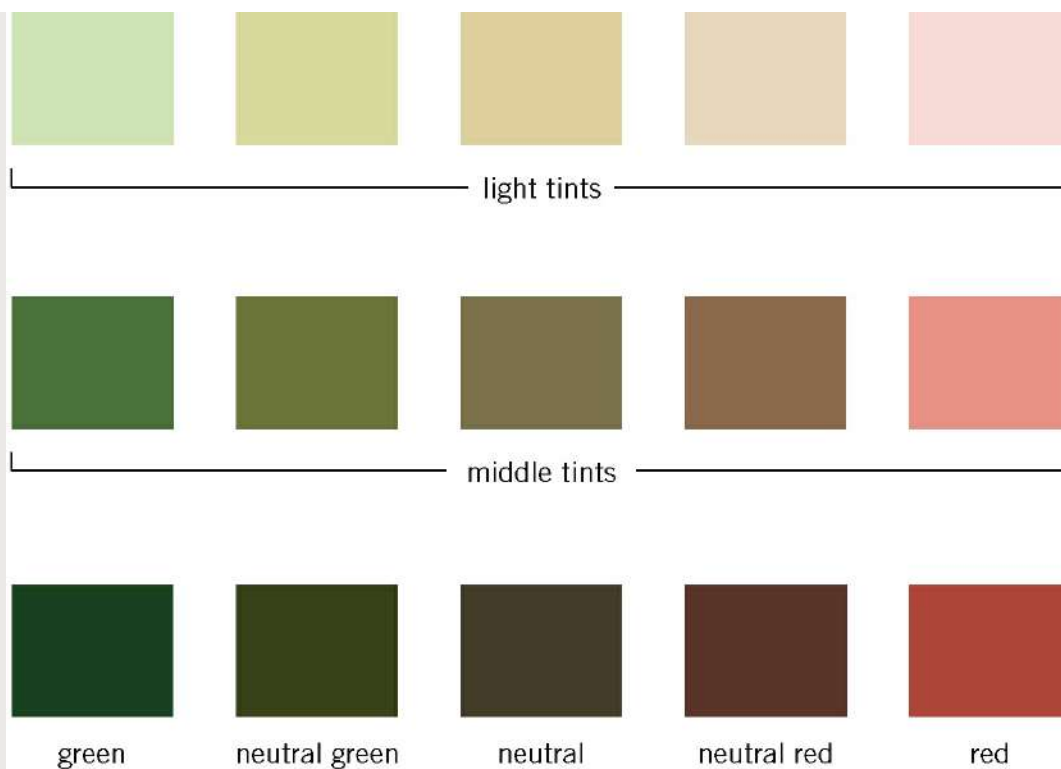


The green/red limited palette is based on sap green, cadmium red medium, and titanium white. A broad range of neutral colors are created when sap green and cadmium red medium are mixed. Titanium white is used to tint the colors, resulting in a row of mid tones and light tones.



Still Life Study in Red/Green Palette, 2009, oil on canvas board,
8 × 10 inches (20.3 × 25.4 cm), private collection

This still life painting was created using a red/green palette featuring sap green, cadmium red medium, and titanium white.



This color chart demonstrates the range of neutral colors that are created when sap green and cadmium red medium are mixed. Titanium white has been used to tint the colors, resulting in a row of mid tones and light tones.

The Violet/Yellow palette

A violet and yellow palette can be made using cadmium yellow light and a violet mixed from alizarin crimson and ultramarine blue. If you would rather not mix the violet, cobalt violet may be substituted.

palette

ultramarine blue

alizarin crimson

cadmium yellow light

titanium white



The violet/yellow limited palette is based on ultramarine blue, alizarin crimson, cadmium yellow light, and titanium white. When ultramarine blue and alizarin crimson are mixed, the result is violet. A broad range of neutral colors are created when this violet and cadmium yellow light are mixed. Titanium white is used to tint the colors, resulting in a row of mid tones and light tones.



This color chart demonstrates the range of neutral colors that are created when a violet mixed from ultramarine blue and alizarin crimson is mixed with cadmium yellow light. Titanium white has been used to tint the colors, resulting in a row of mid tones and light tones.



Still Life Study in Violet/Yellow Palette, 2009, oil on canvas board,
8 × 10 inches (20.3 × 25.4 cm), private collection

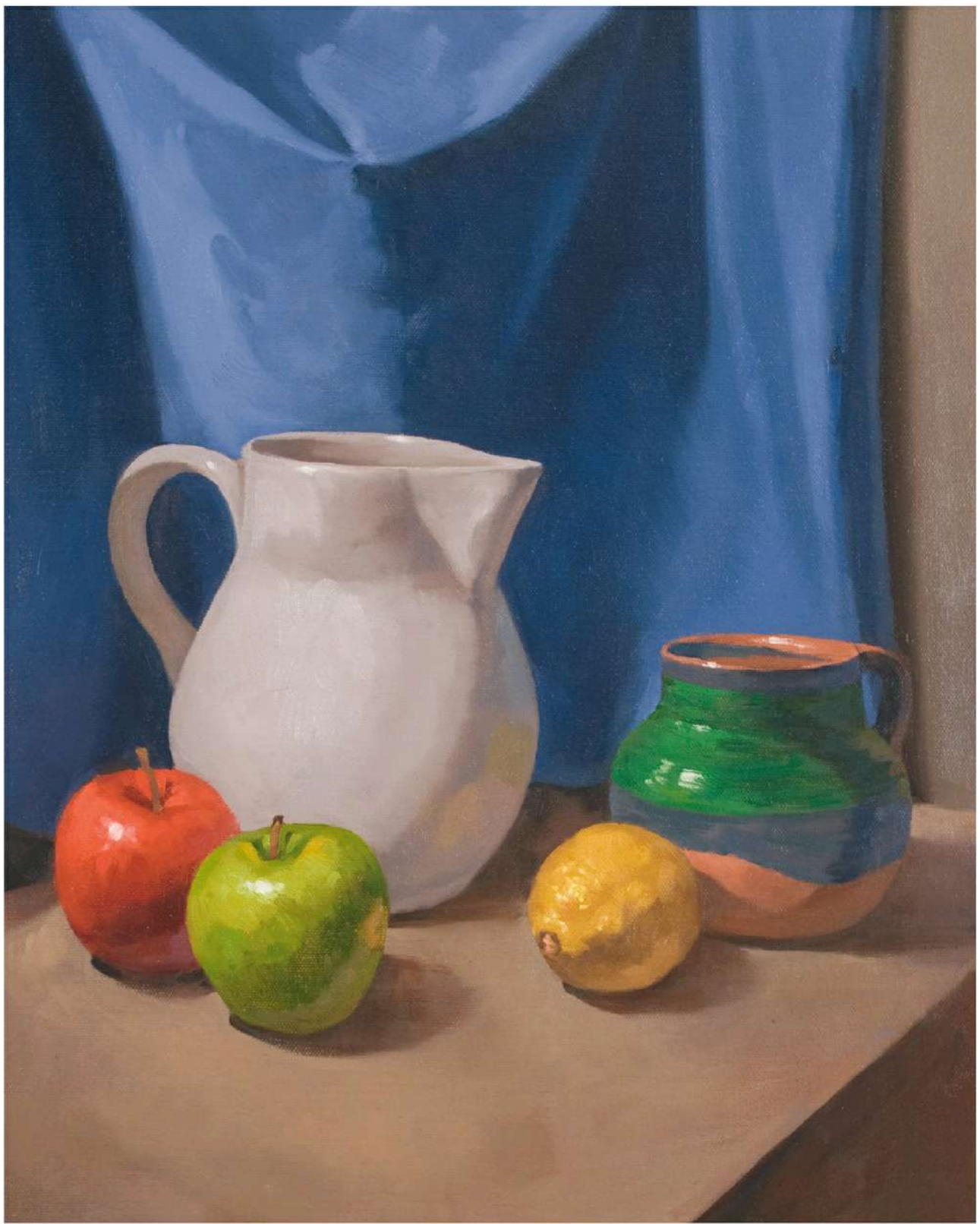
This still life painting was created using a violet/yellow palette featuring ultramarine blue, cadmium yellow light, alizarin crimson, and titanium white.

DEMONSTRATION

ALLA PRIMA PAINTING WITH A FULL PALETTE

This project involves working *alla prima* (without the aid of an underpainting), using a variety of brushes to create sharp and soft edges, and painting with a full palette.

In preparation for this painting, gather your objects. For this still life, you will need three to five objects that have brighter colors and matte finishes. Also include a red apple, a green apple, and a lemon, as there will be an exercise in which you mix colors for these pieces of fruit. In this lesson, you will also use the colors in your palette to mix your own blacks and grays, so among the still life objects, include something that is white or gray. And finally, include objects that have a variety of sharp and soft edges. (For instance, drapery has a softness to its edge, whereas something ceramic has a harder edge.) There will also be other sharp and soft edges to paint, regardless of the material of the other object. (For instance, shadows have both sharp and soft edges.)



Demonstration Painting 2, 2009, oil on canvas,
18 × 14 inches (45.7 × 35.6 cm), private collection

The Full Palette

The full palette that I use includes ivory black, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, viridian, sap green, titanium white, cadmium yellow light, yellow ocher, burnt sienna, Indian red, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, and burnt umber. Painters generally disagree as to which colors

should be included in a full palette, but I have found that this selection works for me. I suggest that you begin with this set, but continue to explore the colors available at art supply stores to discover which set of colors works best for you.

laying out the palette

As with the neutral primary palette featured on [this page](#), lay out a full palette by placing the colors on the palette according to temperature, with the cool colors along the vertical edge, and the warm colors along the top. Starting at the bottom left corner and moving up the palette, lay out ivory black, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, viridian, and sap green. Place titanium white in the top left corner. Then, moving toward the right, lay out cadmium yellow light, yellow ocher, burnt sienna, Indian red, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, and burnt umber.

palette

ivory black

ultramarine blue

cerulean blue

viridian

sap green

titanium white

cadmium yellow light

yellow ocher

burnt sienna

Indian red

cadmium red medium

alizarin crimson

burnt umber



My full palette includes ivory black, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, viridian, sap green, titanium white, cadmium yellow light, yellow ocher, burnt sienna, Indian red, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, and burnt umber.

This progression of colors around the palette is similar to the way colors progress around the color wheel. I find this useful when mixing color. For example, to adjust the temperature of a color such as viridian, mix it either with the cooler cerulean blue below it or the warmer sap green above it. The same is true of the warm colors along the top edge of the palette. To adjust the temperature of a color such as burnt sienna, cool it down by mixing it with yellow ocher, or warm it up by mixing it with Indian red.

mixing new colors

Two colors that are not included in this palette are violet and orange. Violet can be made by mixing alizarin crimson and ultramarine blue, and a variety of orange hues can be mixed by using any combination of the reds with the yellows. Burnt sienna is a very warm earth tone that works well for creating an earthy orange in middle and dark tones.

mixing black

Many painters avoid using black, but instead choose to mix black from the colors on their palette. I prefer to keep ivory black in my palette. As discussed earlier, it is cool in temperature, and can be used to mix a number of neutral hues. It is also semitransparent, and works well as a glaze color. However, if you want to mix a black, combine ultramarine blue with burnt umber or burnt sienna. Other interesting darks can be made with the mixtures of ultramarine blue, sap green, and alizarin crimson, and combinations of sap green and burnt sienna, as well as sap green and alizarin crimson.

creating tints and shades

When tinting and shading colors, the full palette gives you many options. To begin with, a variety of light and dark colors are available that may be used in place of a tint or shade. For example, of the blue pigments, cerulean blue is a light blue and ultramarine blue is a dark. In the case of yellow pigments, cadmium yellow light is a light yellow and yellow ocher is a dark. Of the red pigments, cadmium red medium is much lighter than the darker Indian red and alizarin crimson. So when you paint an object using the full palette, rather than tinting and shading just one color, see if there are lighter and darker versions of a color within the palette that can be used together to cover a range of lights and darks. For example, when painting a red apple, you might use cadmium red medium for the lighter reds, and Indian red, alizarin crimson, or burnt umber for the darker reds.

When working with the limited palette in the previous lesson, you tinted colors using white. As a color is mixed with white, it is both cooled down and neutralized. This doesn't work well if you are trying to paint, for example, a red apple and your tints turn to a dull, pastel pink. With the full palette, you can instead use cadmium yellow light, or a mixture of cadmium yellow light and white, to tint your warmer greens, yellows, oranges, and reds. This way these warm tints will retain their vibrancy. White does not have as dramatic an effect on cool colors, but you might notice that when violet is tinted with white, it looks more like a blue-violet. You can add some alizarin crimson to the tint to offset this change in temperature.

Burnt umber is a good color to use to shade warm colors, but other dark warm colors can be used for shading as well. Burnt sienna is useful in shading orange hues. Indian red and alizarin crimson can be used to shade reds. Ultramarine blue mixed with alizarin crimson creates a deep violet that can also be effective in shading reds. Ivory black, or a mixed black is useful in shading cool colors. Ultramarine blue is also effective in shading cool colors. It has a cool dark hue that brings deep accents to shadows.



Still Life with Peppers, 2001, oil on canvas,
18½ × 21 inches (47 × 53.4 cm), private collection

This still life was created using the full palette discussed here.

EXERCISE: Creating Tints and Shades

Before you begin painting, use the full palette to mix at least three tonal steps (a dark tone, a middle tone, and a light tone) for each piece of fruit (the red apple, the green apple, and the lemon) in your still life, and then place them in rows on the palette. Below are some color mixing ideas to get you started. However, your subject matter may require different color combinations.

For each object, avoid simply tinting the color with white and shading with black. Instead try to use the full palette to match the color of the objects as best you can. When you are finished mixing tonal steps for the fruit, mix some colors for the other objects in the still life.



This red apple, green apple, and lemon were painted using colors featured in the palette below.

red apple

For the middle tones, try a mixture of cadmium red medium neutralized with Indian red. In the lighter tones, consider mixtures of cadmium red medium and Indian red with and cadmium yellow light. If the tints need to be lightened even more, especially for the highlights, add white. To shade the local color you have mixed for the red apple, mix alizarin crimson with Indian red or burnt umber.

green apple

Mix sap green and cadmium yellow light for the local color. For a more neutral green, mix sap green with yellow ocher. To tint the local color of the green apple, add a mixture of cadmium yellow light and white. For the shadows, use sap green alone or darkened with ultramarine blue.

lemon

Mix yellow ocher and cadmium yellow light for the local color. Increase the amount of cadmium yellow light as the lemon gets lighter in the halftones. For the highlights, tint cadmium yellow light with white. Use a combination of yellow ocher and burnt umber in the shadows of the lemon.



This palette shows three rows of colors: red, green, and yellow respectively. Rather than tinting colors with white and shading colors with black, a variety of colors in the full palette were mixed to create tonal steps of red, green, and yellow, while retaining their characteristic hues. These color mixtures are a good place to start when painting red and green apples, and lemons.

PAINTING *ALLA PRIMA*

Alla prima, an Italian term meaning “at first,” refers to a technique in which a painting is completed in one layer. In the previous demonstration, you painted the still life using two layers. In the first layer, you established value contrasts with an underpainting, and in the second layer you added color with the limited palette. For this demonstration, you will use the *alla prima* technique to paint the still life without the aid of an underpainting, developing both light/dark and color contrasts simultaneously.

In *alla prima* painting, the paint is applied wet into wet. For this reason, you will get the best results if you paint your shadows first, before applying the lights. Light colors are generally opaque, and therefore can be painted over a wet, dark color without much blending of the two. The opposite is true when painting a dark color over a wet light color. The two colors mix, often resulting in a muddy and flat appearance. If you run into this problem while painting, scrape away the color with a palette knife, and wipe the canvas clean with a rag. Then, reapply the darks again before applying the lights.

Begin an *alla prima* painting by outlining the objects and shadow shapes of the still life with burnt umber. Then, mass in the colors, starting with the shadows first, then the halftones. Next, deepen the core shadows, and add any color in the reflected light that you see. Finally, paint the highlights. While the paint is still wet, blend any areas of the painting as desired, then finish by refining the edges.

As the name of the technique implies, *alla prima* paintings are often completed in one sitting. However, finishing this painting in one sitting is not necessary. Return to the painting as many times

as needed to rework and retouch it as you see fit.

materials

preliminary drawing (optional)

14 × 18-inch canvas or canvas board with imprimatura (See [this page](#) for how to apply an imprimatura.)

full palette (See [this page](#) for how to prepare your palette.)

