

Choice Space in the Early Stages of Tempera Grassa & Oil Painting



'Phanes' – artist anon

(Including approach to Ground, Imprimatura and Underpainting)

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We have surveyed so far how our material study of constructing the painting can take the following choice space:

- 1) **Supports** : Wood, cotton canvas, linen, or canvas/linen glued to wood
- 2) **Grounds** : Genuine Gesso, Oil primer, Acrylic Primer
- 3) **Cartoon** : Symbolic composition, nested composition, general to specific etc
- 4) **Imprimatura** : May be considered the useful 'average' value and temperature of the painting, allowing the artist to create the values through the following :
- 5) **Optical Grey underpainting (optical grisaille)**, the distribution of white and a shading pigment (mars black/raw umber/van dyke brown/paynes grey) to create the values. The value of the imprimatura is usually present as a bridge between our passages of white and shade. A third pigment equal to the hue and value of the imprimatura may be used to improve and fix areas where we have missed the mark.
- 6) Within this modelling, we consider the **Axioms of worldbuilding** which include consideration of directional light(s), atmospheric perspective, relative orders of contrast within the layers of composition (dark-before-light-light-before-dark) scale cues, silhouette shapes.

This brings us to the next consideration of our study which involves

- 7) **Temperature**. We have considered so far the painting as a value-based sculpture. But in order to progress we must then step forward into what I have referred to as a 'symphony of browns'.

If **browns** are considered to be '*semi-neutral colors*' – I.e colors that are quite on their way to being grey I.e 'neutral', then we may begin to diversify, through delicate optical treatment, a harmony of temperature within the underpainting via cooler and warmer hues to differentiate foreground from background, direct light to reflected light, and so on.

Before we progress to 6) **Temperature**, I would like to revisit, elaborate upon and expound on some further details of our technique, since there are important detailings we can do at this stage.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

These are more advanced techniques that require consideration, effort and planning. They are NOT strict mandate of the teaching, as you will have by now seen theres different levels of effort and detail we can approach things from depending on our stage of learning.

Recollecting our Approach to Cartoon

I have provided ways to understand **cartoon & composition** without being proscriptive of what exactly you should paint. These understandings comprise of

- **Symbol making.** Symbolic consciousness. Understanding relationship between sound, word, cultural meaning, biographic memory, and archetypes
- **Nested Compositions and Composition envelopes**
- The potential use of harmonic rectangle **armature** as an organising principle for laying out the symbolic universe.
- **Quantum collage** – the use of the mediums of found media, inspirations, photography. Particularly, for those unsure of their drawing abilities, and who wish simply to practice the further reaches of the technique, I have suggested the profound power of collage as a means into assembling a starting point for our world.

One element I do not believe I have expressed enough is in how one may point a symbolic gestalt (a symbolic network) toward 'Re-conciliation' or 'Integration'.

'**Holotropic**' means '*toward Wholeness*'. We may effect unions by examining tensions between symbolic energies and bringing them into union through the '*Altar*' or also known as **TEMENOS** – which is a representation of a space of union or integration, or '*transcendence that includes*' (not bypasses).

Your work may either be drawn and created from your spirit and being spontaneously, and then brought into some congruence with the sensory world through reference material ('*veiling*' the immaterial energies with symbols of things of our material sensory world). Or you may work more 'automatically' by finding images you find instinctually attracted to and assembling them together. Both methods may effectively reflect the quiet song of the soul that we are attempting to raise into awareness through images.

Once we have created our symbolic composition, our composition must then be applied to our chosen ground and support. As already recommended, my chosen optimum approach would be linen glued onto panel via *EVA* or *PVA* glue, and then primed ('*meroflage*').

I do not currently see a problematic issue in using high quality acrylic primer and letting it dry, then using a 'spray mister' and wet sanding the primed layer down to egg-shell smoothness. This process results in a surface not unlike a traditional gesso wall that the mural and fresco artists of olden times would have painted upon in the temples.

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Optical Properties of Oil & Tempera/Tempera Grassa

"I have I think, said sufficient to show that Van Eyck and his followers had a complete understanding of the optical properties of their pigments and media and made full use of that knowledge ; and that later on, as new methods of painting were evolved, the more careful painters still followed the old tradition and utilized new methods with caution and common sense. They were fully aware of the following facts :-

1. That oil yellows with time
2. That pigments in oil get more translucent with time
3. That pigments in tempera are much brighter than pigments in oil and retain their brightness
4. That glazing in oil over pigments in tempera does not impair their brightness if the tempera surface is non-absorbent
5. That transparent pigments suffer more degradation in oil than opaque pigments, and should therefore be used for glazing and scumbling on solid underpaintings
6. That this is more especially true of blues and greens. See the black and white modelling of the Blue Robe, already referred to, and the practice of Venetian painters of putting on blue with size
7. That a pigment which suffers degradation in tone from the rise in the refractive index of the oil has its brilliancy fully preserved if painted thinly on a bright under surface
8. That the most brilliant permanent white is the white gesso of the panel, which should therefore be utilized wherever possible
9. That solid whites in oil will go down in tone unless the minimum of medium was used, the paint being put on very dry and, if there is dark painting below, very thick.

