

Imprimature and Underpainting

(copied from: <http://www.painting-ideas-and-techniques.com/imprimature.html>)

Imprimature and underpainting are classical painting techniques, used in contemporary painting as well. Most oil painting techniques are done in layers that are left to dry, before working on them again - a practical need before the invention of Liquin. But layering is also about creating depth and quality. I've heard very good painters define their art as: "knowing what layers to put over each other". Contemporary painters find their own recipes, and traditional underpainting techniques are like the recipes of your grandmother: tested and refined by generations of painters since the middle ages. During the ages these techniques gained a meaning of their own. They were developed to create 'realism', and that's what they're really good for.

Adrian van Ostade (1658) They're great, the old Dutch guys. But let's not think they could do all this in one layer... This painting was (probably) first done in burnt umber and white, and worked over in only these colors for several layers until the feeling of light and space was just right. Only after that, colors were applied.



Classical terms

In underpainting, there are two classical terms:

- Imprimature, meaning: a single-colored half transparent coloring of the entire canvas with a pure pigmented paint. It sets the general 'mood' for a painting
- Underpainting, meaning: painting more or less the whole scenery, in one color *and white* - usually flake or foundation white. It creates a unifying basis for the different colors that will be put over, and the occasion to focus on composition, light and darkness.

The difference is: in underpainting you use white, and in imprimature you don't. The color effect is amazingly different. Warm earth colors that are applied semitransparent on a white surface, have a warm glow. The same warm earth colors get a more cold, neutral appearance when you add white to them. Underpainting is done to create tonal range and at the same time a unifying basis for the (usually realistic) scenery. Some painters, who like utter realism, do it both: first an imprimature, and over that an underpainting, or a called "dead layer".

Imprimature, the gentle rubbing in of a warm brown on your white canvas, is a way of filling the surface with 'atmosphere' before you actually start to paint. A bit like meditation, or brooding. It creates a lot of warmth that will keep shining through, when layers are kept partly open. In imprimature, you don't want to see brushstrokes. You can achieve this with a wet or a dry method.

- When working wet, put the painting on its back, on the floor or table. Dilute the oil paint with turpentine, and apply it with a big brush over the whole canvas, dividing the paint. Leave it to dry on its back. The paint gets an overall watery appearance.
- When working dry, take a big dry bristle brush. Only wet the outer tips with a little paint, and work your way over the canvas by pushing the brush around in small circles. This takes a little more time, but gives a more cloudy appearance.

In the purely material sense, layering is about the rule 'fat over lean'. Egg-tempera is a good option, for doing an underpainting on canvas, so is acrylics with caseine. But there's more to layering, in terms of color, light and darkness.

Artistic use of underpainting

Eugene Carrière, 'Maternity'. In this painting most of the imprimature is still visible - only the faces have a little extra brown/greyish paint. Carrière worked in the 'underlayers' of a painting that would be 'realistic', but he deliberately refrained from finishing the painting with a top layer. It's as if he tries to 'look behind the scenes'.



Systems of layering

There are many systems of layering. In fact, every painter develops his/her own ways of layering. But sometimes, painting skills are taught from one artist to another. And apart from that, light and darkness have their own general, physical laws. In abstract-expressionist oil painting techniques, the layering was done randomly until a certain sense of substance was built. In ancient oil painting techniques, layering was done by proven recipes - first to make sure the painting would last (and not crack, peel etc) - but also to get carefully planned visual effects.

The layering is not just important for artistic reasons: correct layering is the only way to make your painting last. Oil paint is only a raw ingredient, you have to know how to prepare each layer.

Black and white underpainting

A black and white underpainting was done by the ancient Greek. It's a way to save colors (bright colors were very expensive those days), but it also enables you to focus on the tonal values in your work, which is complicated enough on itself. In this system, you first paint your picture in black and white, like a black-and-white photograph, and glaze on the colors later.

This system also helps you, to get the right tonal values for each color you want to paint (that is, if you paint realistic). It helps you create a solid basis for learning to work with color.

When you paint semi-transparent black and white over each other, you already see the effects of color trying to appear. When you paint a half-transparent white over black, you get a cold and bluish tone, and when you paint semi-transparent black over white, the black gets a warm tone.

The "dead layer"

This is a layer of black-and-white that increases the realistic effect. After doing an imprimature, you paint everything that should look like a realistic object in black and white. Don't cover the whole canvas, leave some of the imprimature visible.

Yellow ochre underpainting

A yellow ochre imprimature or underpainting is particularly suited for painting sunny blue skies. The yellow ochre provides a warm and sunny feeling. The blue should be painted over opaque (hiding), mixed with white (otherwise it'll appear green). It's best to do it opaque on places, and a little bit transparent on other places. On places where the blue is strongest, the yellow ochre should be strong too.

Yellow ochre was also used to paint the green of plants in two layers: first a white-and-blue, then over that a transparent layer of yellow ochre.

Green earth underpainting

A green earth imprimature is very good for painting flesh tones. When you also paint with white (green earth underpainting), you can paint the form of the face, before applying the actual flesh colors. Make sure you have a real green earth, not a color named "green earth hue" - that's not only a different material, but also a different color.

Burnt umber underpainting

A Burnt umber imprimature and underpainting is good when you work will be rich in clair-obscur. Burnt umber is the darkest brown. It's much easier to paint the light on with white, than to spare it out by painting dark around it. And to do that, you need a dark background. You can use neutral grey or black as well, but a warm underpainting is great for radiant blues. For very realistic effects, use the dead layer too (black and white painting of objects, etc)

Burnt sienna underpainting

Burnt sienna is one of the warmest earth colors. It was often used for imprimature in Italian Renaissance oil painting techniques. If you use it as underpainting (mixed with white), it becomes more of a skin color. It's good for greens, if you keep the underpainting light. The burnt sienna imprimature creates a wonderful warm basis - not much can go wrong from there.