palette knife

hog bristle and soft hair brushes

medium

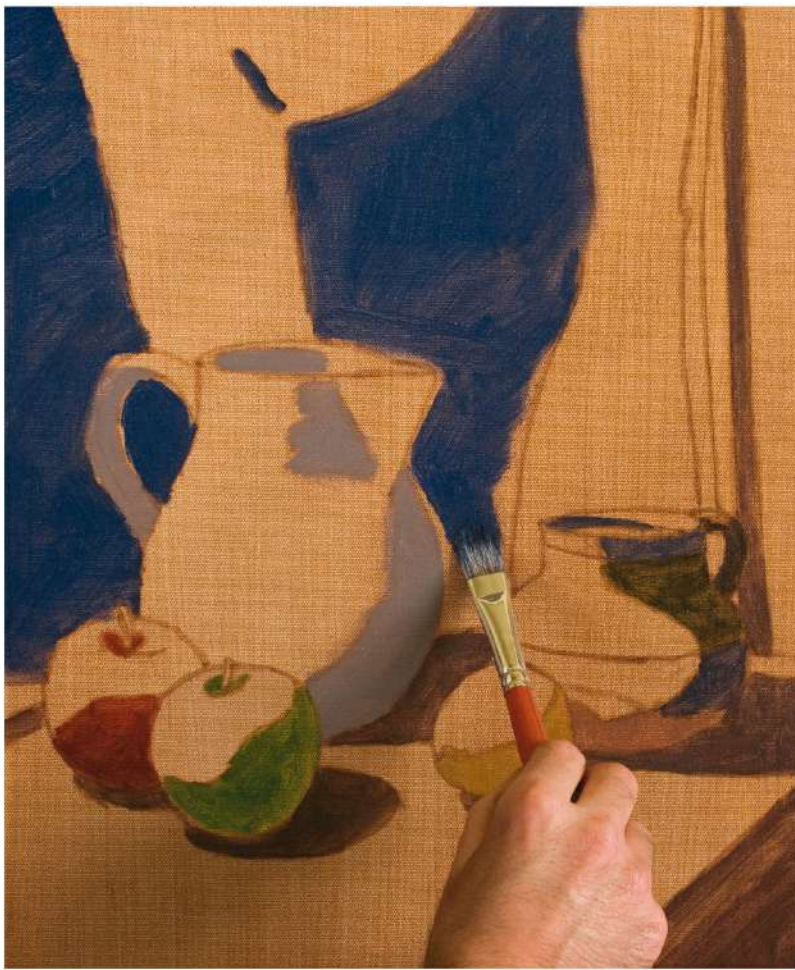
solvent

cotton rag



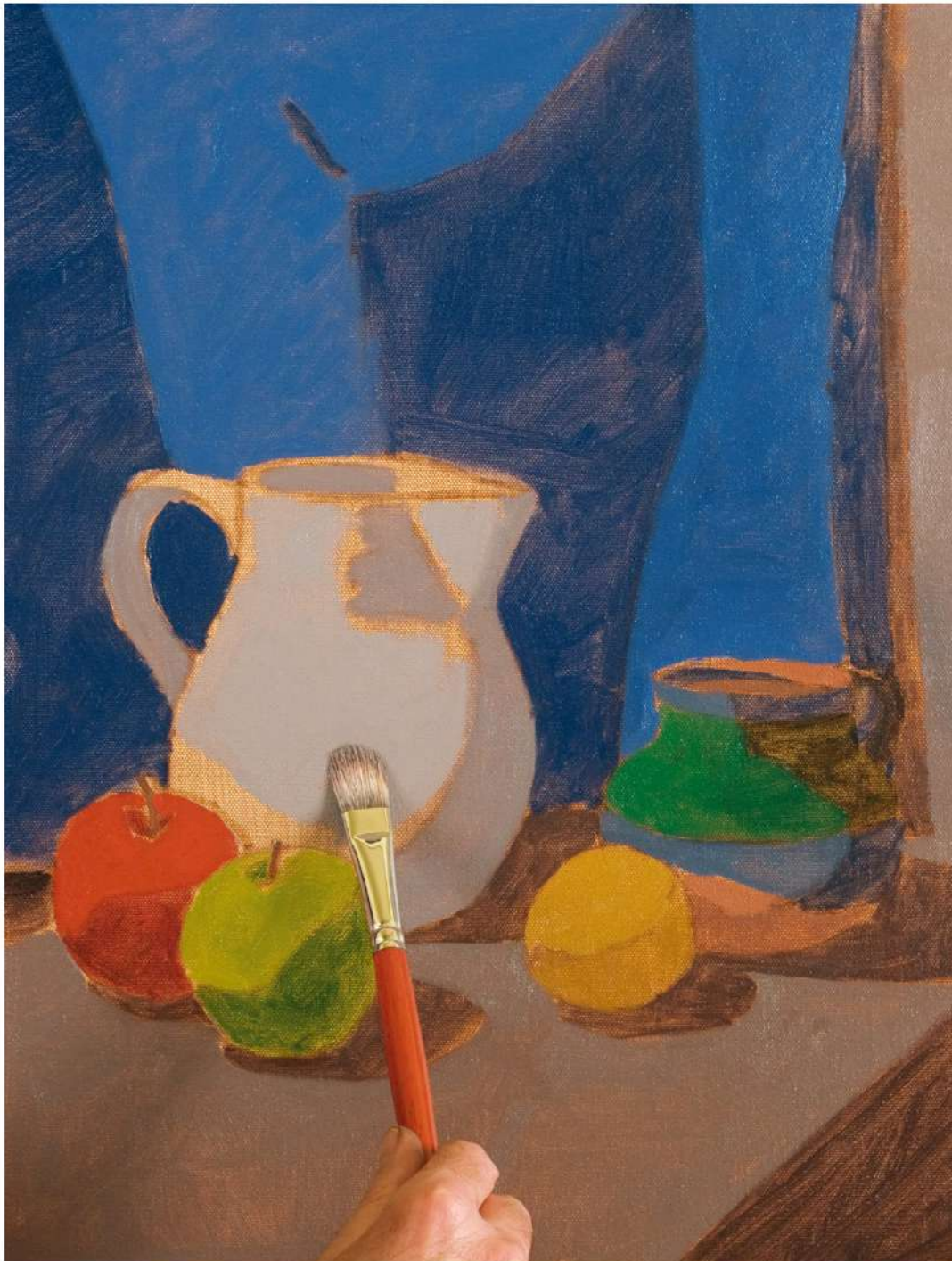
STEP 1 OUTLINE THE OBJECTS AND SHADOWS.

Using a small round hog bristle brush, draw the still life objects and shadows with burnt umber that has been thinned with solvent to a middle value.



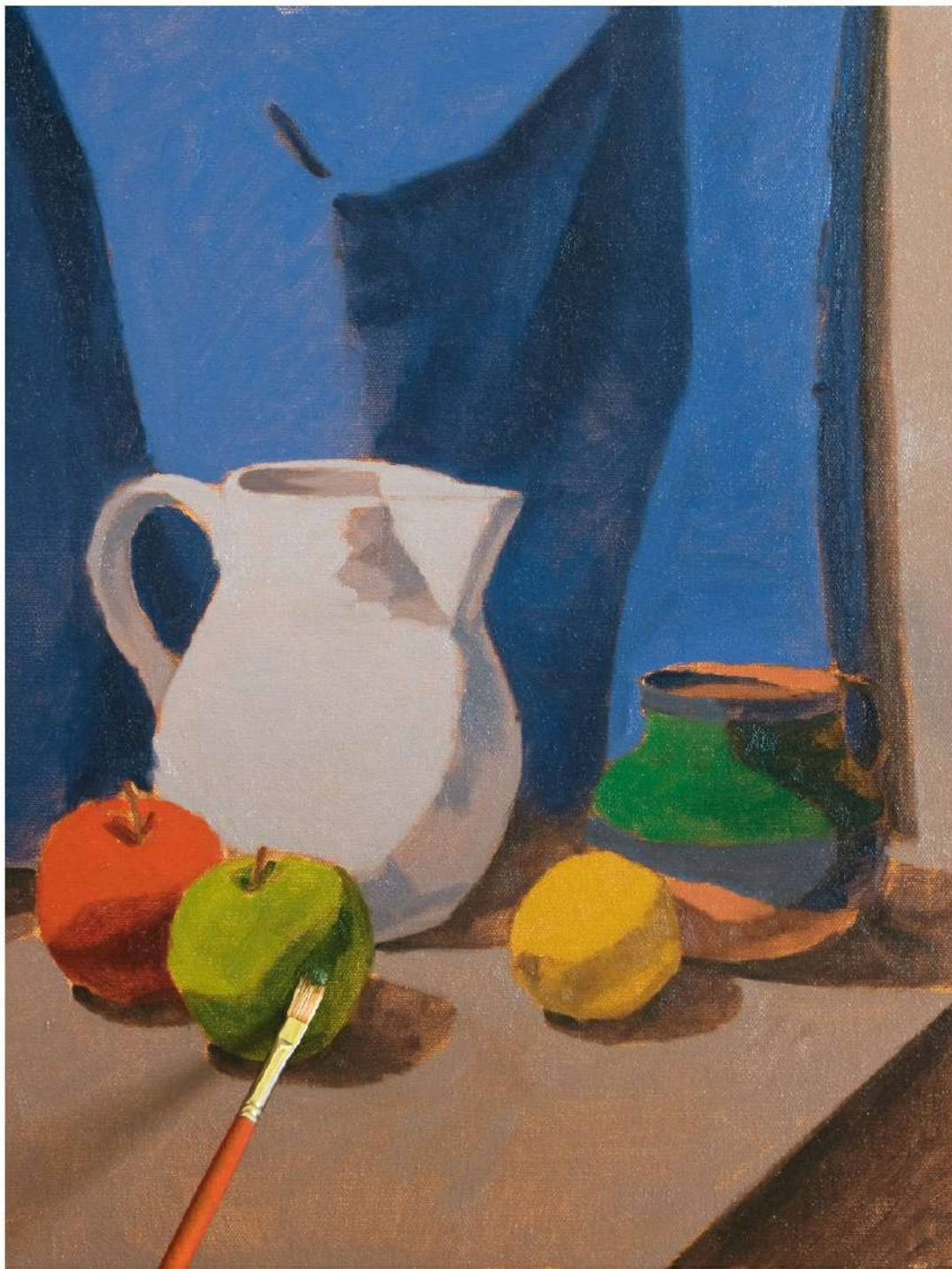
STEP 2 MASS IN THE SHADOWS.

Use the colors on your palette to match the colors of the shadows, and mass in flat layers of color in the shadows. Thin the colors slightly with solvent or medium to increase the flow of the paint. Use medium and large sized brushes wherever possible. This will allow you to cover a large area in a short amount of time.



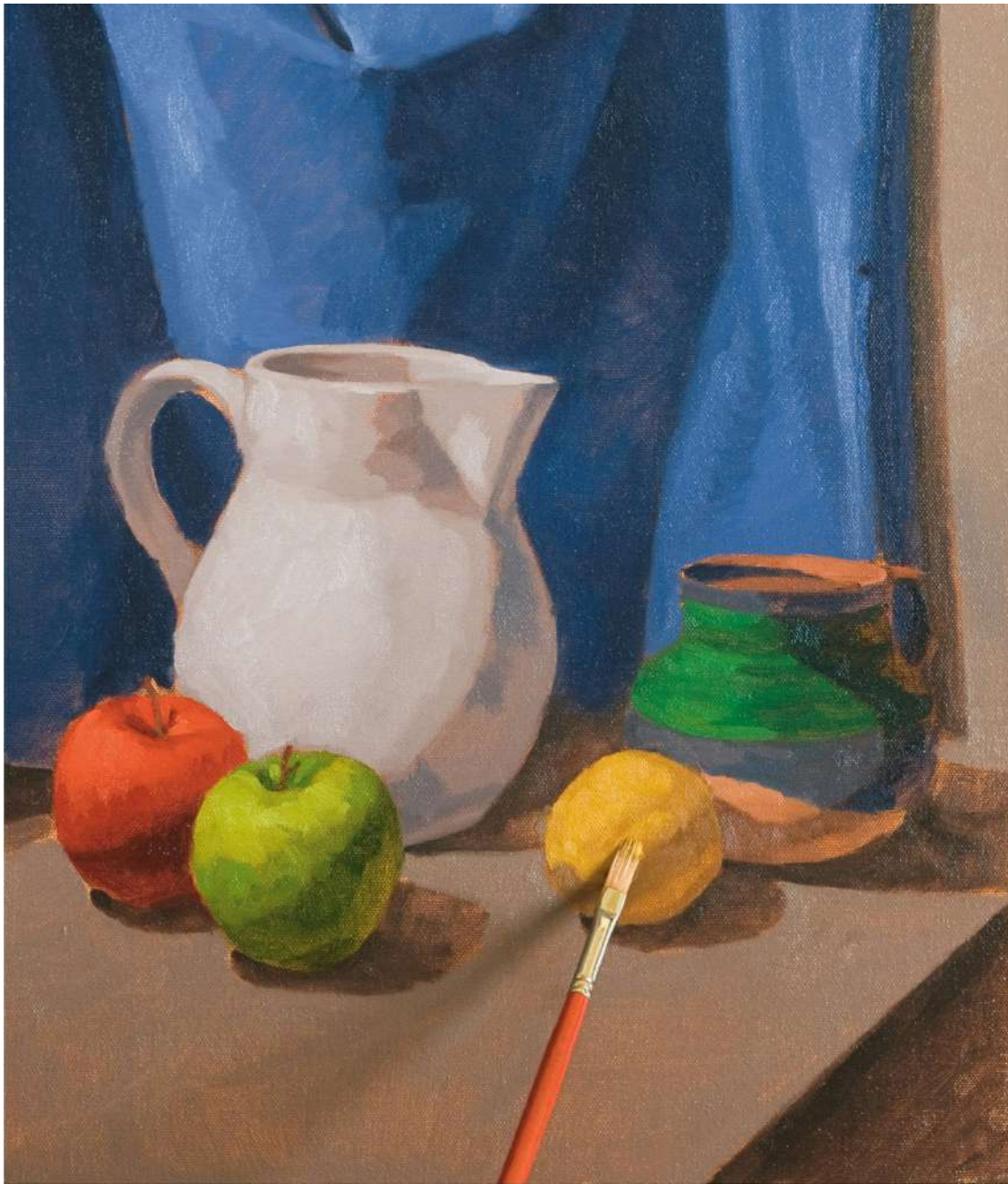
STEP 3 MASS IN THE HALFTONES.

Continue to use hog bristle brushes, and mass in flat layers of color to the light areas of the still life.



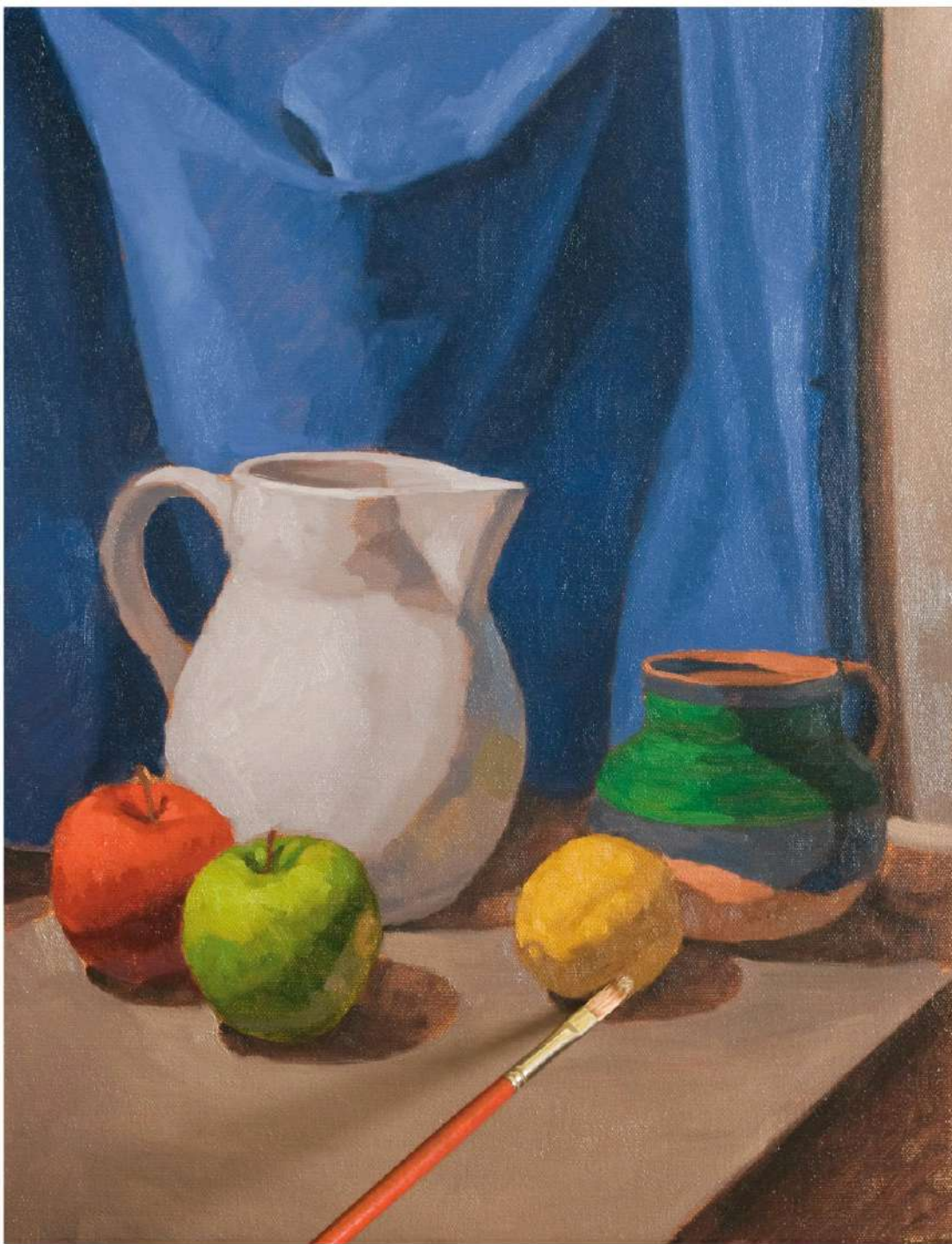
STEP 4 ADD THE CORE SHADOWS.

Using the darker colors on your palette, paint the core shadows while allowing the areas of reflected light to remain as the original shadow color.

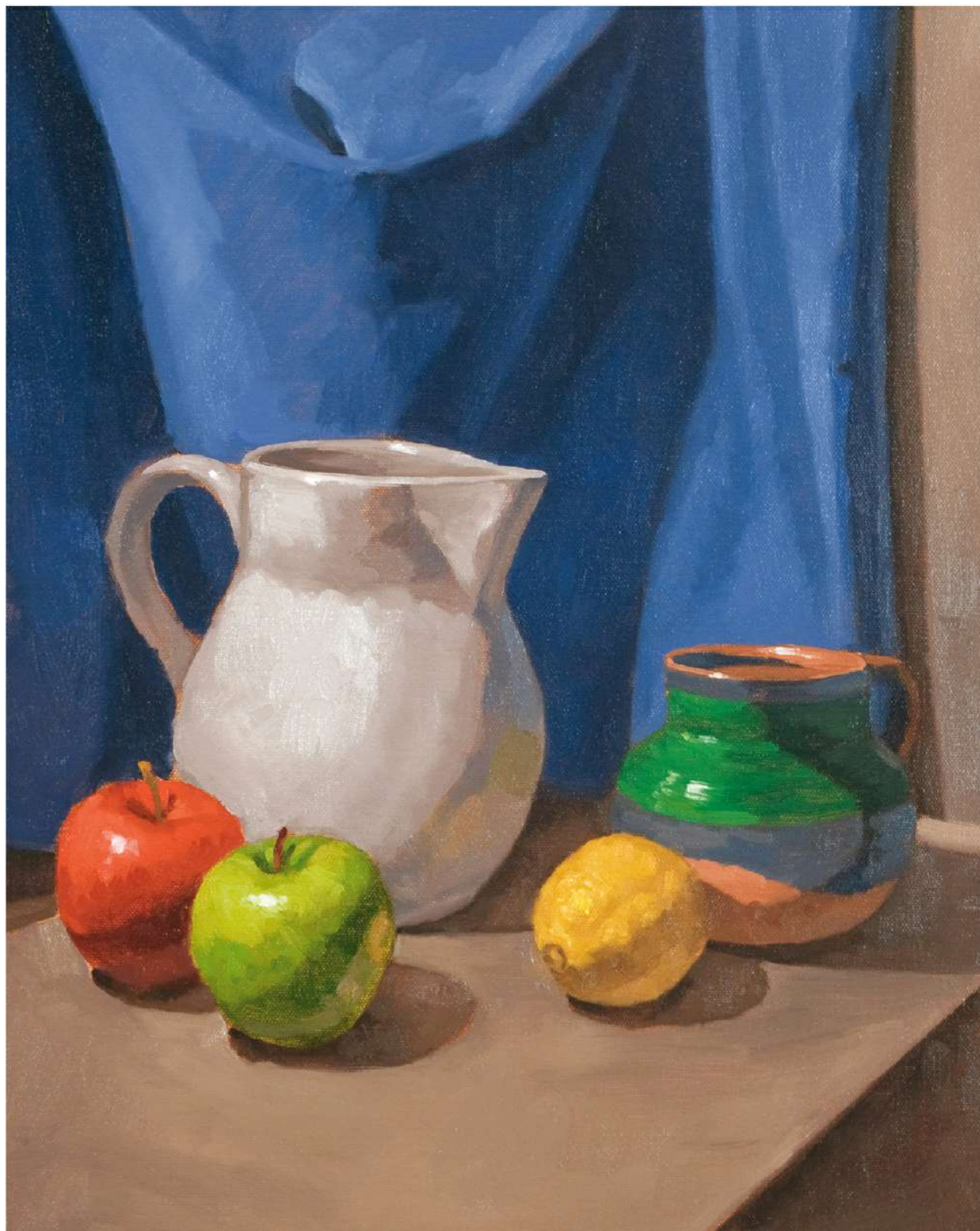


STEP 5 MODEL THE HALFTONES.