From:

'The Painters Methods and Materials' by A.P Laurie, M.A (CANTAB.) D.S.C. (EDIN.), F.R.S.E., F.C.S., H.R.S.A. 1960 Seeley Service and Company

Point 7 and 8 here are worth special attention:

It may be that optically nothing is as clean, reflective fresh & permanently white as the base gesso or acrylic primer of the canvas/panel.

What is being said here is that once paint darkens the gesso, retrieving the luminosity of the gesso is difficult, even with the freshest and cleanest of paints, which include foremost casein and tempera.



Some of the paintings of the Flemish masters such as Hans Memling (above) have avoided the yellowing or 'old brown oil painting' look. These considerations are based on their approaches.

We must consider very carefully our rationale around the use of a heavy or thick imprimatura indiscriminately used upon the whole panel.

If our design/cartoon is decided, we may think about laying in our imprimatura in varying degrees of heaviness so that areas intended to be luminous have a very light treatment so that the luminosity of the gesso is allowed to be preserved in such areas that are anticipated to be bright and fresh in value and hue.



Visualising these steps on Ottone Porfirogenito

This means on your main piece, with this design in mind, you may ANTICIPATE THE BRIGHTER AREAS by not laying down the imprimatura so thick in such zones.

This means we are to move from a 'general imprimatura' to a 'nuanced imprimatura' one which already plays a part in the 'painting process' true, so it is applied thicker or thinner, or even omitted in places where the most luminosity is to occur. And it may also pre-empt large differences in temperature if your composition contains such contrast.

Justifications for this Approach

Cennini's method refers to the underpainting as "vaporous drawings", advising to work from dark to light, avoiding necessity for alterations that destroy the luminous quality of the white grounds. Obviously there is some difference here than to the technique we are familiar with, with our general imprimatura.

Discussing a painting by Titian "... From its style I should place the panel as late in the sixteenth century. Both these pictures show a departure from the early technique. The picture is no longer first laid in in monochrome or in colour with a tempera mediun. The oil is laid directly on the white gesso, but the value of the white gesso is still retained, as is shown by the very thin painting of the high lights of the flesh over the white ground." (pg 149)

"When the Rokeby Venus was slashed by a Suffragette, Sir Charles Holroyd gave me the opportunity of making a thorough examination of the picture and the detached pigments... The priming is of white lead, and would therefore degrade in tone to some extent compared with gesso, but still would retain much of its whiteness. On this priming a deep red paint had been laid except under the flesh of the Venus. Here there is nothing but white upon white." (pg 150)

This is the adaptations I started making to my process with the painting Venus Neith (see below). I worked from a cool paynes grey imprimatura, which I lifted off before drying from areas I anticipated as being bright.

I scoured back to the gesso with stubby hog brushes. And built up the value study, then began to make light glazes of differentiating temperature with transparent violet hematite, raw sienna and van dyke brown upon the cool imprimatura.



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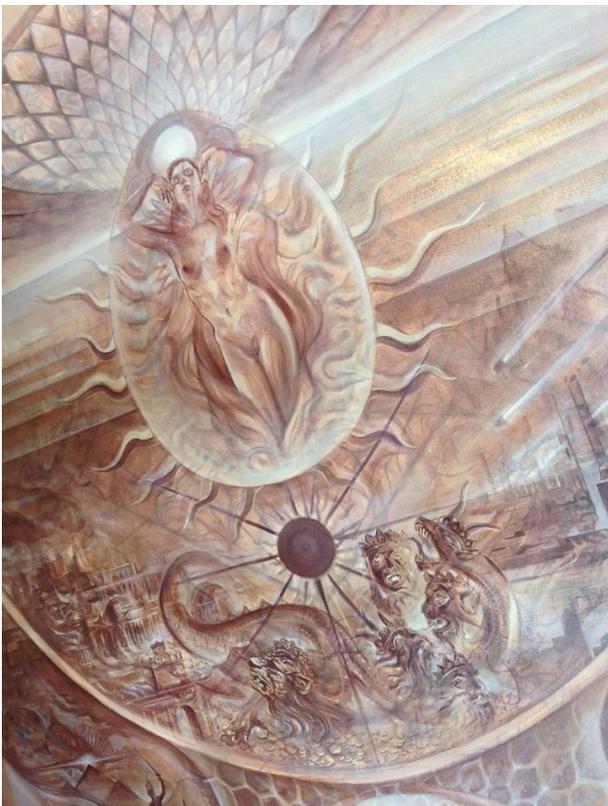


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Here you may see the result that the areas where the imprimatura is thin, the painting glows from within. This is known as reductive technique, which we will be touching on in our future studies.

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Below, Nova Era, which also is an underpainting where the luminosity of the gesso is preserved. This is only possible as a technique when the idea is already conceived so that the imprimatura can be planned.



Pigments used: mars violet, raw umber, paynes grey.

