

# Basic Oil Painting Materials

Anne Cremeans

## Tools

**Brushes:** There are many brush options and your selection may be limited to what you already have or can afford. You may find that you have preferences between the different bristles types and shapes. I DO NOT suggest buying a lot of brushes at once, build your collection one or two brushes at a time as you figure out what you like. As a bare minimum you should have two brushes, one to use in your light masses, and one to use in your dark masses.

**Palette:** There are a lot of options, go for what is easiest to acquire when you are first learning

Type	Pros	Cons
Palette Paper	Cheap, easy clean up	Usually white instead of mid-tone, have to continuously replace
Wood	Can last a lifetime with proper oiling and care, typically a nice mid-tone value	Hard to resurface if you allow paint to dry on, heavy, some are poor quality OR expensive
Glass (always add mid-toned paper or cardboard to the bottom by duct taping along edges)	<i>MY FAVORITE</i> , easy to scrape off dry paint with razor blade, can put any color or tone under glass to help with mixing	Easy to break, heavy and usually requires a tabletop to rest on
Primed Foam-core (2 or more coats of shellac over foam core)	Can make any color you like, cheap, reusable, highly customizable in shape and tone, light weight	Will eventually need to be replaced, must be home-made, hard to remove dried paint

**Palette Knife:** used to mix paints, clean palette, apply paint,. Typically you will only need one, so get a well made metal palette knife.

## Paints

**Quality:** Oils range in quality depending on the purity of the pigments and the consistency of the medium in which the pigment is suspended (oil). When you are still finding out if you even like oil painting, start with a limited Palette of student grade paints. Once you know that you love oil painting, you can start replacing your tubes of paint with higher

quality (and higher priced) colors. If you are interested in avoiding toxic fumes because you do not have a well ventilated area to work in, try using water soluble oil paints while you are still learning how to use oils.

### **Limited Palettes:**

*Imprematura - Raw Umber and medium:* you can create a tonal study or even finished works using a simple dark brown like burnt umber and a medium (such as a wax medium)

- Raw Umber

*Grisaille - Black and White*

- White (Titanium or Zinc when you are new to oils)
- Ivory Black (or Raw Umber)

*Dead Palette:* You can create a surprisingly nuanced color study with earth tones

- White (Titanium or Zinc when you are new to oils)
- Ivory Black
- Burnt Siena
- Yellow Ochre

### **Full Color Palette:**

a FULL palette will include a *cool* and a *warm* of every color along with a full range of earth tones. This is the palette I typically use for color paintings.

- Titanium White (cool)
- Flake White (warm)
- Lemon Yellow (cool)
- Cadmium Yellow (warm)
- Alizarin Crimson (cool)
- Cadmium Red (warm)
- Cobalt Blue (cool)
- Ultramarine Blue (warm)
- Yellow Ochre (earth tone)
- Raw Umber (earth tone)
- Burnt Umber (earth tone)
- Burnt Siena (earth tone)

*Additional colors you may find useful:*

- Naples Yellow
- Ivory Black
- Chrome Oxide (cool)
- Sap Green (warm)

## Surfaces

Oil paint will make many materials rot if they are not sealed properly. Before painting on a surface, be sure to prime it properly.

**Traditional Gesso** is made with rabbit-skin glue and marble dust. You must use a stove-top or hot plate to prepare the mixture. Gamblin makes a very good traditional gesso kit that you can use to try out this process. I no longer go through this long process as it does not lead to the most archival surface.

**Acrylic Gesso** is affordable and versatile. It dries quickly and is the easiest way to prepare a surface. You can use it on canvas, MDF boards, masonite, cardboard, stock paper, just about anything you may want to paint on. Be sure to use at least two coats and let it dry completely. When applying the first coat, try to saturate your surface thoroughly by moving the brush in many directions. For a smooth surface I recommend thinning the gesso slightly and sanding between coats.

**PVA Size** is used to seal canvas and linen before the application of oil based gesso. This is a necessary step in creating an archival surface if you plan to use a non-acrylic ground.

**Oil-Based Gesso** oil based gesso creates a lovely surface to paint on, but require a lot of patience. It takes approximately two weeks to cure before you can paint on it. You **MUST** use a size such as PVA before applying an oil-based ground to a new surface. Oil based grounds/gessos are very useful for repurposing an already used canvas. If you have already used a canvas for an oil painting, but you would like to sand it down and start a different piece, you can use an oil-based gesso to cover your original painting.