Apply tints of the local colors to the halftones.



STEP 6 PAINT THE REFLECTED LIGHT.
Paint the color of the reflected light into the shadows.



STEP 7 ADD THE HIGHLIGHTS.

Add the lightest tints to the highlights.

NOTE

In the pages that follow, we will focus on what would be the next step in an *alla prima* painting—refining the edges. We will soften some edges and sharpen others to evoke a sense of depth or type of surface material. I recommend that you refine the edges while the paint is still wet, but if you decide to end your painting session now, and refine the edges at a later time, make sure that all of the edges in your painting are somewhat soft when you finish. Once the paint dries, it is difficult to soften a sharp edge.

Edges

We took a fundamentally different approach when creating the first demonstration painting than we did with the second. To recap the first approach, when making the preliminary drawing, we used line to draw the shapes of the still life. When creating the underpainting, we applied value contrasts to the shapes, expressing lights and darks in the still life. Then, using a limited palette, we applied color to the underpainting by matching tonal contrasts to its value contrasts.

By contrast, in the second demonstration painting, we handled line, shape, value, and color simultaneously using the *alla prima* painting technique. These four elements are at the heart of every painting. But one more topic plays a key role in every painting—edges.

Imagine that your painting is an arrangement of shapes, each with a value and a color, organized in such a way that transforms into a picture of a still life. It's like a mosaic, an image made up of a number of pieces of stone, each with a specific value and color, cut in a particular shape, and also organized in such a way to convey an image. But in the case of the mosaic, each shape or piece of stone has the same sharply cut edge, making it difficult to convey the difference between a sharpness and softness. As a result, the image in a mosaic has a flat appearance.

In a painting, however, you are not limited to using one consistent edge. Instead, you can manipulate edges to be sharp, soft, or somewhere in between. A soft edge will recede and sharp one will advance, creating the illusion of depth. A soft edge will also distinguish a shadow from an object, or a soft material in the still life from a hard surface such as the table. Well-placed sharp or soft edges will transform a flat arrangement of shapes into a convincing realistic painting that has the illusion of depth.

shadow edges

You can show the depth of a cast shadow by the way you paint its edge. The edges of cast shadows are sharpest where they originate, and become softer as they move away from the object or surface that casts the shadow. For example, the cast shadow of an apple is sharpest where the base of the apple touches the tabletop. As the distance between the shadow and the object increases, indirect light fills the shadow and softens its edge.

A core shadow may have a sharp or soft edge, depending on the shape of the still life object. On a round object, such as a cylinder, the transition from light to shadow is gradual, making the edge of a core shadow soft. On an angled object, such as a cube, the transition from light to shadow is sudden, making the edges of the core shadow sharp.

The brightness of the light source also plays a role as to whether shadows are sharp or soft. As the brightness is increased, the shadow edge becomes sharper. Still life paintings that feature natural light usually have softer shadow edges than those that feature artificial light.

material edges

You can also use edges to convey the type of material you are painting. A hard material will have a sharper edge than a soft material. For instance, you can use a sharper edge when painting a ceramic pitcher, and a softer edge when painting drapery. A great way to emphasize the hardness or softness of a material you are painting is by contrasting the two in your painting. If you want the pitcher to appear as a hard surface, include a soft-edged surface nearby. The two edges will contrast against each other, emphasizing that one is a hard surface and the other is soft.

edges that convey depth

Sharp and soft edges can also be used to convey depth. Soft edges recede and sharp edges advance. A still life generally takes up a relatively shallow space. Therefore, when looking at your still life setup, you will most likely not see any difference between the edges in the foreground and the edges in the background. Still, if you use softer edges on objects that are in the background, and sharper edges on objects in the foreground, you will convey the illusion of depth to your painting.



The sharp edges of the violin and its strings contrast with the soft edges of its cast shadow. The full image can be seen on [this page](#).

Brush Applications

You can create a variety of edges in your painting by using a variety of brushes. Oil painting brushes come in different textures, shapes, and sizes. While some brushes leave a softer edge, others leave edges that are sharper. While some brushes are more suited for broad, gestural strokes, others provide more control, and are better used in the finishing touches and details.

Brushes can also be used to blend the paint after it has been applied to the canvas.

Below are some guidelines that you can follow when using different kinds of brushes. However, they should not be followed as strict rules. Instead, experiment with your brushes, and learn which ones are best suited for sharp edges, soft edges, and any other applications. If at the end of your painting session, you find that you have to clean a lot of brushes, then it's safe to assume that you have painted a variety of edges in your painting.

NOTE

When you sharpen edges, make sure that you leave some edges in the painting soft. The sharp edges appear even sharper when there are soft edges to contrast against (and vice versa).

brush textures

When painting edges, hog bristle brushes and soft-hair brushes will give you different results. Hog bristle brushes do not hold to a fine point, so they tend to leave softer edges. On the other hand, soft-hair brushes do remain together at a point, leaving sharper edges.

Start your painting using hog bristle brushes. These brushes are durable, and great for most oil painting applications. Then, in the later stages of a painting, reach for the soft-hair brushes when you want more control. Soft-hair brushes can be used to sharpen edges, paint details, and add finishing touches such as highlights.

NOTE

Edges can be cleaned up and defined in two ways—by painting the edges of objects or by painting the shapes around them.



A small soft-hair round brush works well for painting sharp edges.



A flat hog bristle brush is good for cleaning up an edge.



When lightly pulled along an edge of wet paint, a round hog bristle brush blends the color.

brush shapes

Brushes come in many shapes, but some of the more common categories are round, flat, bright, filbert, and fan. (See image on [this page](#).) Each of these different shapes leaves its own characteristic mark. Whether you need a broad stroke, a fine line, a sharp edge, a soft edge, or even a blended edge, knowing which brush to use will help you achieve the desired effect.

NOTE

Use large brushes wherever you can. In fact, try to use the largest brush possible for any given area you are painting. This saves time. In addition, large brushes leave expressive, or painterly brush strokes, which add interest to your picture.

round

Depending on the size and texture of the brush, a round can be used to paint either a sharp or soft edge. Round brushes work well for laying in color and daubing brushstrokes, but they are also suited for painting lines. A small soft-hair round brush can be used to paint a fine line and sharpen an edge. These brushes also come in handy when painting details. A hog bristle round brush will leave a softer line. You can also use a round brush to blend an edge further by lightly pulling it along an edge of wet paint.

flat and bright

Flat brushes are great for painting broad strokes of color, but they can also be turned on their side to paint lines. Flats generally leave a squared-off brush mark. You can sharpen an edge with a flat by pulling the brush along the side of a shape, or using its flat tip.

Brights are similar in shape to flats, but shorter in length. This makes the bright less flexible than the flat, allowing more control of the brush. I like to use a small soft-hair flat or bright when painting sharp edges and details.

filbert

Like flats and brights, filberts can be used to apply broad strokes of color or turned on their side to paint lines. Filberts are great for sketching shapes and laying in color. They do not leave as sharp an edge as flats or brights, and like rounds, can also be used to blend color.

fan

Fan-shaped brushes are used to blend paint after it has been applied to the canvas. Fan blenders are great when you need to soften an edge. I find that the soft-hair fan brushes work better than those made with hog bristles. If possible, avoid rinsing the fan brush in solvent during the painting session. The reason for this is that solvent often remains in the brush, and will leave streaks in the paint as you continue to use the brush. Instead, wipe any paint from the brush as necessary with a cotton rag. At the end of the painting session, clean the brush in solvent, then soap and water, as you would any other brush.

NOTE

Fan brushes are made for blending, but almost any clean brush in your collection can be used to blend paint. I find that large rounds and house painter's brushes are useful for blending paint.



Filberts do not leave a sharp edge, so they are great for laying in color.



Fan brushes blend paint after it has been applied to the canvas.

brush sizes

Natural-bristle house painter's brushes are used for most of the prep work involved in painting, including priming and toning canvas. But they also come in handy when painting your still life. You can use them to quickly cover large areas with a thin wash of color. And with a light touch, you can also use them to blend paint and soften edges.



A house painter's brush can be used to blend paint.



The finished *alla prima* painting with sharp and soft edges.

DEMONSTRATION

PAINTING REFLECTIVE SURFACES

This project involves painting shiny surfaces, including a detailed look at reflections.

In preparation for this painting, gather your objects. For this still life, you will need three to five still life objects. This demonstration will be a study in painting shiny surfaces, so for this still life setup, include surfaces that are reflective (such as one silver, one gold, and one copper object) or shiny ceramic. You will also need a few objects that will reflect onto these surfaces. A colored tablecloth and several pieces of fruit will work well in this regard.



Demonstration Painting 3, 2009, oil on canvas,
16 × 20 inches (40.6 × 50.8 cm), private collection

Painting Shiny Surfaces

Until now, most of the still life objects we have painted have had opaque surfaces with relatively matte finishes. We have studied these surfaces in basic terms, focusing on light and shadow. But shiny surfaces provide a greater challenge. A shiny surface such as metal will reflect other parts of the still life and your studio.

Painting reflections can be intimidating. But if we approach the subject matter in simpler terms of shape, value, color, and edge—painting these materials is not necessarily that difficult. Forget for a moment that you are painting a reflective object and focus on these basic elements. When painting a shiny surface, you paint shapes, values, colors, and edges as they are seen in a reflection. (Likewise, as we will see in the next demonstration, when painting a transparent surface, you paint shapes, values, colors, and edges as they are seen through its surface.)

When you first look at a reflection, the many shapes and colors can seem confusing and even overwhelming, but if you take some time to study the reflection, you will begin to recognize sections of the still life within it. Try moving your hand through the still life setup to see where it shows up in the reflection. Turn your easel and still life lamps on and off to see where they are in the reflection. As you do this, you will begin to get a sense of how the still life objects appear in the reflection. Once you recognize the subject matter that is being reflected, the shapes and colors in the reflection begin to make sense. A student of mine once commented in class that painting reflections was like painting the still life within the still life. If you think of it that way, painting reflections does not seem that difficult. If you painted the still life once, you can paint it again.

With this in mind, it is wise to paint the rest of the still life first, before working on the reflections. Then, when you are ready to paint the reflections, you will be familiar with the subject matter. However, the subject matter will be slightly altered in a reflection. Below are tips on how shapes, values, colors, and edges are changed in one way or another in a reflection. When you paint reflections, show these differences. This will keep the reflections from being confused with the content that is being reflected.

shapes in reflections

Shapes are distorted by the surface onto which they are reflected. For instance, a round orange will look oblong when it is reflected onto a tall pitcher. If you paint the reflected orange as round as it is in the still life, it won't look convincing as a reflection. Carefully observe how shapes are distorted in reflections. This will reinforce the difference between real objects and reflected objects.

values in reflections

In a reflection, values are not as light as they may appear. Reflections result from indirect light, which is never as bright as direct light. So reflections should not be as light as the real still life. In most cases, when you squint while looking at reflections, they blend into the surface they are reflecting into. When a reflection is painted too light, it will take on a form of its own and become mistaken as a real object. To avoid this, pay close attention to the values you use when painting reflections, and keep them darker than the real objects in the still life.

colors in reflections

Colors are not as bright when seen in a reflection. They may also be changed by the color of the surface onto which they are reflecting. For example, the reflection of a yellow lemon on a copper kettle will look yellow-orange. Show how colors change to emphasize the difference

between the real objects and reflections.

edges in reflections

The edges of reflections are generally smooth, especially when compared to the real objects in your still life. You can contrast the clean edge of a real object with the blended edge of its reflection. This will emphasize the difference between real objects and their reflections. The same can be done with the object that contains the reflection. For example, the edges of a metal creamer should be sharp, and the edges of the reflections within it should be soft.



Still Life with Self-portrait, 2005, oil on canvas,
24 × 32 inches (61 × 81.3 cm), private collection

The silver pitcher was painted using a base tone of ivory black. The darkest areas of the pitcher were painted with mixtures of ultramarine blue and burnt umber, and light tints of ivory black were used for the highlights. The copper dish was painted using a base tone of burnt sienna. Mixtures of ultramarine blue and burnt sienna were used for the darks, and tints of both burnt sienna and cadmium red medium were used for the highlights.

Using a Base Tone

Before painting reflections, I apply a thin, even wash of color over the entire reflective object. This is usually a dark tone of the local color of the object that I have thinned with medium. It works as a base tone into which the reflections can blend. It looks a bit extreme to have the entire object covered with one flat (and usually dark) color, but then you can paint the individual

colors of the reflections into the base tone while it is still wet. When the object is finished, much of the base tone has been painted over, but it still brings an allover local color to the surface.

When painting different metallic surfaces, I use particular colors for base tones, darks, and highlights. Of course, you could use many different color mixes to accurately represent the metal surface you are painting, but I find these colors work well when painting silver, copper, and gold.

colors for silver

When painting a silver object, start by laying down a thin base tone of either ivory black, or a mixed black made from a combination of burnt umber and ultramarine blue. Use different colors for the reflections in the silver object, blending them slightly into the base tone. Undiluted, the base tone can be used in the darks. It can also be tinted with white for the light areas of the silver object. Use a light gray or white for the highlights.

colors for copper

When painting a copper object, use a thin wash of burnt sienna for the base tone, and a mixture of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue for the dark areas. The presence of ultramarine blue complements the base tone, enhancing its red-orange quality. The reflections should be painted using their individual local colors, but show how the copper color has an effect on them. For the lighter areas, tint burnt sienna. Highlights in copper tend to be red-orange in color. Try various mixtures of burnt sienna, cadmium yellow light, and cadmium red medium, with titanium white.

colors for gold

For gold, a thin layer of yellow ocher works well as the base tone. If you find it to be too bright, you can add a mixed violet (a mixture of alizarin crimson and ultramarine blue) to neutralize it a little. For the darks, use a mixture of burnt umber and ultramarine blue. The colors of the reflections should have a yellow cast to them. For the lights, use mixtures of yellow ocher and cadmium yellow light, with titanium white.



Pears in Candlelight, 2001, oil on canvas,
10 × 8 inches (25.4 × 20.3 cm), private collection

Here a yellow ocher base tone was applied to the gold candlestick. Then combinations of burnt umber and ultramarine blue were added for the darks. Alizarin crimson was also used in the darks to allow the candlestick to blend with the predominant warmth of the painting. Finally, a mixture of yellow ocher, cadmium yellow light, and titanium white was used for the highlight.

PAINTING REFLECTIONS

As mentioned above, I find it works best to first paint the rest of the still life before taking on the reflections—especially if you are just learning to painting reflections. As you become used to

painting reflections, you might choose to paint them at the same time as the rest of the still life. The step-by-step sequence that follows begins at the point in the still life when the background and other still life objects have all been painted. We are really just focusing on rendering the reflections. So before you begin the sequence, make sure to first paint your other still life and background objects. This will make it easier to put the reflections in context with the rest of the still life.

materials

preliminary drawing (optional)

16 × 20-inch canvas with imprimatura (See [this page](#) for how to apply an imprimatura.)

full palette (See [this page](#) for how to prepare your palette.)

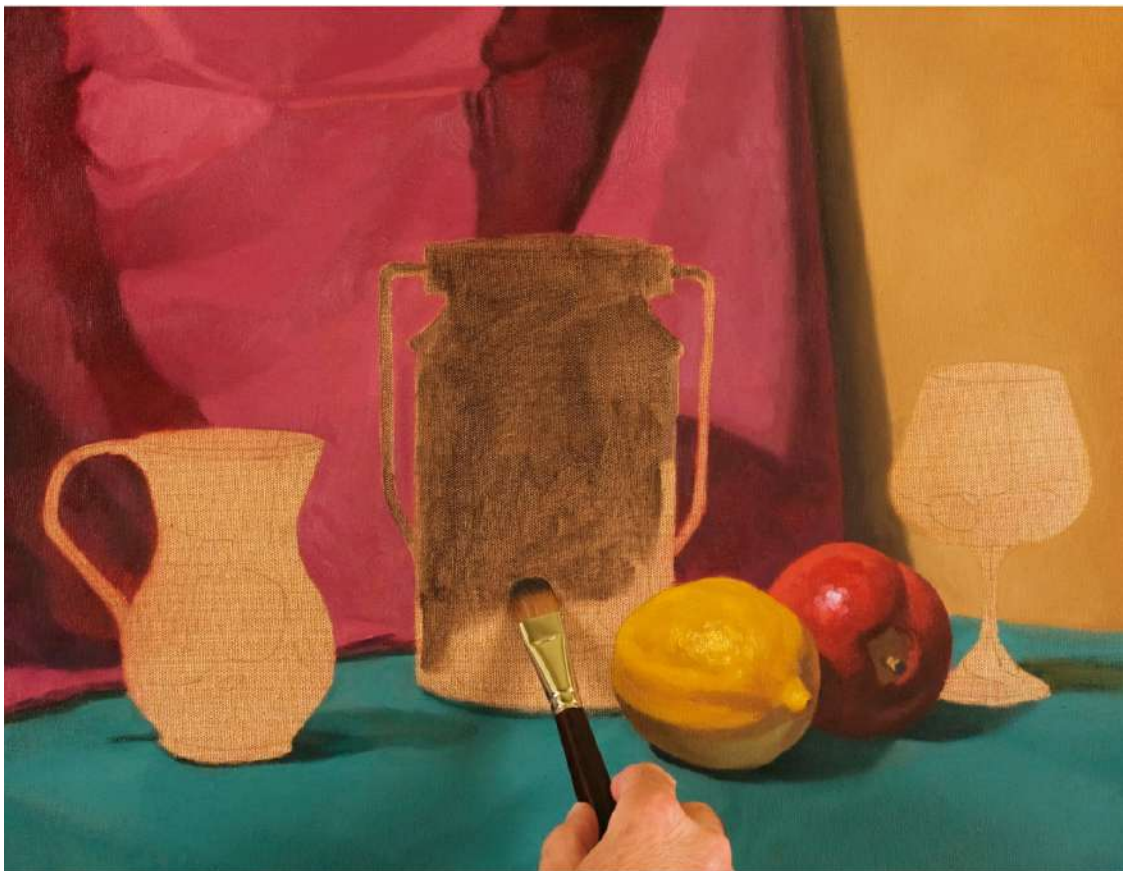
medium

palette knife

hog bristle and soft-hair brushes

solvent

cotton rag



STEP 1 APPLY THE BASE TONE TO THE SILVER OBJECT.

Dilute the local color of the object with medium, and apply a thin, flat layer of ivory black over the entire object.



STEP 2 PAINT THE REFLECTIONS INTO THE WET COLOR

Using the *alla prima* technique, paint the still life objects as they are seen in the reflection. In this case, their shapes are stretched upward, their values are darkened, their colors are not as bright, and their edges are soft. The wet base tone provides a color for the reflections to blend with, setting them apart from the real objects in the still life.



