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**Easel painting techniques**

*Easel* paintings are works of art painted on *supports* that are reasonably movable, such as wood or *canvas*. As the description implies, during painting the support was placed on an easel. Our knowledge of techniques used in their preparation has been derived from documentary sources and from scientific examination, but it is still incomplete.

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The examination of a number of Italian paintings of the 13th , 14th and early 15th centuries has shown that there was *a great uniformity* in technique and that this closely follows the methods described by Cennino Cennini in Il Libro dell`Arte written in the 14th century.

The support used was *wooden panel,* most commonly of poplar. If a large panel was required then two or more planks were joined with a type of *casein glue*. The panel was *coated* with two or three applications of sheep parchment *size* and a layer of cloth *was often attached* with further size. Preliminary layers of *gesso* grosso *were spread on the panel*, allowed to dry and *scraped flat.* Several layers of gesso sottile were then applied and after drying were scraped down until absolutely *flat and smooth*. *Low relief patterns* were *executed on the ground* using liquid gesso applied with a small brush.

*The design* for the painting was first drawn with *charcoal* and then *reinforced* with brush and ink. *Incised lines* were drawn in the gesso *to delineate the edges* of the areas to be *gilded,* which were painted with Armenian bole. When dry the bole was *burnished*  with a stone burnisher, moistened with water and *gold leaf* laid down. After burnishing, the gold was *decorated with patterns*, stamped using punches, *glazed with transparent pigments* such as dragon blood, or *opaque paints* were applied and *patterns* scraped through them *to expose* the gold underneath (*sgraffito*).

*Egg yolk tempera* was used for the paint medium; the rapidity with which paints prepared from it dry, necessitated their *application* in *short hatching strokes*. There was a fairly

*restricted range of pigments on the palette:* white lead, carbon black, earths, ultramarine,

azurite, malachite, terre verte, verdigris, lead tin yellow, red lead, vermilion and red lakes.

Cennini describes the use of a number of *shades of a colour* ranging from light to dark, to *build up drapery folds*. In the majority of early Italian paintings the flesh paint has *underlayer* of green paint that is either terre verte or verdaccio mixed with other paints. Some of the

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green paint is left to *show through* the flesh paint, particularly *in the shadows*. Cennini mentions *varnishes* but it is not clear how widespread their use was.

*The major innovation* of the 15th century Netherlandish painters was their use of *drying oils* as a *paint medium*. It seems probable that Jan van Eyck and the other painters *had access to* oils with satisfactory *drying properties*. *Diluents* such as turpentine were also *available.*

The Netherlandish paintings are on wooden panels, usually of oak. The panels were prepared with *grounds* of chalk *bound* with animal glue. The paintings were prepared with *elaborate* drawings on the gesso. The *range of pigments* was similar to those in Italy. There is little or no gold leaf found on their paintings; gold was simulated using lead tin yellow. The painting technique depended on *optical effects* created by *building up* of an *elaborate layered structure* of paints and *glazes* over the white ground.

During the 15th century there was *a gradual transition* from egg tempera painting to oil, and from panel to canvas; sometimes these two media *coexisted* even in a single work , in which egg tempera was used for *the underpainting* while the final layers were *executed in oil* or an *egg-oil emulsion*.

In Italy, at this period, media were used in such a way – generally in thin, flat, rather transparent layers – that it is often impossible to *distinguish visually* between them.

Drawings were extensively made, both on paper and on the ground, while the development of large workshops led to the increased use of *pricked cartoons*, enabling artists to produce copies or *slight variations of compositions.* Works of Bellini *are*, for example, *distinguished* by their *pale tonality*, and by the use of *thin glazes* which allow the white ground *to glow* *through* the paint layers, reserving the use of white lead for the *highlights.*

In the 16th century, in Venice the increasingly large scale of works encouraged the use of canvas. Titian, who was an extremely *influential* and may be considered the first great Venetian *colourist,* rarely did *preparatory drawings* but preferred to *worked out* his compositions directly on the ground *making alterations* freely and *overpainting* whenever

necessary. His early works are characterized by the use of *clearly defined, flat areas of vividly*

*contrasting colour*. At this period, pigments were not usually *mixed* within a single paint layer but used pure, or with white; thin layers were applied *in succession* and often finished with

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glazes *to produce brilliant colour effects*. In his later work, Titian`s technique became freer, with *brushwork and canvas texture* playing an important part.

For a while Venetian artists continued to use white gesso grounds that *reflected light*: this was the method of Veronese who *painted freely over drawings*, often with an *initial thin wash* of colour. However, Tintoretto started using black or brown *priming*, *composed of* charcoal in oil. Occasionally, the *ground was left visible in the shadows or half-tones*, or *directly glazed* over.