## Brushes Clean Up

### Materials:

- Odorless Terpenoid (Gamblin's Gamsol was used in class)
- Brush Soap (Master's Brush Cleaner is great, Fells Naptha bar detergent also works very well)

### **Directions:**

1. **Use paint rag to pull all excess paint from brushes.** Repeatedly grab the bristles in the rag and pull paint out until it looks like no more paint is showing up on the rag.
2. **Use terpenoid to clean brushes.** The best method is to have terp in a small container (cat food cans or old glass jelly jars work great) and dip the brush into the terp WITHOUT STIRRING so as to keep the terp clear. Use your paint rag to pull terp out of the bristles and repeat until there does not seem to be more paint in the brush. **\*\*\*skipping this step will hurt your plumbing, sink, parent's hearts\*\*\***
3. **Clean brushes with soap and COOL water.** I prefer to use Master's Brush Cleaner, but in a pinch and bar soap or dish soap will do. Wet the brush in the sink, move bristles across soap and then work soap into a lather by bouncing the brush with the bristles against the bottom of the sink or palm of your hand. **DO NOT SMASH YOUR BRISTSLES.** Rinse and repeat until the soap no longer becomes discolored as you work up a lather/bounce. Hot water will slowly weaken the glue holding the bristles in your brushes. Using cool water while cleaning will lengthen the life of your brushes.
4. **Allow brushes to dry laying down horizontally.** Repeatedly placing your brushes in a cup with the bristles up will weaken the glue holding the bristles in place.

## **Palette Clean Up**

### **Materials:**

- Palette knife
- Rags or paper towels (mechanic's shop towels work nicely, as do cut up old t-shirts)
- Odorless Terpenoid

### **Directions:**

1. **SAVE LEFT OVER PAINT** Oil paint is expensive. My preferred method for saving paint is to have a small primed board or extra palette to transfer extra paint to. Once all left over, clean paint is transfer, wrap in plastic wrap and keep

in the freezer. Next time you go to paint, pull out the paint, immediately take off and throw out the plastic wrap, and transfer back to your palette. The paint will thaw completely in a couple minutes. Other people will drop a small tile with the paint on it into a pan of water, allowing the water to act as a seal to keep it from drying. The water submerging method will not work if you are using water soluble oil paints.

2. **Use palette knife to scrape clean.** Remove as much paint as you can this way.
3. **Wipe Off.** Use your rag to polish as much paint off as you can
4. **Finish with terpenoid.** The last step is to use your solvent to clean off the remaining paint until no residue is detected. If your palette is made of wood, consider pouring a couple drops of linseed oil onto the wood and rubbing it in with a clean rag to build up a nice patina.

## Safety

**Oil painting can be highly toxic!** Many pigments, solvents, and mediums are made with toxic materials which can cause permanent damage to your body or mind if you are not careful.

### Guidelines:

**Ventilation** – make sure you are in a well ventilated area when you are painting. Use a fan to pull air outside and opt for less toxic solvents whenever possible.

**Keep paint off of your skin and clothes** – Practice keeping your skin paint free and washing your hands if you accidentally get paint on them. If you struggle to keep paint off of your clothes, wear a heavy apron. Do not keep clothes on if you have spilled paint, solvents, or mediums on them. You can get a chemical burn from wearing clothes that have been soaked in a solvent.

**Don't eat or drink while painting** – If you get hungry or thirsty, take a break. Be sure to wash your hands before touching food

**Fire safety** – oil paints and solvents are flammable. Rags used to clean brushes and palettes can catch fire very easily. Use a metal trashcan with a metal lid to dispose of old rags or paper towels. If you are re-using rags, hang them on a line outside to allow the fumes to dissipate quickly and safely.

# Basic Oil Painting Concepts and Activities

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## Vocabulary and Terminology

**Alla Prima** is an Italian phrase meaning 'at first attempt.' In painting this term refers to one-shot painting.

**Fat-over-lean** refers to the process of using a higher oil to solvent ratio (more oil) when mixing your medium each time you go back into a painting. Oil paint is flexible and expands and contracts with the changes in temperature and humidity. The rate of expansion and the flexibility of dry paint is higher when more oil is used in the medium. Because of this variance in expansion rates, your painting will begin to crack if you are not careful. By keeping your layers getting oilier as you go, you will construct a painting that will not develop cracking as easily.