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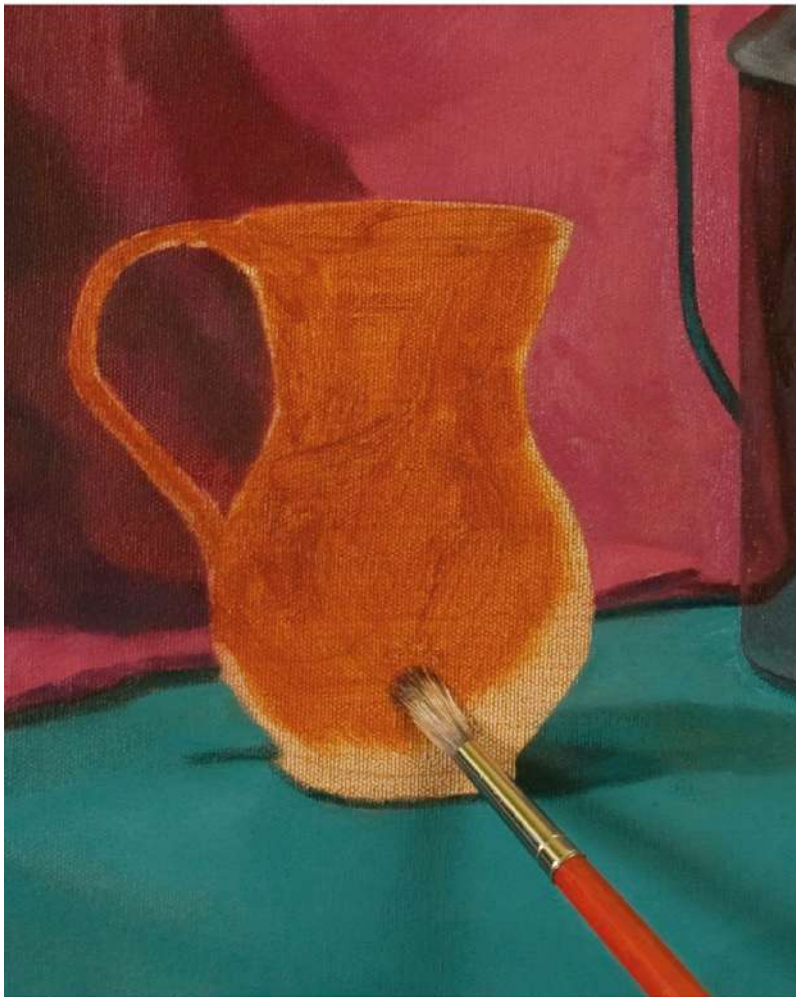
STEP 3 PAINT THE HIGHLIGHTS ON THE SURFACE OF THE REFLECTIVE OBJECT.

Using very light, almost white, tints of ivory black, paint the highlights on the silver object. This will give the silver object form, which in turn will cause the reflections to appear to recede into the object. Make sure that any highlights in the reflected objects are not as bright as the highlights on the objects.



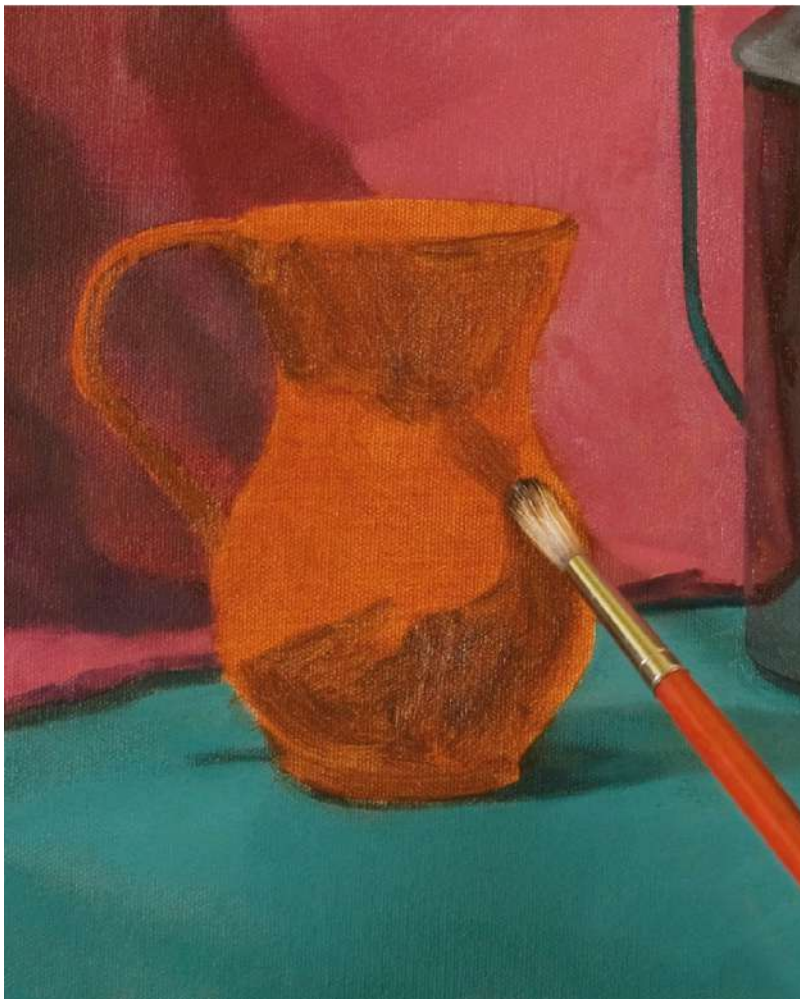
STEP 4 SHARPEN THE EDGES OF THE REFLECTIVE OBJECT.

Sharpen the edges of the silver object to show that it is metallic. This will also emphasize the form of the object and keep the reflections to within its surface.



STEP 5 APPLY THE BASE TONE TO THE COPPER OBJECT.

For the copper object, apply a burnt sienna base tone thinned with medium to the entire shape.



STEP 6 ADD SHADOWS TO THE COPPER OBJECT.

Add shadows on the copper surface, using a mixture of ultramarine blue and burnt sienna.



STEP 7 ADD THE REFLECTIONS AND HIGHLIGHTS.

Paint the reflections into the shadow side of the copper object. Then, add highlights on the light side, and sharpen the edges.



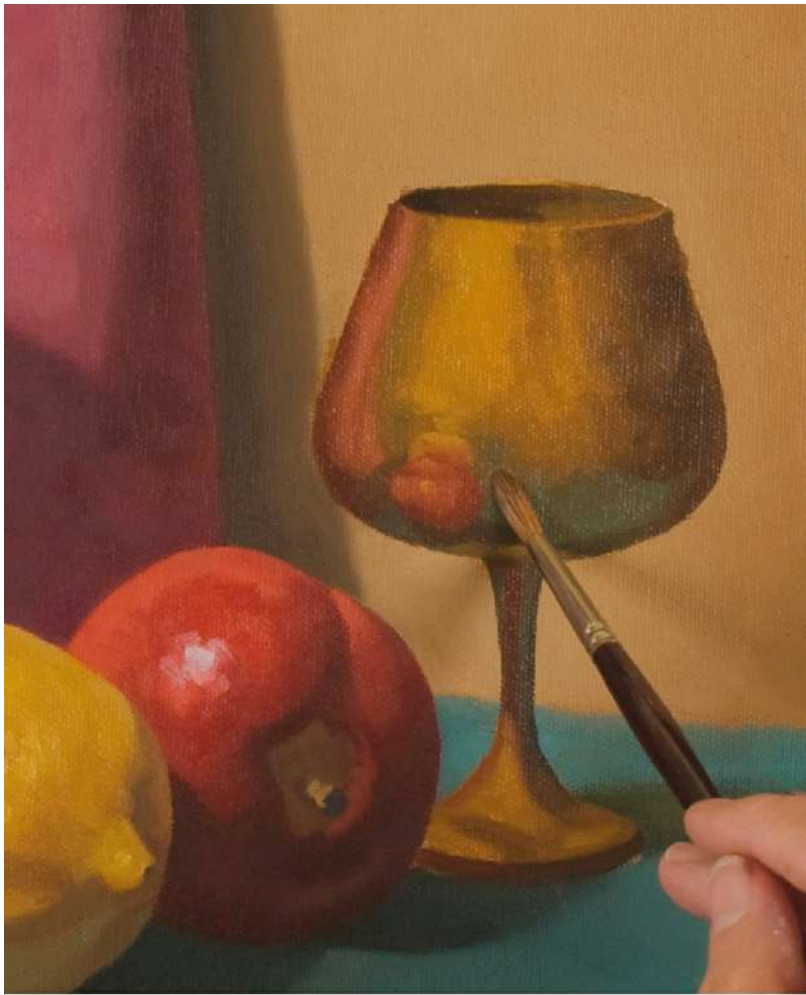
STEP 8 APPLY A BASE TONE FOR THE GOLD OBJECT.

Thin yellow ocher with medium, and apply it as a thin flat base tone over the entire gold object.



STEP 9 ADD SHADOWS TO THE GOLD OBJECT.

Using burnt umber, add shadows to the wet base tone.



STEP 10 PAINT REFLECTIONS INTO THE GOLD OBJECT.

While the paint is still wet, paint the reflections *alla prima* into the base tone. In this painting, a small amount of yellow ocher was mixed with the colors used in the drapery, tablecloth, and fruit, to allow the reflection to sink in to the surface of the gold object.



STEP 11 SHARPEN THE REMAINING EDGES.

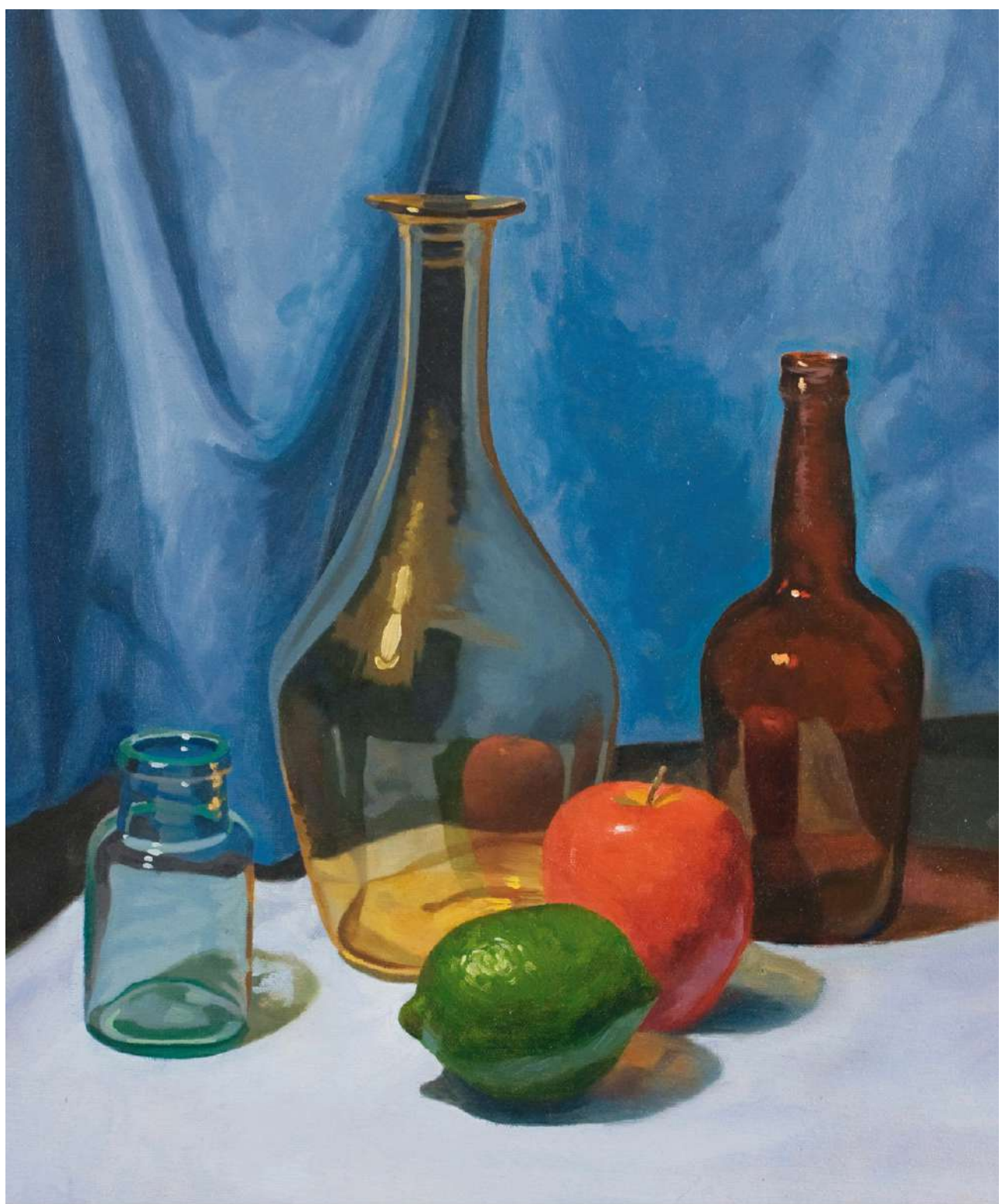
To complete the painting, sharpen the edges of all three metallic objects and add highlights to keep the reflections within the shapes.

DEMONSTRATION

PAINTING TRANSLUCENT SURFACES

This project involves painting a variety of transparent surfaces, including colored and clear glass.

In preparation for this painting, gather your objects. For this still life, you will need three or more glass bottles, one clear and the others colored. Also, hang a drapery behind the bottles. This will provide you with a background of shapes to paint as seen through the glass. Finally, include a few other objects that will reflect into the glass.



Demonstration Painting 4, 2009, oil on canvas,
20 × 16 inches (50.8 × 40.6 cm), private collection

Rendering Glass

When painting glass, you are painting a transparent, or translucent, surface. So the key to painting glass is to not paint the glass itself, but what you see through the glass. As was the case when painting reflections, if you identify the subject matter (in this case, the area of the still life that is behind the glass), you will understand more clearly what you are painting, which will make the

process easier.

Behind the glass, you may see a hanging drape, a shadow, or another object in your still life. Whatever the content may be, be sure to show how it is different when seen through glass. The shapes may be distorted, the values and colors changed, and the edges softened. Paint these things as shapes behind the glass, showing how they look different by having the glass in front of them.

When painting reflections in the last demonstration, it was helpful to first paint the rest of the still life. This is also true when painting glass. By doing this, you will be familiar with the subject matter seen through the glass; you will also find that many of the colors you need will already be mixed. Plus, it is easier to paint glass when you can see it in context with the rest of the painting.

shapes seen through glass

Shapes are distorted by the form of the glass through which they are seen. For instance, the folds of a drapery will appear to change shape as they pass behind a glass vase. The distortion increases along the edge of the vase, where the shape may become visually cut off. Once the drapery reappears, no longer behind the vase, it is back to its true shape.

values seen through glass

Values are darkened when seen through colored glass, but the effect of clear glass on values is not as predictable. Changes to the values of objects seen through clear glass, if any, are very subtle. Sometimes you have to exaggerate the visual effect of something to make it look right in your painting. Emphasize any changes to the values, and you will distinguish the clear glass from its surroundings.

colors seen through glass

Color changes are more obvious when painting colored glass. If the glass is colored, the color of the glass will mix with the colors that are behind it. For example, a red drapery will turn violet when seen through a blue bottle. Again, in the case of clear glass, the change is subtle. But by accentuating any changes of color, you will show that there is a glass surface in your painting.

edges seen through glass

Edges seen through glass are softened. In contrast, the edges of the glass object through which they are seen should be sharper. This will make the glass object appear solid and come forward.

reflections on glass

Transparent surfaces such as glass also have reflections. When painting what you see through the glass, you show its transparency. By painting reflections on the glass, you show its form. This is where light reflects off of its surface. You might see a reflection of the shadow box, other still life objects, or even your easel. The light source in your studio may also be reflected in the glass. To paint reflections on glass, follow the tips in the previous demonstration for painting reflections.



Still Life with Flowers and Fruit, 1998, oil on canvas,
36 × 27 inches (91.4 × 68.6 cm), private collection

In this painting, the flower stem changes direction as it passes behind the glass.

PAINTING GLASS

When painting glass, I use the same approach that I do for painting reflections. It is much easier to paint a transparent surface such as glass when the rest of the still life is completed. This provides context to compare the glass surfaces to the rest of the painting. As the focus of this step-by-step

sequence is on painting glass, we will begin at the point in which everything in the still life, but the glass objects, have been painted.

materials

preliminary drawing (optional)

16 × 20–inch canvas with imprimatura (See [this page](#) for how to apply an imprimatura.)

full palette (See [this page](#) for how to prepare your palette.)