The late 16th century practice of applying coloured grounds implied a new technique of painting *light on dark* instead of dark on light. This was not only faster, but encouraged greater *variations of tones, opacity, and transparency*, obtained by *overlaying scumbles* and *glazes* in a *complex layered structure*. As the canvas texture was allowed *to contribute to* the *finished effect*, *it contrasted strongly* *with the flatter, decorative paint surface* of early panel painting, and with the enamel-like finish of Flemish oil painting.

During the 17th century the use of the oil medium on an oil ground became a standard practice. The technique was fully developed by Rubens. He often used panels composed of several planks with a white ground, followed by *thin gray washes.* The *design* was *laid out* in warm *golden tones and local colour* applied in *semiopaque* *scumbles*, leaving the *underpainting partially visible*. Shadows were kept thin with *transparent glazes*, and *highlights applied in slightly thicker impasto*. Where the *darker undermodelling* *shows* *through* thin areas of light paint, it produces cool *middle tones* with *pearly quality*.

Velazquez and Rembrandt were both influenced by Rubens but, like all great painters, developed variations on the basic techniques. Velazquez sometimes applied red or gray *priming*, but in areas where he required *great luminosity* he restricted himself to white.

Successive paint layers relied more on scumbles than glazes.

Rembrandt`s panels usually have chalk grounds and thinnly applied paint, while his canvases tend to have gray or brownish primings. He often *painted directly* with *opaque colour*, using *heavy masses* of lead white, followed by transparent warm glazes. His paintings have a *wide tonal range* and he *obtained pronounced textural effects* with *brushwork and impasto.*

Hals also painted directly, mixing colours on the palette and applying them in one layer, but it is more likely that he executed a *monochrome design*, adding shadows, local colour and *accents.*

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The 18th and 19th centuries are often thought of as a period of *technical decline*; many painters relied on standardized and somehow *lifeless academic method* of monochrome gray undermodelling, with extensive use of glazes.

The 19th century produced yet another radical change in working methods. Among the factors that contributed to this was the Romantic movement, which encouraged artistic individualism. There was also a greatly increased interest in *capturing the fleeting effects* *of light on a subject*, especially in landscapes, which promoted the fashion for *painting outdoors*. To achieve the desired immediacy and spontaneity, the traditional process of building up *carefully structured compositions* in several layers was abandoned in favour of the *alla prima method*. This enabled the artist to produce his effects rapidly, in a single application, without under- or overpainting.

John Constable was aware that colours mixed on the palette tend to *appear muddy*, in comparison with *superimposed transparent or semiopaque layers of pure colour*. He therefore used touches of pure colour and white to *break up areas of solid colour*. *The ‘blending’*

of colour was performed by the eye which *perceives an area of finely divided broken colour*

as a whole but more lively and *luminous* than when it would be made in a single *flat application of paint*.

This technique was later taken to an extreme by Seurat who *juxtaposed small dots of pure* colour to produce *a predetermined colour effect.*

New theories of light and colour had a profound impact on French Impressionist painting.

Claude Monet developed the characteristic Impressionist technique of *rendering the visible*

*world in terms of light and colour*. *Shadows are perceived*, not merely as darker tones of a colour, but as areas of *positive colour* influenced by surrounding objects and the reflection of light. *The palette was restricted* to a choice of *spectral colours*, excluding black and brown, and painters returned to the use of a *brilliant white ground* to produce maximum luminosity of colour. In addition, they often used walnut oil instead of linseed, since *it yellowed less* and therefore wouldnot *dull the colour.*

Since the Impressionism there has been no method which could be regarded as the only one‘correct’ way of painting.

During the 20th century artists employed an enormous range of materials to produce

an almost infinite variety of surfaces and effects. *Media were mixed, applied thickly with* *palette knives, poured, thinly brushed, mixed with sand to produce texture, and sprayed*.

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The introduction of *synthetic media* added to an already extensive range of materials.

*Acrylics* are closer to tempera and *gouache* than to oil paints. They are emulsions of resins in water, and *fast drying*. They can be *thinned with water*, or with *gloss or matt* acrylic medium or mixed with *texture pastes* for *impasto effects.*

Jackson Pollock, for example, sometimes used paint straight from the tube for thick textures while Morris Louis *diluted his paints* with water or medium to produce *vast canvases* which *are stained*, rather than painted, with *thin washes*. David Hockney exploits the glazing properties of acrylics over areas of *solid body colour*, using the traditional method with a very different medium.

*scumbling / scumbles* – painting technique in which a layer of opaque colour is brushed lightly over a previous layer of another colour in such a way that the lower layer is only partly

covered and shows through irregularly.