Underpainting Pigments to focus on

Bear in mind every color such as 'blue' may have a 'warmer' or 'cooler' expression. A warmer blue would be a violet blue. A colder blue is moving toward teal or green. A cooler red would be violet red vs a 'true red' or even a red on the orange side is warmer than a violet red. The same holds true for the following semi-neutrals used for underpainting. Although they may all be classified as 'brown', there are certainly colder browns vs warmer browns, since as discussed, browns may be really categorised as desaturated hues, with only the cooler tones (violet blues, green blues) seeming to stand most distinctly outside of this categorisation.

Raw Umber. A deep tone that is cooler and darker when 'loaded up' than when applied leanly. Lean washes exhibit quite beautiful golden brown tones.) Manganese and iron oxide based.

Raw Sienna. Golden brown. Can look muddy and toward greenish when applied thick, but applied lighter it is beautifully harmonic with raw umber.

Burnt Umber. The cooked version of raw umber is a beautiful red brown iron oxide.

Yellow Ochre. With some similarities to raw sienna yet higher chroma yellow, more opaque and much more assertive and dominant than raw sienna. Some brands have an annoying greenish tendency. 'Gold ochre' is my preferred variant for its internally more reddish and slightly more transparent orientation.

Van Dyke Brown. An iron oxide and sometimes humus bearing pigment with a deeper, more peaty tone than raw umber and a colder cast when finely dispersed. Although batches and brands do differ, with sometimes the Van Dyke Brown being completely contrary to what I here describe. An excellent tonal pigment for value modelling.

Paynes Grey. Not a pigment but a mix who's ingredients can alter depending on manufacturer. Though typically a very desaturated, deep, neutral blue. Can be mixed with whites to create subtle blues suitable for the semi-neutral temperature distinctions talked about.

Caput Mortum/Violet Hematite/Mars Violet. Highly pleasing brown violet. All fairly interchangeable with some differences in intensity of hue and granulation and opacity. Possibly the most useful is Mars Violet since it can be muted down with other semi-neutrals to emulate the violet hematite and caput mortum variants.

Potentially worth avoiding entirely

Burnt Umber. The cooked variant of raw umber is a beautiful warm umber, reddish brown. Has been accused of being 'thirsty' physically, I.e can absorb the oils from layers painted over it, resulting in dulling of

the painting. For this reason it is mentioned in historical texts to mix a little bit of lead white in with burnt umber, to perhaps mitigate this 'thirsty' property.

Bohemian Green Earth. Burnt Ochre. A turgid green which has an extremely thirsty and dulling effect on paintings.

Ivory Black. Carbonised animal bones. Although still a mainstay of academic painters worldwide, historically it has also exhibited itself to be one of the most ruinous pigments in oil painting, due to the fact it never quite truly dries due to the presence of bone enamels, and so remains subject to mechanical change over centuries. Walk through any old art museum and observe the cracking in the dark areas.

Zinc White. Absolutely proven to cause saponification and delamination, Its presence particularly in the underpainting (unless stabilised by mixing with lead white) should be completely avoided. Its use in upper layers may be less worrisome.

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Classic Hues for moving into Temperature (or – 'blooming out of the semi neutral underpainting through temperature')

The following colors are still very 'classical' and are not the strongest pigments in their respective hues. For instance phthalo blue may be much stronger in its saturation than Ultramarine Blue. Or cadmium yellow may be stronger than yellow ochre and Naples Yellow respectively. However it may be possible through experimentation to mix up paint from high chroma pigments to emulate these subtler counterparts.

Because of course we may mute a highly chromatic pigment, but we can never take dull chroma pigments and make them more saturated.

So there may be a strong argument from building ones pigment essentials from the strongest, sweetest, brightest most transparent pigments, and then being able to 'take them downhill' by muting them with oppositional hues or making them opaque with titanium or lead whites.

Yellow Ochre. With some similarities to raw sienna yet higher chroma yellow, more opaque and much more assertive and dominant than raw sienna. Some brands have an annoying greenish tendency. 'Gold ochre' is my preferred variant for its internally more reddish and slightly more transparent orientation.

Naples Yellow/Primrose Yellow/Titinate Yellow. A sweet 'lemon/vanilla' pale yellow hue of the yellow sometimes found in the sunset or sunrise sky.

Ultramarine Blue. The classic substitution for the blue hue provided originally by genuine Lapiz Lazuli. Mixed

with whites to produce sky 'Kings Blue'. Comes in 'red shade' and 'green shade' variants.

Venetian Red & Transparent Oxide Red. Iron oxide red – blood red. Venetian red is highly opaque hot and viscerally pleasing red which does not have the chromatic overload of cadmium red. However, may be emulated with a cadmium red muted down with earth pigments. Transparent oxide red is the transparent equivalent.

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Proceeding forward

1. Establish our quantum collage/symbolic world/cartoon
2. Make 'bringing forth a world style oil sketches to get rough idea of how we may approach the imprimatura and temperature.



Oil sketches help establish axioms of worldbuilding, differentiation in temperature, color contrasts, and areas where we keep the bright imprimatura untouched. See the symbolic work 'Ankh' by Ainhoa Neith below.