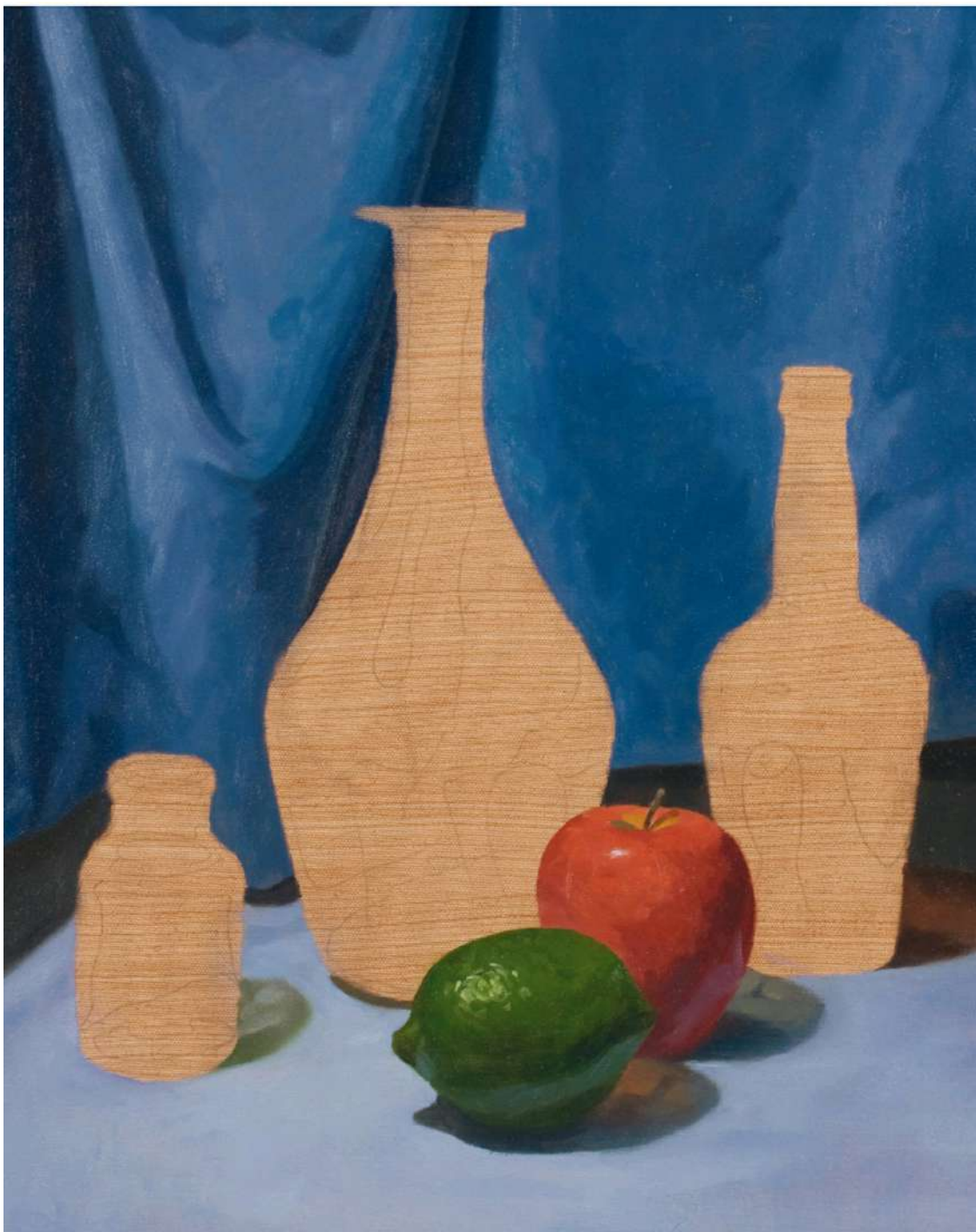
palette knife

hog bristle and soft-hair brushes

medium

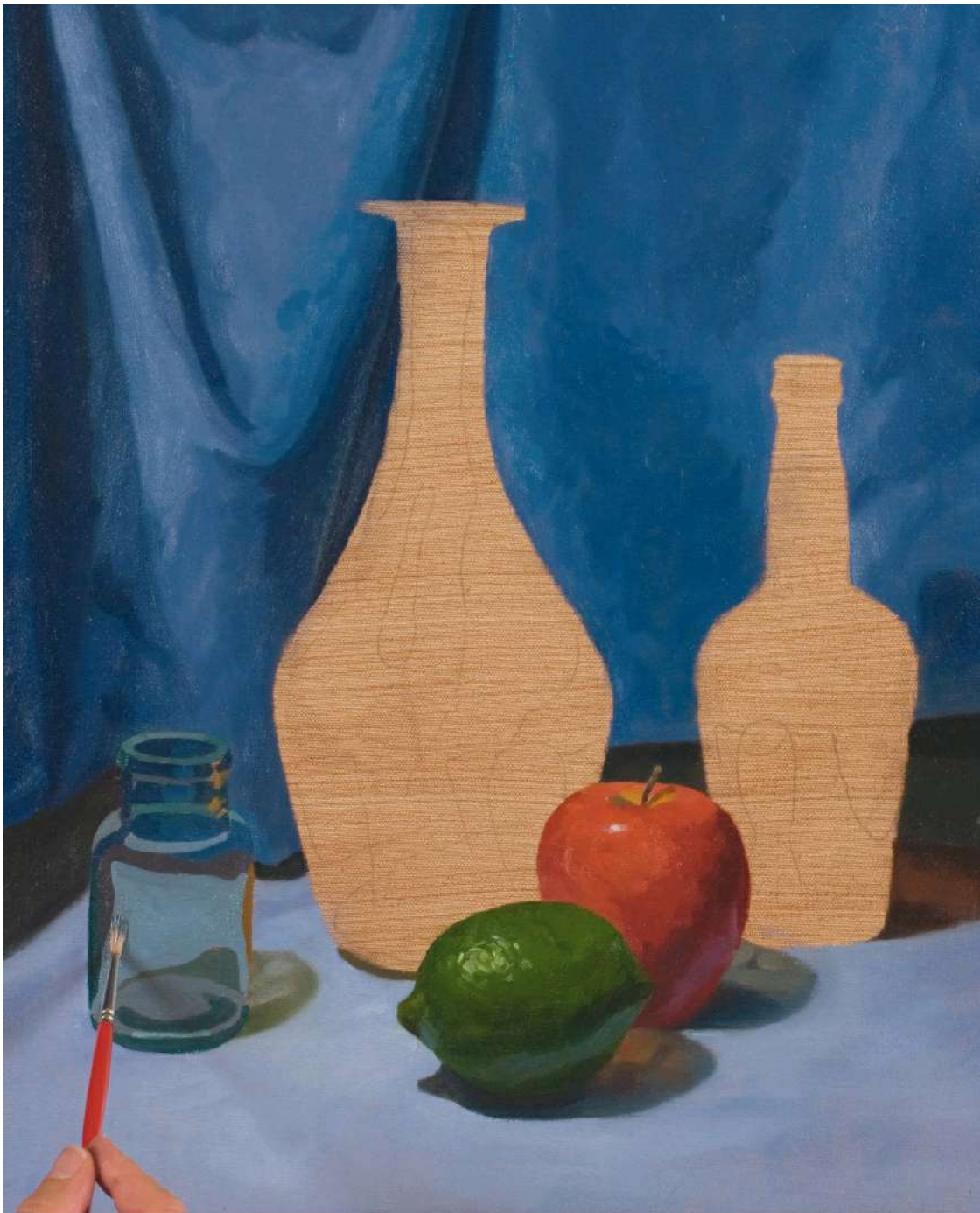
solvent

cotton rag



STEP 1 PAINT THE SURROUNDING STILL LIFE.

Before you paint the glass, paint the surrounding still life, including the background and the objects in the foreground. It is easier to paint glass when it can be seen in the context of the rest of the painting.



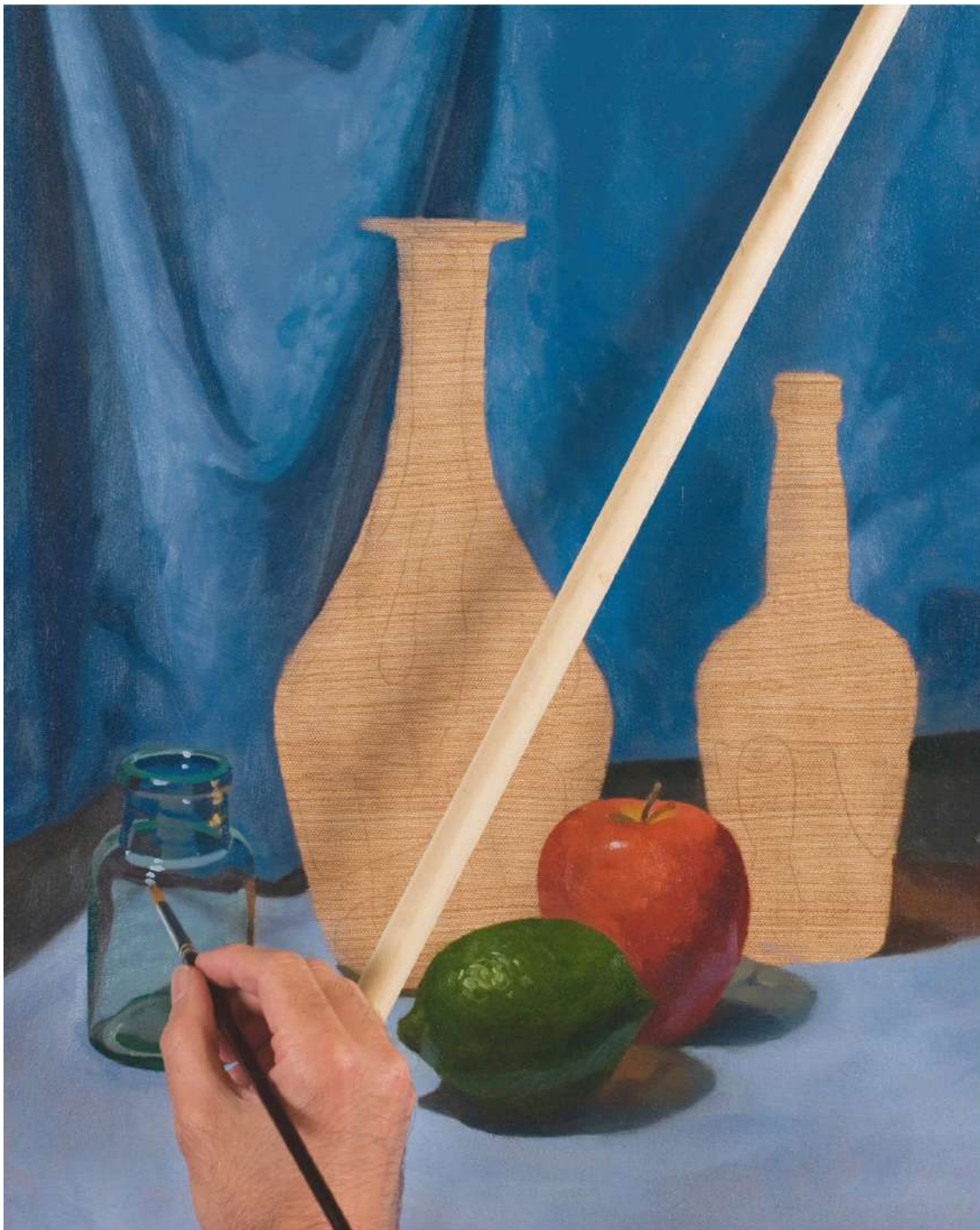
STEP 2 PAINT THE SHAPES BEHIND THE CLEAR GLASS.

For clear glass, there is no need for a base tone. Start by painting the basic shapes of the background as seen through the glass. Show how the shapes are distorted.



STEP 3 MODEL THE SHAPES BEHIND THE CLEAR GLASS.

Now model the shapes by adding subtle changes of light and dark. To show that these shapes are seen through the glass, remember to keep the overall value range slightly darker than they would appear in other parts of the still life.



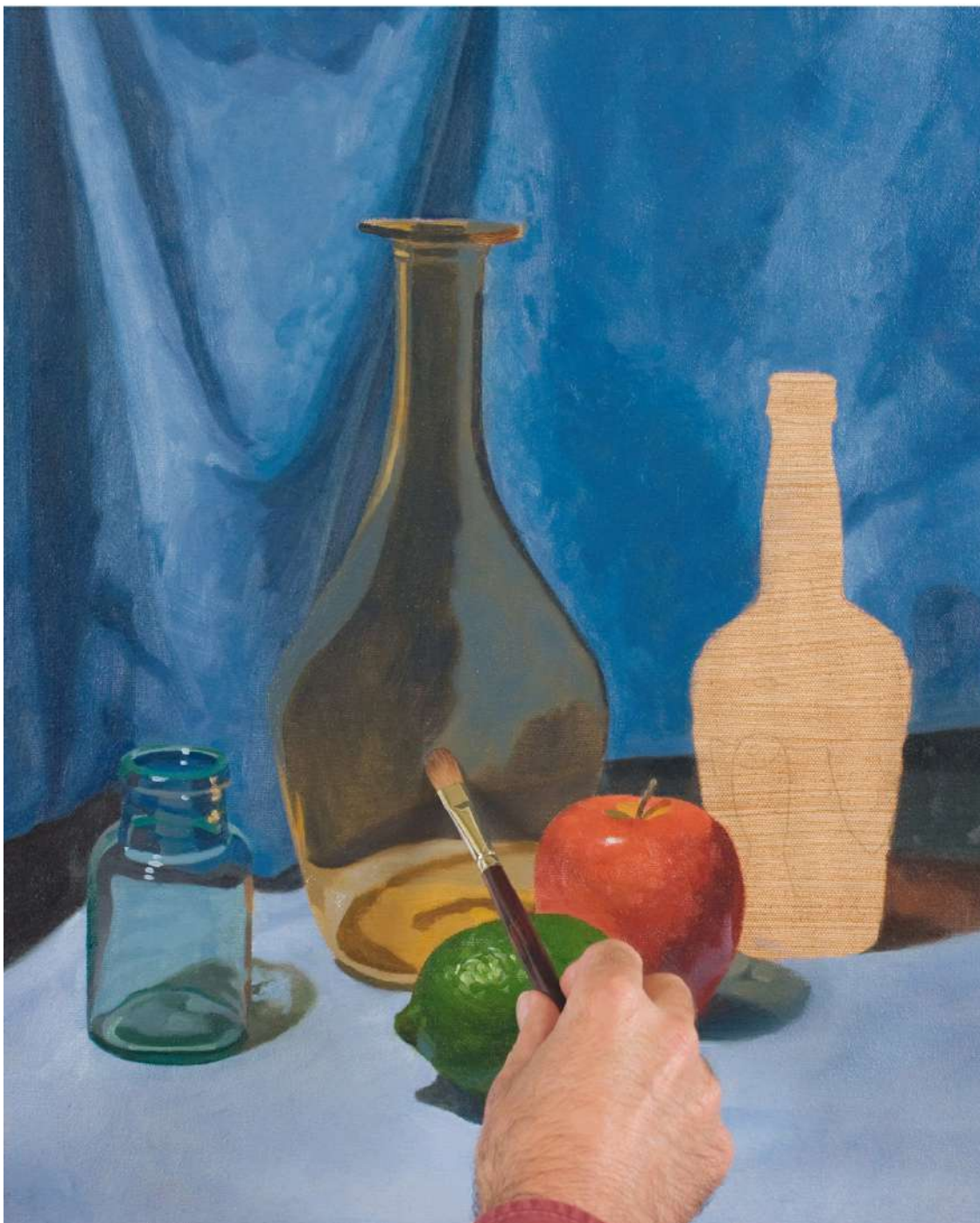
STEP 4 PAINT THE HIGHLIGHTS ON THE CLEAR GLASS.

When you put the highlights in the clear glass, the shapes seen through the background will recede, making the glass look transparent.



STEP 5 SELECT A COLORED OBJECT AND APPLY A BASE TONE.

For a colored glass object, apply a thin and flat layer of the local color to the entire object. This color will act as a base tone for the colored glass.



STEP 6 PAINT THE BACKGROUND SHAPES.

Paint the background shapes as they are seen through the colored glass. Allow the color to blend and mix with the base tone.

Establishing a Base Tone

As was the case with painting reflections on shiny surfaces, it is helpful to first apply a base tone of the local color when painting colored glass. Thin the color with medium, and apply it flatly and evenly over the entire glass surface. This base tone will give you a wet color to blend into as you continue to work. If your glass is clear, a base tone is not necessary.



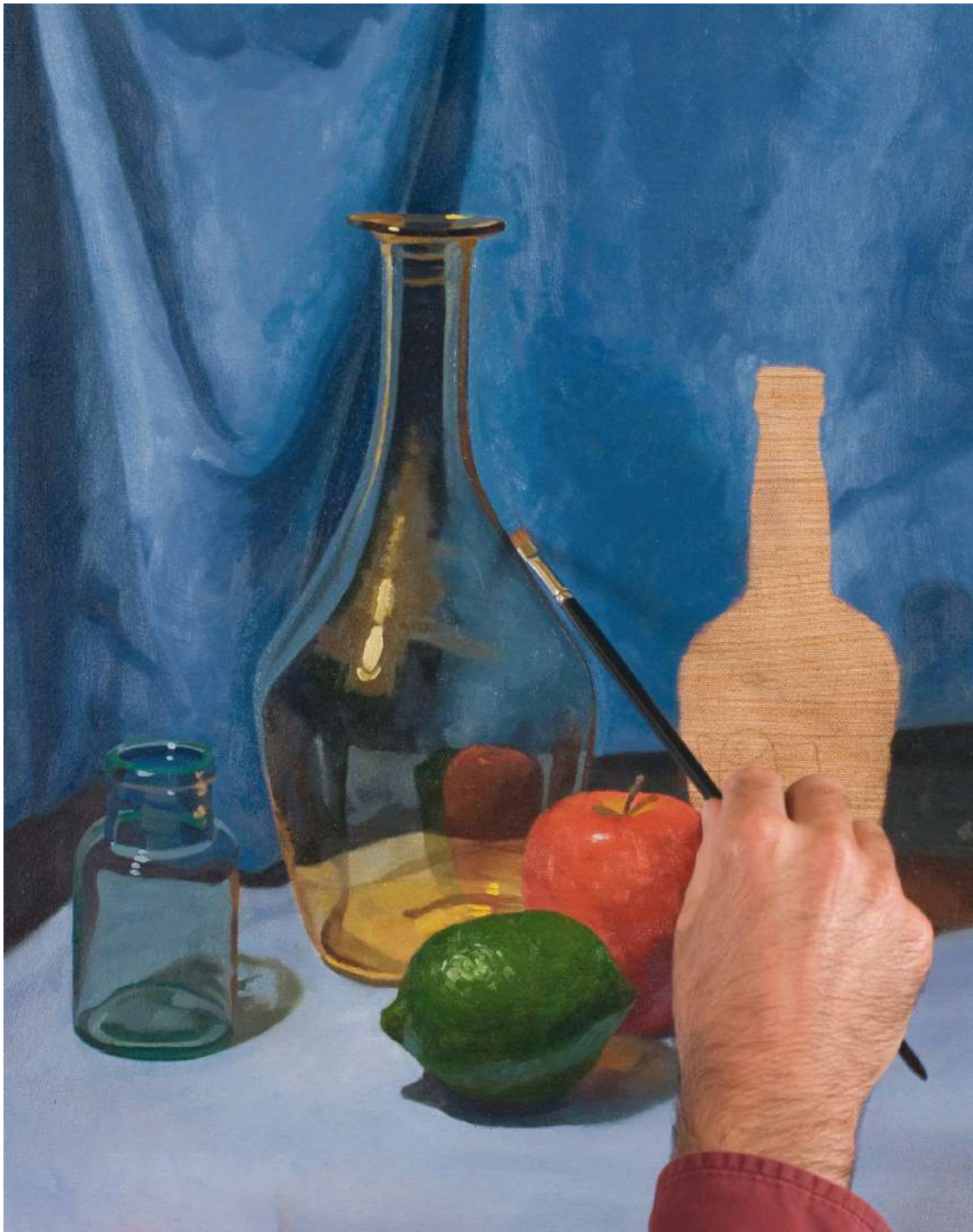
STEP 7 PAINT THE REFLECTIONS.

Paint the reflection on the surface of the colored glass. Review the techniques used to paint reflections on shiny surfaces [here](#). The shapes of reflected objects are distorted, their values are darkened, their colors are changed, and their edges are kept soft. In this instance, the reflections in the yellow bottle were transparent. To show this effect, the colors in the reflections were split into sections according to the background shapes. Then they were adjusted to make it appear that the background shapes show through.



STEP 8 PAINT THE HIGHLIGHTS.

Mix a very light tint of the local color of the glass. (In this case, the highlight was a touch of yellow ocher mixed with white.) Then, paint the highlights on the surface of the colored glass.