**Grisaille (pronounced griz-eye)** is the term for a grayscale painting using white and black (or another neutral dark color like raw umber)

**Under Painting** is the term for the first step in a work that is meant to have multiple layers in which the main drawing is worked out before using full color.

## Short Activities to Boost Your Skills

- 1. Value Scales** – this activity will help you learn about your paints. On one canvas or board, for each color you own, create a full value scale where you first mix 5 tints of a color ranging from pure (out of the tube) to *almost* white. Make a mental note of how much white you need to push the value: is this pigment very strong, do you need a lot of white to make it lighter? Do the same thing, but going darker using black. Make a mental note about how the black interacts with this pigment: does the color change? Does it take much black to get darker? This can be an ongoing exploration of your paints that you add to whenever your simply aren't ready to concentrate on an artwork.
- 2. Large Shape Landscapes** - This project will help you build speed in decision making, learn to set up the basic composition of a piece quickly, and describe form using simple shapes. Do quick (15-25 minute) landscape paintings, from observation, while trying to use the fewest shapes to do so. When you break an image into large shapes, you can no longer rely on the symbols of specific objects to convey your image, but instead you must use the nuances of shape and the relationships between colors to describe what you see. Can you describe a

landscape in only 5 distinct shapes of color? What happens when you try to simplify a complex space into larger shapes? How do value and color saturation serve to create depth? A sense of light?

- 3. Composition Studies** – Find paintings you admire and do small (2 or 3 inch) studies of them. Do not attempt to show the details of the original paintings, but instead focus on the relationships between the large shapes. Are there a lot of dark areas? Is the piece symmetrical? How do the shapes interact with the edge of the canvas? Is there a common element in the compositions you have gravitated towards? You can push this project further with the long activity #4, described below.

## Long Activities to Boost Your Skills

- 1. Night Painting** – This project focuses on forcing yourself to see your paintings in shapes and pieces. Go outside and find a spot where you can paint at night and you only have minimal visibility of the areas you are observing for your painting. A porch overlooking a front or back yard may be the perfect spot because you can look into the darkness, but have light on your canvas. The goal is to have large areas in your piece that are only describable with attention to the specificity of shape, color, and tone of the silhouettes and blobs showing in the night. A few areas of light in your composition will create a dynamic image, so it is desirable to have a street light or neighbors porch light included in your painting.
- 2. Exploring Toned Grounds** – for this project you will explore the way the color you tone your canvas affects your final painting or your painting experience. Take 5 small (9”x12”) gessoed surfaces and tone each one a different color: purple, green, red, yellow, and blue. Pick a subject matter that you can retain interest in over five paintings. For me, this would be portraits, for you it may be still life or landscape. Do 45 minutes alla prima paintings of the same subject matter (feel free to vary composition, lighting, and color choices) on each board. Both during and after painting, ask yourself: did the color of the tone on my canvas affect my final piece? The decisions I made about color? Did anything surprising happen? Is there a tone I like best for working with this subject?
- 3. Foreground, Middle-ground, Background** – Explore creating a full image by carefully including a foreground, middle-ground, and background. If you like doing figurative work, try having three people in the same painting, one in each of the three areas. Explore ways you can treat the paint differently in each layer of space, either through a difference in brushwork,

sharpness of edges and detail, color saturation, or value. How can you create depth and space in this work? Can you use this sense of depth and focus to create meaning in this piece?

**4. Master Composition** – This project piggybacks off of short activity #3 in the section above.

Pick one of your studies that you find the most appealing and set up a new painting that uses the same composition. Try to just use your study as the guide for this composition. Can you create a similar composition using a different subject matter? Can you create a still life or a figure painting with the same shapes of dark and light masses? Work from observation.

**General Advice:** Get used to creating quick, simple work. Not everything you do has to be for a big conceptual end piece. Find the sort of work that you can do for comfort and pleasure. Over my career this has changed from drawing, to painting, to sculpture, and back to painting. Although you will typically have something challenging and long term you are working on, it is very useful and grounding to have that thing you like to make that is simple, comfortable, and relaxing: your comfort art. Figure out what that is for you. When you feel that block or self consciousness, you can go to that comfortable space and get lost in just making. Very often, your best ideas will come from the act of making, not from thinking about what to make.

**Contact Me:** I want to hear how things are going! Share your work with me, ask me questions, say hi! I always keep an up to date email on my website: [www.annecremeans.com](http://www.annecremeans.com)