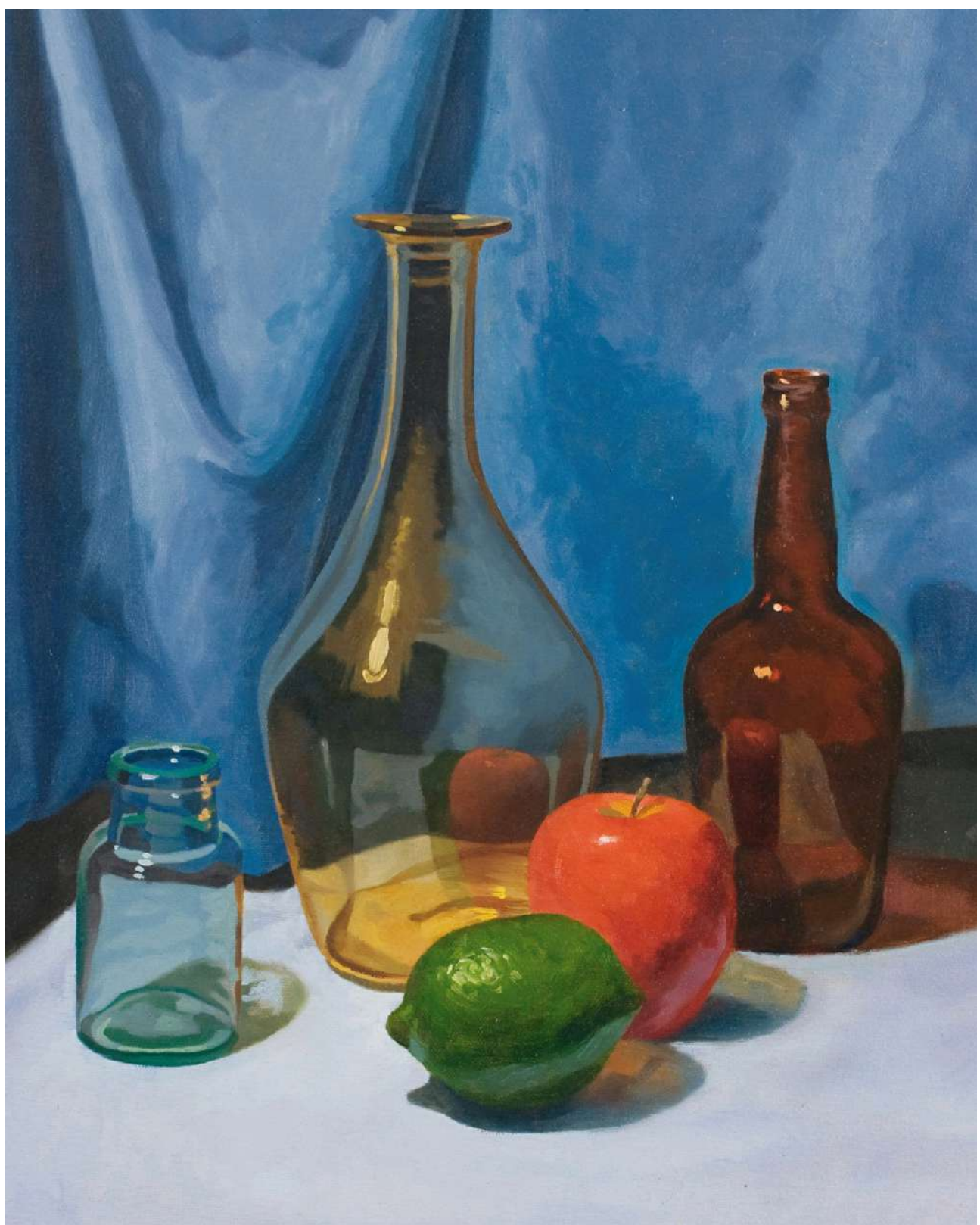
STEP 9 SHARPEN THE EDGES OF THE COLORED GLASS OBJECT.

Sharpen the edges of the glass object to give it form. In contrast, the background shapes behind the glass will recede.



STEP 10 REPEAT STEPS 5 TO 8 FOR EACH ADDITIONAL COLORED OBJECT.

If you are painting a brown bottle, use burnt sienna for your base tone. It is the same base tone color used for the copper object on [this page](#), and also works well when painting glass.



STEP 11 SHARPEN THE REMAINING EDGES.

When painted, the background shapes behind a brown (or similarly dark) bottle are distorted, especially near its edges. The value range of the background should also be kept quite dark to show that it is behind dark glass. Because we are looking through dark glass, the blue drapery, gray background, and light blue tablecloth in this image all have been painted in shades of brown. Reflections were painting using the guidelines [covered here](#). Finally, highlights were painted using white with a touch of cadmium red medium mixed in, and the edges of the bottle were sharpened to allow the background and reflections to recede.

DEMONSTRATION

PAINTING WITH A GRISAILLE UNDERPAINTING AND GLAZES

This project involves exploring the different physical properties of oil paint, making a detailed underpainting called a grisaille, applying a glaze, and creating texture in a painting with dry brush and wet-into-wet techniques.

In preparation for this painting, gather your objects. For this still life, you will need a piece of colored fabric to hang against a dark background. You will also need some objects with vibrant colors. Be sure to feature a variety of textures, from smooth to rough. Glass or metal objects work well for smooth surfaces and a piece of crusty bread works well as a rough surface.



Demonstration Painting 5, oil on canvas,
20 × 24 inches (50.8 × 61 cm), private collection

The Principle of Contrasts

Oil paint is a versatile medium. It can be applied as a thin layer or a thick stroke, with a wet wash or a dry brush. The colors themselves come in opaque, transparent, and semitransparent consistencies. While this range of physical characteristics makes oil paint a unique and beautiful medium, it can also be used to heighten the sense of form, color, and texture in your painting.

In the previous demonstrations, we have studied ways to create contrast through shapes, values, colors, and edges to express form. Whether it's light and dark shading, warm and cool or bright and dull colors, or sharp and soft edges, these elements are expressed in painting through skillfully managed contrasts.

The principle of contrast also applies to texture. A thickly applied highlight is more pronounced against the flat wash of a shadow. A dry brush adds a crisp texture over the softness of a wet glaze. Contrasting the physical attributes of oil paint reinforces the sense of form and texture in a painting.

In oil painting, lights are more pronounced when painted with opaque color, and shadows are more effective when painted with transparent color. Opaque colors reflect light from the canvas, mimicking the way that light itself reflects off of an object in your still life. This use of opaque color reinforces the sense that the object is solid. Transparent applications of paint, on the other hand, are less reflective and therefore more appropriate for shadows; they appear to sink into the surface of the painting more. The shadow side of an object does not reflect light to the same degree or have the same feeling of mass as the light side. Moreover, these contrasts of transparent shadows and opaque lights add beauty and visual interest to a painting's surface.

Impasto is a term used to describe thick and heavy strokes of paint that stand out from the surface of the painting. Impasto works well to articulate the highlights in a painting—reinforcing the effects of intense light on a surface. Thick highlights also contribute to the surface quality of the painting itself, apart from its image, and are considered aesthetically pleasing.



Still Life with Pears, 2004, oil on canvas,
24 × 20 inches (61 × 50.8 cm), Pentz collection

In this still life, thinly applied transparent and semitransparent color was used in the shadows, while thicker applications of opaque color were used in the light areas. In oil painting, this approach helps to heighten the sense of form.

PAINTING IN GRISAILLE

For this demonstration painting we will use a grisaille. A grisaille is a detailed underpainting that serves as a base for glazing. The term *grisaille* comes from the French word *gris*, meaning “gray,”

because grisailles are usually painted in shades of gray. However, it's common to use colors other than gray when creating a grisaille. For our grisaille, we will use burnt umber.

In *alla prima* or direct painting, form and color are handled simultaneously as a painting is developed in generally one layer. However, in the glazing technique, form and color are developed separately. Form is established with the grisaille, and color is added afterward by glazing.

The purpose of the underpainting that we made in the first demonstration painting in this chapter was to create a value sketch of the still life. Eventually, that underpainting was completely covered with opaque color, and any mistakes made were corrected during the process. By contrast, with this demonstration painting some areas of your grisaille will be covered with opaque color while other parts will remain visible through transparent glazes. Therefore, drawing mistakes in the grisaille cannot necessarily be painted over, so it is important to take time to paint your grisaille as accurately as possible.

The process of creating a grisaille can be approached in two stages: massing in shadows and modeling highlights and halftones.

In the first stage, a preliminary drawing is transferred and fixed to the canvas. Then, a semitransparent imprimatura is painted over the drawing and allowed to dry. Once the imprimatura is dry, a shadow tone of a semitransparent color is first massed in over the entire canvas and then selectively wiped away with a clean cotton rag, exposing the light areas established in the drawing using and leaving the wash only where there is shadow. At the end of the first stage the grisaille will have two flat tones—a faint tone for the light side of objects and a dark tone for the shadow side.

In the second stage, opaque tints are used to model the highlights and halftones, giving the objects form. This stage will also provide the opportunity to create texture using heavier applications of impasto.

materials

preliminary drawing

workable fixative

20 × 24-inch canvas

burnt umber, burnt sienna, and flake white (or flake white substitute)

palette knife

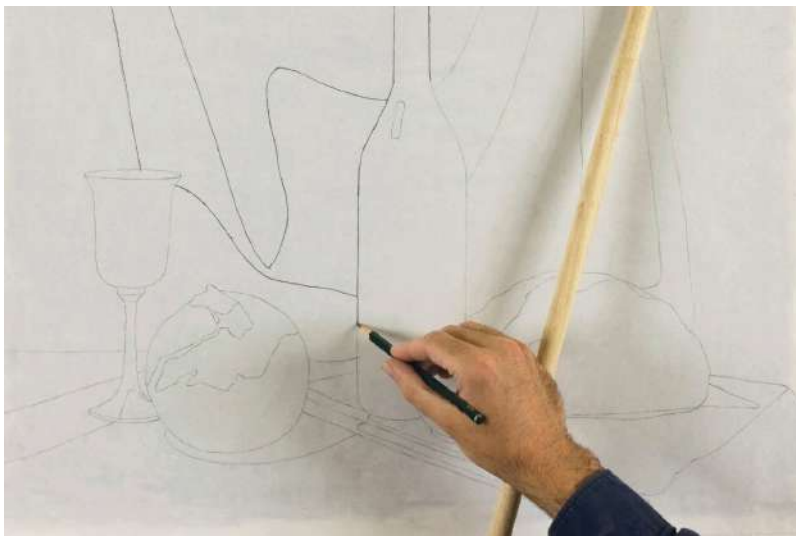
solvent

linseed oil

cotton rag

house painter's brush

hog bristle and soft-hair brushes



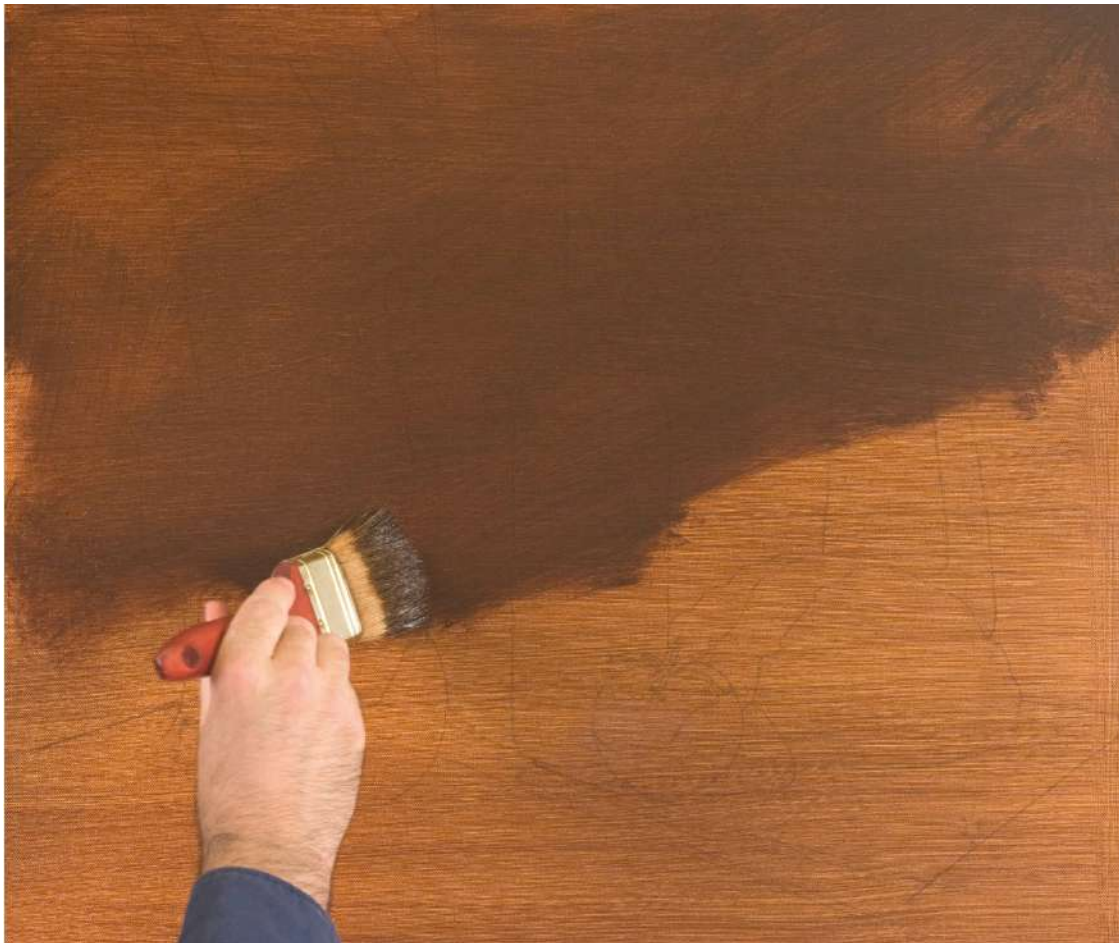
STEP 1 TRANSFER THE PRELIMINARY DRAWING.

Transfer your preliminary drawing to the canvas. (See [here](#) for additional details about this process.) Fix the drawing to the canvas with a workable spray fixative. Allow the fixative to dry.



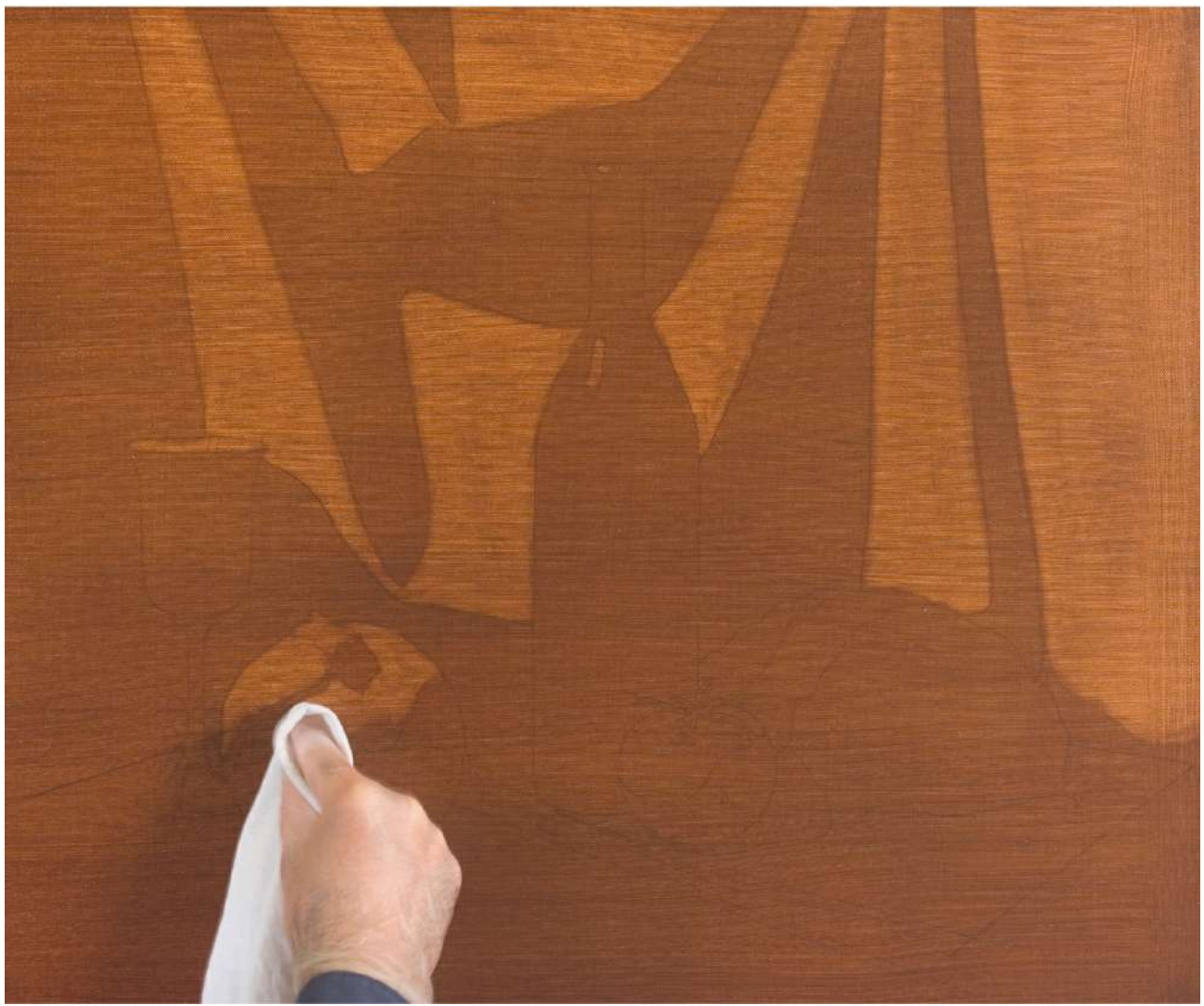
STEP 2 APPLY THE IMPRIMATURA.

Dilute burnt umber with solvent until the color is a light-middle tone. It should be semitransparent, so that you can see the preliminary drawing through it. (See [here](#) for how to apply an imprimatura.) Allow the imprimatura sufficient time to dry.



STEP 3 APPLY THE SHADOW TONE.

Prepare the shadow tone by diluting burnt umber with linseed oil thinned with 50 percent odorless mineral spirits or turpentine until it is a middle-dark tone. The oil allows the color to stay open longer, giving you more time to work the shadow tone before it dries. It should be darker than the imprimatura, but still thin enough that you can see the preliminary drawing through it. Using a house painter's brush, cover the entire canvas with a thin layer of the shadow tone. After you've covered the canvas, use the house painter's brush to smooth out and lighten the tone.



STEP 4 WIPE OUT THE LIGHTS.

Using a clean cotton rag, wipe the shadow tone away from the highlights and halftones. Do not wipe out the reflected light—the shadows and reflected light should not be modeled at this time. Instead, they should remain as one consistent flat tone throughout the grisaille.

STUDIO SAFETY NOTE

Always wear protective latex or vinyl gloves when painting with or handling oil-soaked rags.



STEP 5 CORRECT ANY MISTAKES.

If, by mistake, you wipe away too much shadow tone from an area, dip your house painter's brush into the burnt umber on your palette and reapply it to the area. Blend the burnt umber so that it matches the rest of the shadow tone in the grisaille and then resume wiping the correct areas clean.

NOTE

A cotton rag is more effective than a paper towel for wiping out the lights. It will absorb the paint better and leave a cleaner wipe. If you are working on a large painting, you may have to replace the rag, or cut one into smaller pieces and go through the pieces as you work.



STEP 6 CHECK YOUR PAINTING CAREFULLY AS YOU WORK.

After several hours, the burnt umber will begin to set, and you will no longer be able to cleanly wipe away the paint. So it is important to wipe out all highlight and halftone areas before the paint dries. When you have finished wiping away all highlights and halftones, the grisaille should consist of two flat tones: the shadow tone and the imprimatura.



STEP 7 PREPARE THE TINTS.

Mix five tonal steps of burnt sienna and flake white (or a nontoxic flake white replacement), per the instructions below. Lay these tints out in a row of tonal steps on your palette.

*STUDIO SAFETY*NOTE

Flake whites contain lead, and should be handled with caution. There are a number of nontoxic white pigments with similar consistencies available on the market.

Preparing the Tints

Burnt umber cools and becomes a dull grayish brown when mixed with white. Instead, for the second stage of the grisaille, I recommend using burnt sienna because its tints retain a warm hue that goes well with the burnt umber shadow tone. Create the five mixtures as follows:

darkest tint

Mix burnt sienna and just a little white to create the darkest tint. It should be just a tonal step lighter than the imprimatura. Apply a small brushstroke to the imprimatura to check its tone. When you have mixed the correct tone, wipe away any remaining test swatches from the toned ground.

lightest tint

Create the lightest tint by mixing white with just a touch of burnt sienna. The lightest tint should be just a tonal step darker than white.

middle tint

Create the middle tint by mixing part of the lightest tint with the part of the darkest tint until you get a tone that falls right in between the two.

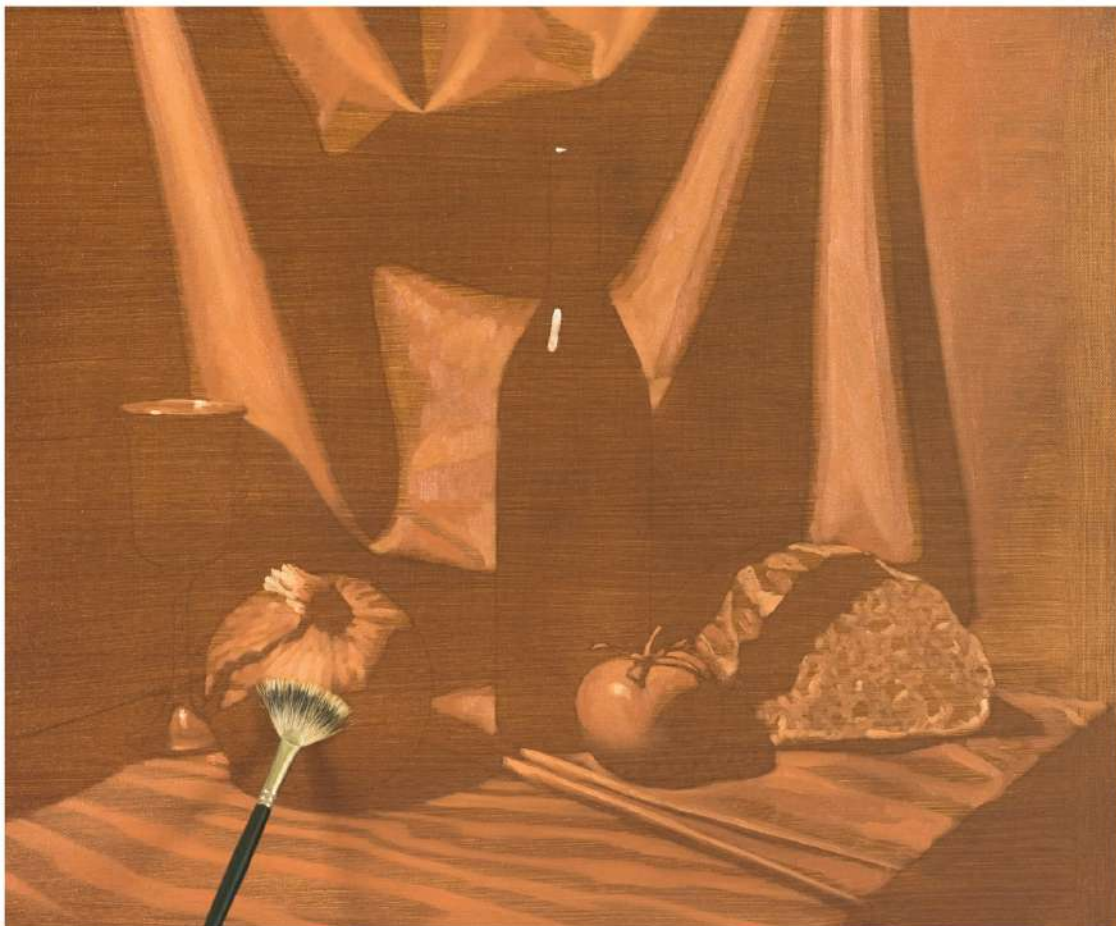
intermediary tints

For the last two tints, mix the middle tint with the darkest tint to get a middle-dark tint, and mix the middle tint with the lightest tint to get a middle-light tint.



STEP 8 APPLY THE TINTS.

Apply the tints to the highlights and most of the halftones. Lay them side by side, as if in a mosaic style. Stop short of tinting the darkest halftones. Instead, allow the imprimatura on the canvas to remain as a transitional step between the opaque tints and semitransparent shadow tone. Do not apply any tints to the shadow tone.



STEP 9 BLEND THE TINTS.

Using a soft-hair fan brush, lightly blend the tints into each other. However, take care not to overblend, as you may lose the subtle changes of tone from one tint to another.



STEP 10 REAPPLY THE TINTS AS NEEDED.

Reapply the any tints that may have lost their brightness from the blending process of the previous step. Take your time with this stage. Unlike the shadow stage, you can apply tints over multiple painting sessions. Note that the glazing process will eventually darken the painting, so the general tonal range of the grisaille should be lighter at this time than what you want your final painting to look.



STEP 11 MAKE ANY FINAL ADJUSTMENTS.

If you are painting the grisaille in two or more sittings, and the grisaille has dried between painting sessions, you can make the surface of the grisaille slick by applying a very thin sheen of oil with a clean cotton rag. This will allow you to apply and blend the tints more easily over the painting's surface. Avoid drips or heavy applications of oil, as excessive oil can cause structural problems to your painting. After applying the oil, use a clean cotton rag to gently wipe away any excess oil from the painting surface.

Glazing Colors

A glaze is a transparent application of oil color. In most cases, a painting medium is used to thin the color. Its transparency allows light to pass through the glaze and reflect from the layers below, resulting in a more luminous quality to the color than is possible in opaque applications. Instead of mixing colors directly on the palette, you can also create rich and unique color effects by layering glazes.

As discussed earlier, oil colors come in transparent, semitransparent, and opaque consistencies. Transparent and semitransparent colors are useful when you want to apply a glaze. These colors will lay down an even coat while still revealing the underpainting beneath. They can be thinned—or extended—with glazing medium, or in some cases, they are transparent enough to be used as a glaze color straight out of the tube.

Opaque colors are not useful in glazing, but they can be fed into parts of the wet glaze to give form and substance to the image. In addition, they can be used to transform transparent and semitransparent colors. For example, adding a touch of titanium or flake white, or any other opaque color will make a transparent or semitransparent color opaque.

Once you become familiar with the opacity, semitransparency, or transparency of a given color, you will find that in most cases it will be consistent from manufacturer to manufacturer.

NOTE

Refer to the note on [this page](#) to see which colors on your palette are transparent, semitransparent, or opaque.

Indirect Color Mixing

While you can build a rich effect by layering one color repeatedly over a specific object, you can also indirectly mix colors by overlaying glazes. Color mixing theories that apply to the palette also apply in glazing. Alternating layers of warm and cool glazes can produce rich dark neutral hues. Combinations such as ultramarine blue over burnt sienna make beautiful blacks that can be very effective background colors.

Colors can also be neutralized by being glazed over by their complements. For instance, a red onion that has been glazed with one layer of alizarin crimson will look more natural if it is glazed over again, this time with sap green.

And finally, secondary colors can be created by layering primaries. For instance, a violet drapery can be created with alternating layers of alizarin crimson and ultramarine blue.

Before applying color to the grisaille, experiment with color overlays on a test canvas. You can glaze swatches of transparent and semitransparent color over all the colors of your palette to see what colors are possible.

Using Painting Medium

As discussed [here](#), painting mediums are used to extend and increase the flow of the paint. They can also be utilized to allow a glaze to dry evenly.

The amount of painting medium needed for a glaze varies depending on the color that you are using. While only transparent or semitransparent colors should be used for glazing, the consistencies of these colors vary. Always test the transparency of a color before adding any medium. A glaze should be similar in transparency to a sheet of stained glass. Apply a small brushstroke of the glaze to the canvas to see if you can view the grisaille below. If the grisaille is not visible through the glaze, add more medium to it. However, adding too much medium will make the color nearly invisible and ineffective as a glaze. Keep testing until you find the right amount of medium to add to your color.

Some mediums accelerate the drying time, causing the paint to become tacky before you have finished working the glaze. This is especially true when using alkyd mediums, which dry rapidly. With this in mind, if you are glazing a large area, it is best to divide it into separate

sections. For example, if you are going to glaze a fabric background, rather than glazing it all at once, divide it into three or four sections. To do this, look for the shapes within the fabric, like folds or shadows, and decide where the sections may begin or end so that the “seams” of the glazes are not noticeable. Dividing the fabric into separate glazing areas will give you more time to complete each glaze before the paint dries.



Still Life with Shells, 1997 oil on canvas,
20 × 30 inches (50.8 × 76.2 cm), Pentz Collection

Glazing colors used in this painting include burnt sienna, sap green, ultramarine blue, and transparent gold ocher, which is similar to yellow ocher, but better for glazing.

APPLYING A GLAZE

If this is your first attempt at applying a glaze, try glazing something simple or small, such as a blank wall in the background or a piece of produce. In this demonstration, we will start by glazing the red onion. When you become familiar with the process, you can move on to more challenging areas of the painting.

materials

20 × 24-inch canvas with grisaille

linseed oil

full palette

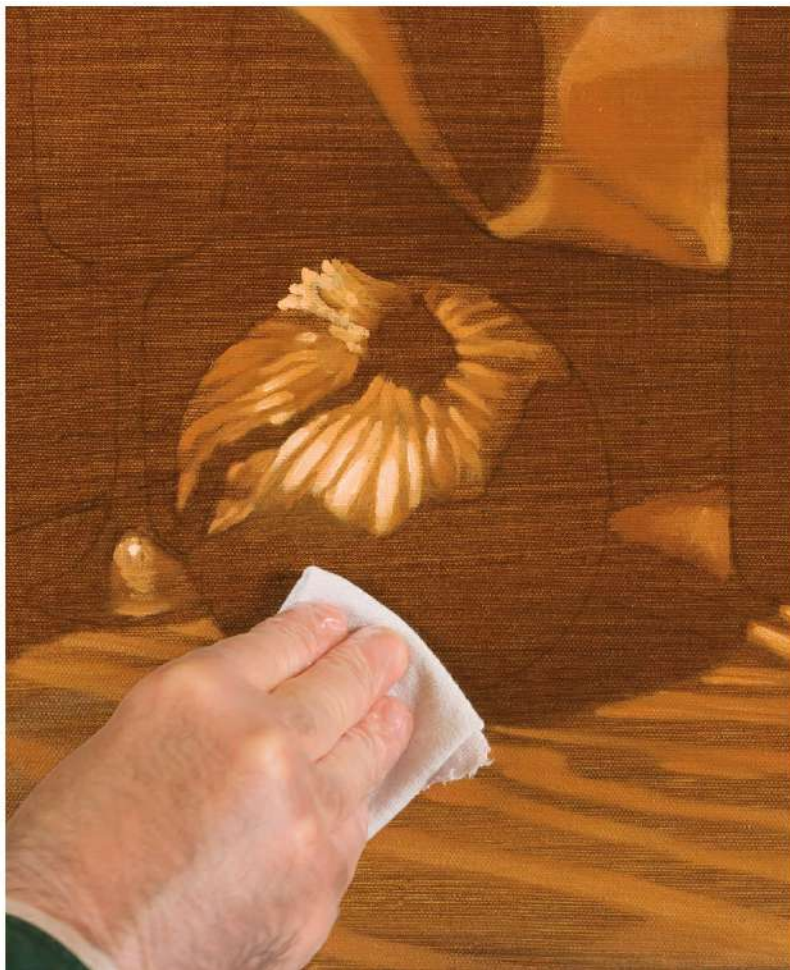
palette knife

hog bristle and soft-hair brushes

medium

solvent

cotton rag



STEP 1 APPLY LINSEED OIL OVER THE DRY GRISAILLE.

A thin sheen of linseed oil on the canvas will make the surface of the painting slick. This will make it easier to apply and manipulate glazes.



STEP 2 TEST THE TRANSPARENCY OF THE GLAZING COLOR.

Determine the transparency of the color by applying a small brushstroke of it to the canvas. Add enough medium to get the desired degree of transparency. Once the color is at the consistency you want, prepare enough color on your palette to complete the entire glaze so that you will not have to prepare additional color while partway through the glazing process.



STEP 3 APPLY THE GLAZE.

Using a large soft-hair brush, apply the color evenly over the entire area that you are glazing. For example, if you are glazing an apple, apply the color to the entire apple. Then, lightly blend the glaze with a soft fan brush to smooth out any uneven patches of color. A glaze both darkens and reduces the value contrast of the grisaille. In the two remaining steps, we will add darker accents to deepen the shadows, and lighten tints to rebuild the lights to regain the intended tonal range of the painting.

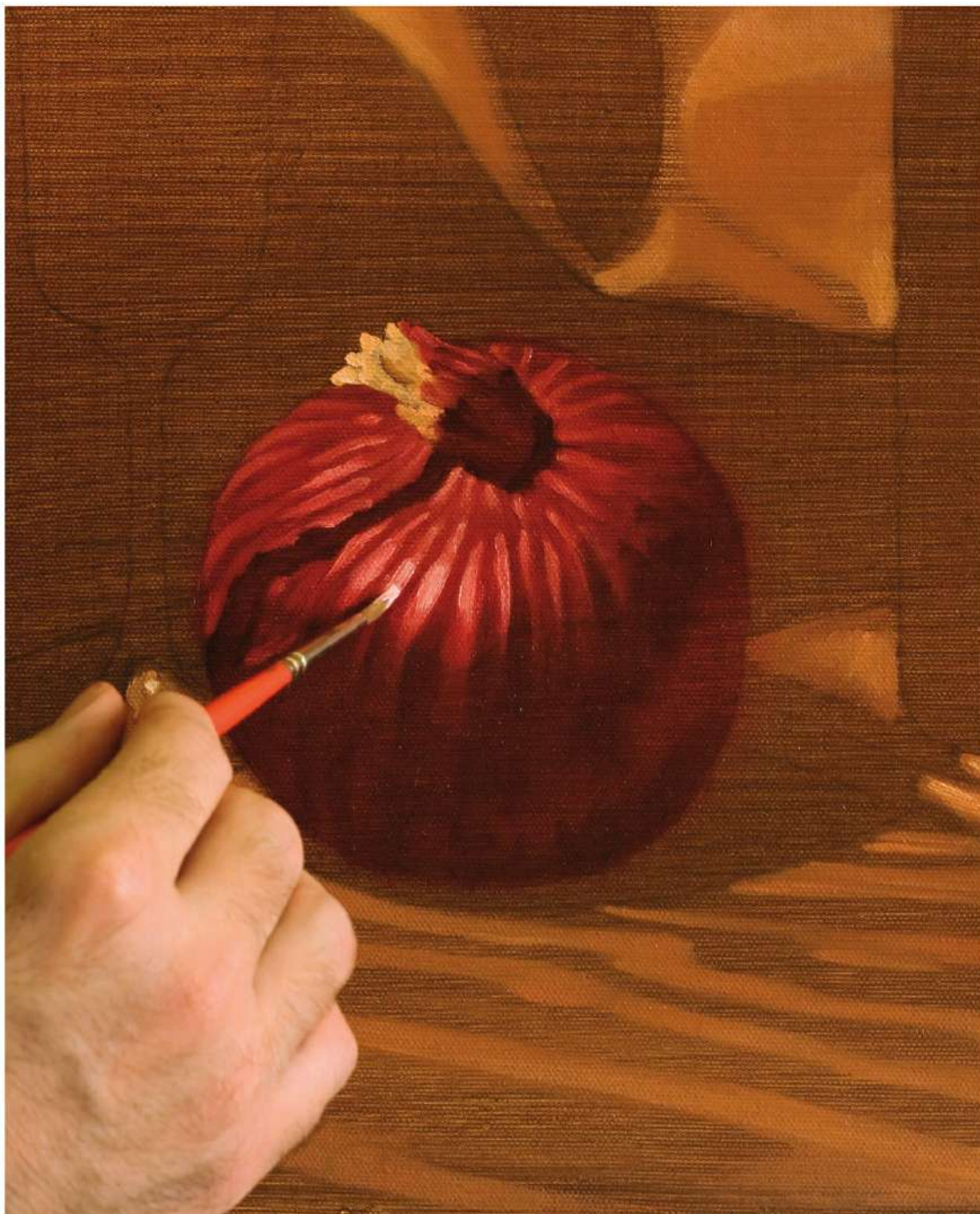


STEP 4 DEEPEN THE SHADOWS.

Still using a soft brush, apply a dark transparent or semitransparent color, without the addition of glazing medium, to the darkest areas of shadow. This may be a dark version of the glaze color, or something else. Focus mainly on deepening the core shadows; resist darkening the entire shadow area. By contrast, the parts of the shadow that you do not darken should appear to lighten and read as reflected light. After applying the darks, lightly blend them into the wet glaze with a soft fan brush.

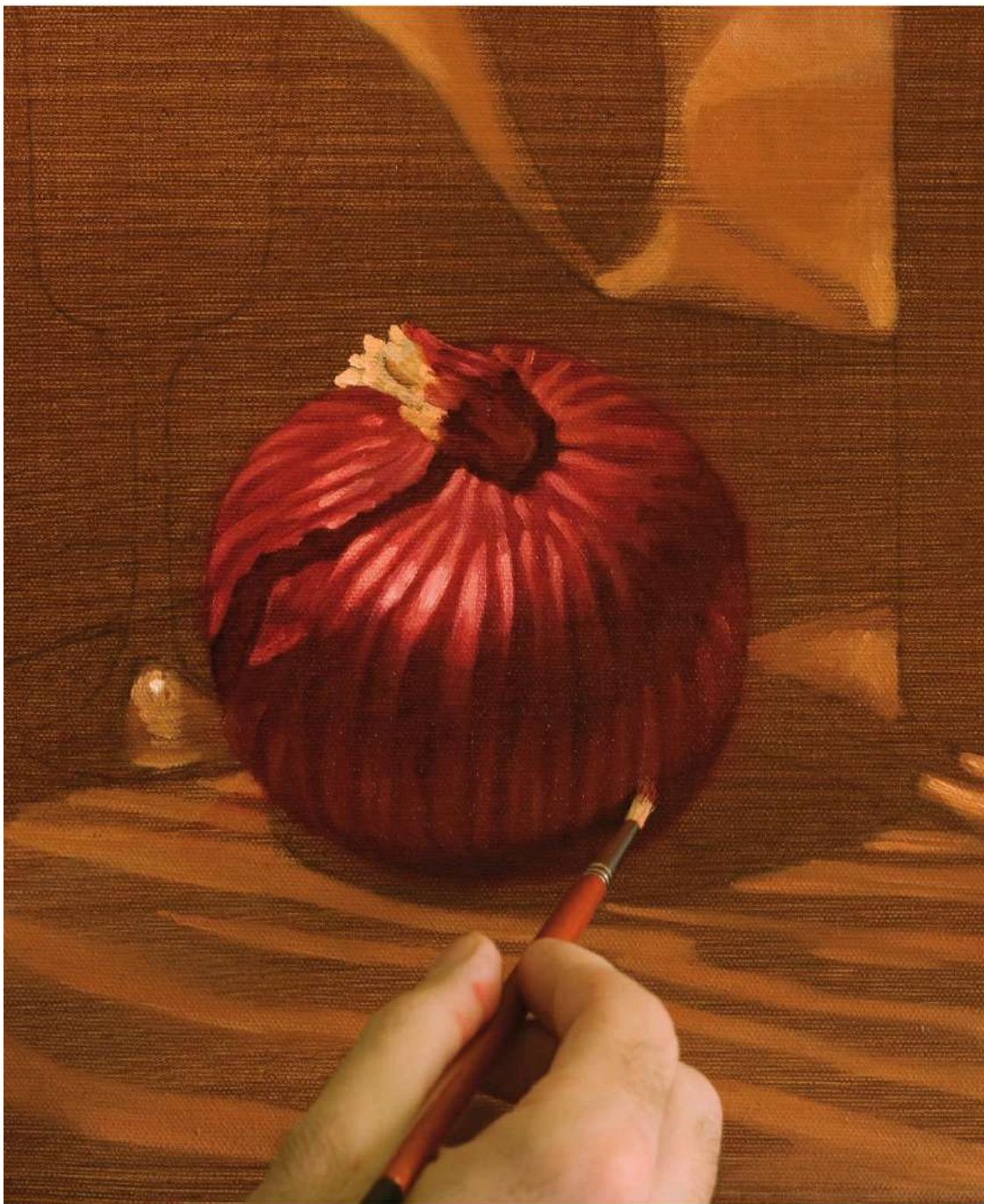
NOTE

When applying or blending the glaze, if the color goes beyond the intended area, you can wipe it off with a cotton rag.



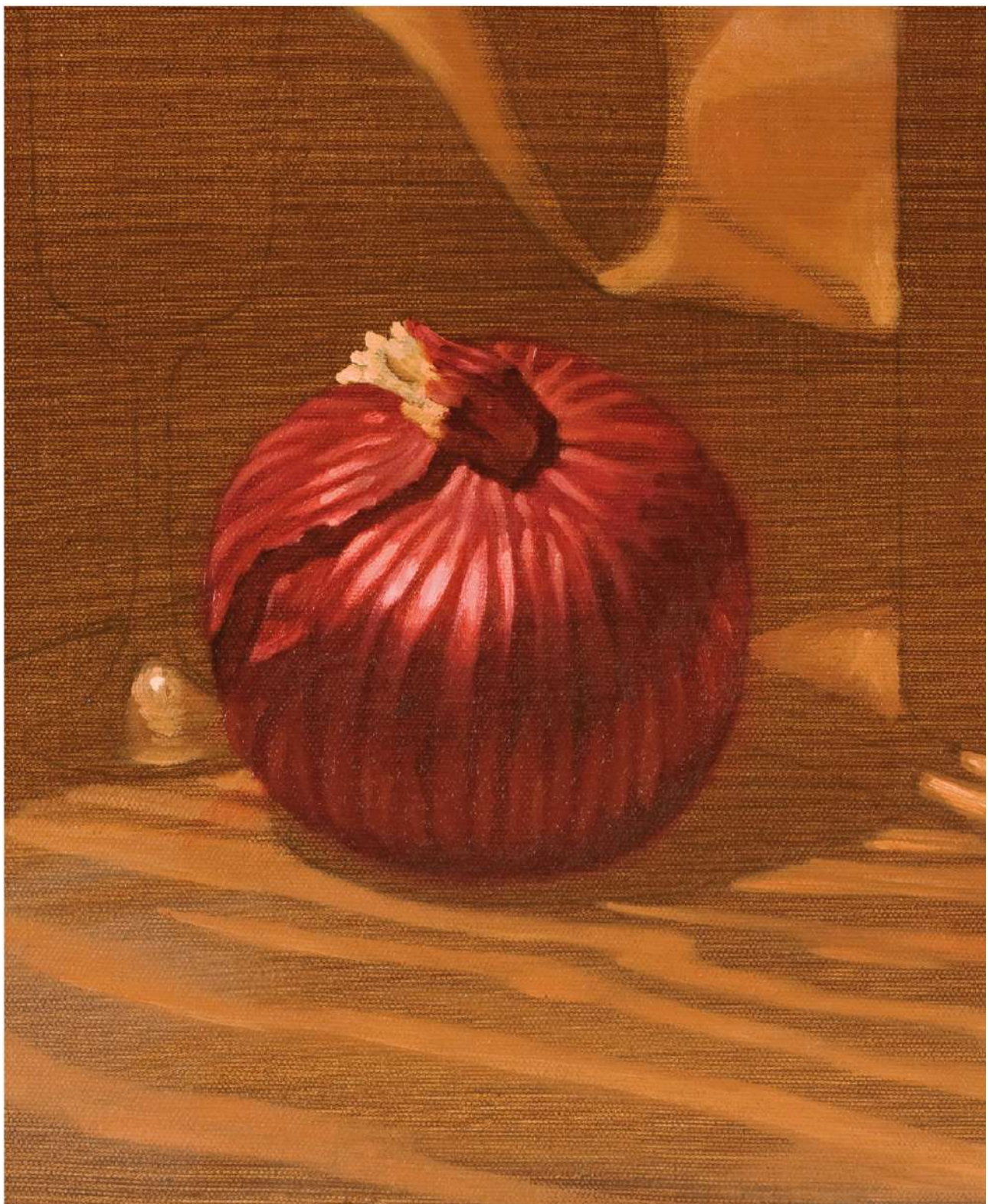
STEP 5 REBUILD THE LIGHTS.

Rebuild the light areas of the painting as needed by applying tints to the highlights and halftones. Do not add any medium to the tints, as they should not be thinned, but instead applied opaquely and thickly. Lightly blend the tints with a fan brush as needed. Use the local color of the object when rebuilding the light areas. For instance, a light blue tablecloth may need only a simple series of blues tinted with various amounts of white, whereas an apple may require more complex mixtures of reds and yellows.



STEP 6 ADD THE COLOR OF THE REFLECTED LIGHT.

Apply opaque color into the shadow to represent the color of the reflected light. Blend the color as desired.



STEP 7 ALLOW THE PAINT TO DRY, AND REPEAT THE GLAZING PROCESS.

The color will become richer with additional layers. The completed glaze should appear as if a sheet of colored glass had been laid over the grisaille. While impasto highlights, opaque halftones, and reflected light contrast against the transparent shadows, transparent glaze color remains most visible in the darkest halftones and shadows.



This image shows how the painting looked after the first layer of glazed color.

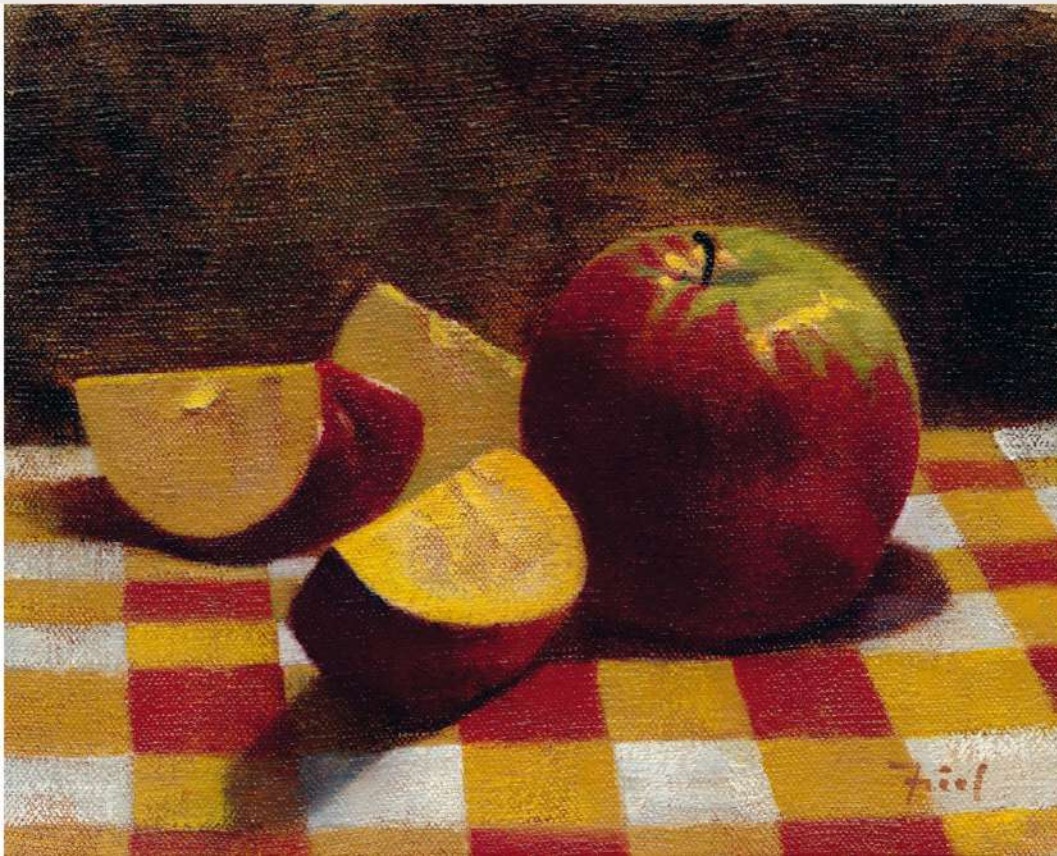


Here, a second layer of glazed color has been applied over the drapery, onion, and bread. Notice how a glaze of alizarin

crimson has changed the color of the blue drapery to violet; the color of the red onion has been neutralized with a glaze of sap green; and the color of the bread has been deepened slightly with a second glaze of burnt sienna.

Painting Texture

Texture is more visible in light areas than in shadows and is at its most pronounced in halftones. In halftones, the light skips across the surface of an object at an oblique angle, illuminating the high points of the texture, and leaving the low points in shadow. Texture is less visible in highlights, where light floods the surface of an object. Still, the appearance of a highlight can express the texture of an object's surface. Shiny and smooth surfaces have brighter highlights than rough surfaces. Highlights on a shiny or smooth surface will also have sharper edges, while those on a matte or rough surface will have softer edges. You can express these different characteristics of highlights to convey the type of texture that the object has in the still life painting. Texture is the least visible in the shadows and reflected light.



Apples in Candlelight, 2002, oil on canvas,
8 × 10 inches (20.3 × 25.4 cm), private collection

The weave of the canvas itself can be used to provide texture in a painting. This still life was painted on a canvas that had a relatively coarse weave. This made it easier to apply a dry brush effect and show texture in the checkered cloth.



Tomatoes and Garlic, 2004, oil on canvas,
18 × 24 inches (45.7 × 61 cm), private collection

Opaque color is scumbled in layers over the garlic to bring out the texture.

SCUMBLING

Scumbling is a technique in which a lighter opaque color is applied over a darker dry color without completely obscuring it. In a way, scumbling is the opposite of glazing, a technique where darker transparent color is applied over a lighter surface. These two applications go well together, as scumbling is a great way to add crisp texture to a glazed painting.

While a scumble can be applied with a normal brushstroke, the technique is often used in a dry brush effect in which you lightly drag opaque color over the textured surface of the canvas. If you use a light touch, paint will stick to the highest parts of the painting, while the lower areas remain untouched. As the lighter color contrasts against the darker ground, a shimmering or grainy effect is produced. This technique is especially effective when built up between layers. Allowing each layer to dry, you can alternate between darker glazes and lighter scumbles.

materials

(in progress) demonstration painting

full palette

hog bristle and soft-hair brushes

palette knife

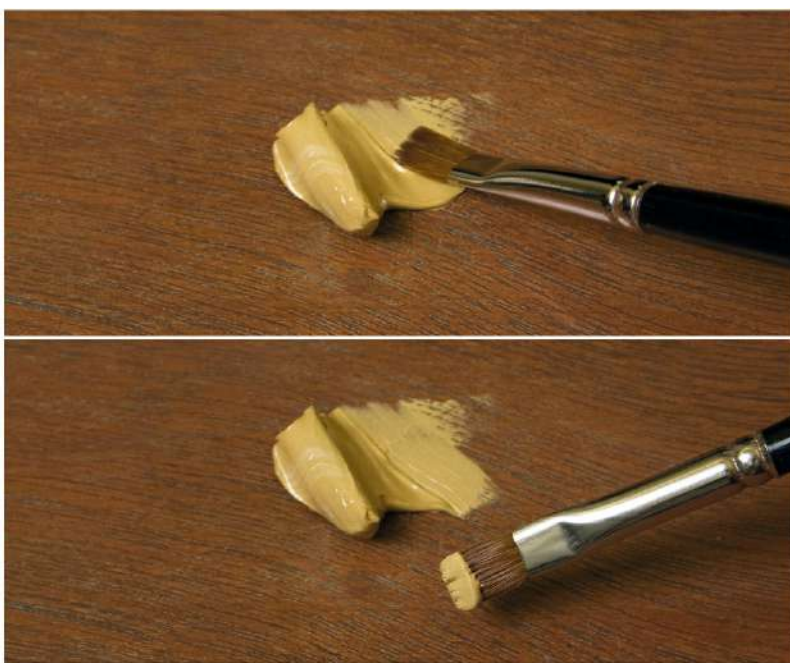
piece of cardboard or paper (optional)

mahlstick (optional)



STEP 1 PREPARE THE COLOR.

Mix a color that is lighter than the surface on which it will be applied. The color should also be opaque and not too wet or buttery in consistency, making it difficult to dry brush on the canvas. If the color seems too wet, you can draw oil out of the color. (See sidebar on [this page](#).)



STEP 2 LOAD THE BRUSH WITH THE COLOR.

Load one side of the brush with a small amount of color. Do not overload the brush. An overloaded brush will make it difficult to apply a dry brush effect. A small amount of paint on the brush is easier to control.

NOTE

I find that soft-hair brushes are more useful for scumbling than hog bristle brushes because they allow you to better control the pressure of the brush when you are applying paint to the canvas. This is important for controlling how much paint is applied.



STEP 3 DRAG THE BRUSH.

To show texture, hold the brush nearly parallel to the canvas and lightly drag it across the surface of the painting. Allow color to stick to the higher points of the painting while leaving the lower points untouched. Modify the pressure of the brush against the canvas to control the amount of color you want to apply. You may find it helpful to rest your palm or wrist against a mahlstick while practicing this technique.

Drawing Oil Out of the Paint

In most cases, when we want to change the consistency of an oil color, we thin or extend it by diluting it with a solvent or adding a medium to it. However, on occasion you may find that the color may be too slick or buttery to create a dry brush effect. Or it may lack the body needed to be applied as impasto. In either case, you can draw oil from the color, changing its consistency from wet to tacky. To do this, use a palette knife to spread the color out in a thin layer on a piece of cardboard or a sheet of paper. Allow about fifteen minutes for some of the oil in the paint to

be absorbed by the cardboard. Use your palette knife to scrape up the paint and place it back on your palette. The consistency of the paint will have become sticky and thick, making it easier to create textural effects.

Some white oil paints are available in stiff consistencies. These already have a heavier pigment load, and do not need to have the oil drawn out in the manner described above. They can be mixed with your other paints to thicken the consistency of your color, making them ideal for textural and impasto effects.



If you want to dry out the consistency of your oil paint, spread it out on a piece of paper or cardboard, and allow about fifteen minutes for some of the oil to become absorbed. When you scrape the color back up from the cardboard, you will find it has become quite tacky. This dry consistency is great when you want to paint texture.



Object Study, 1995, oil on canvas,
17 × 25 inches (43.2 × 63.5 cm), collection of Dr. and Mrs. N. Barrett

PAINTING SMOOTH SURFACES

In painting rough texture, it is helpful to apply paint to a dry surface. The opposite is true when painting a smooth surface—a surface where the colors blend together. Painting on a wet surface will give you the opportunity to blend colors into each other, creating the look of a smooth surface. If the surface of the painting is dry, use a clean rag to apply a thin sheen of linseed oil to it. Apply the colors you're using side by side, then lightly blend the edges of the colors together using a soft-hair fan brush.

materials

(in progress) demonstration painting

full palette

hog bristle and soft-hair brushes

cotton rag

linseed oil



STEP 1 OIL OUT THE CANVAS.

Make sure that any paint on the surface of the canvas has dried. Then, using a large soft-hair brush or a clean cotton rag, apply a thin layer of linseed oil to the area of the canvas on which you want to paint. Wipe away any excess oil from the painting surface using a clean cotton rag until only a thin sheen remains. Avoid heavy applications of linseed oil, as its overuse can slow the drying and damage your painting.



STEP 2 APPLY THE COLOR.

Apply the colors side by side into the wet surface of the canvas.



STEP 3 BLEND THE EDGES.

Lightly blend their edges together using a soft-hair fan brush.



AFTERWORD

THROUGHOUT THE COURSE OF THIS BOOK we have covered a lot of topics and techniques. I hope that you are able to use the information in this book as a base from which to continue to study painting and develop your own interests. You might look back and decide that you prefer *alla prima* painting to glazing and scumbling. You might also expand on the full palette by adding a few colors here and there, or come up with a limited palette of your own.

Oil paintings are completed in many different ways. Develop your own techniques. Wherever the path takes you, the still life will remain an ideal place to explore such things. While painting is an art, it is also a craft. As with any craft, practice is an excellent teacher. So set up a still life and start logging in the painting hours.

As a teacher, I have had the pleasure of meeting many people who have been eager to learn to oil paint and helping them get started has been my great satisfaction. I hope this book has provided the same service for you.

Enjoy your painting.

MICHAEL FRIEL has taught still life painting for more than ten years at the Gage Academy of Art in Seattle, Washington, one of the leading professional art schools in the country. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in painting from the University of Washington and has shown his work extensively in the Pacific Northwest.

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Pears, 2001, oil on canvas,
8 × 10 inches (20.3 × 25.4 cm), collection of Janelle Poulsen

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