

MATE ART

UMBER UNDERPAINTING

Classical Brown Underpainting for Oil Painters



Jan Matěják



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The Complete Guide to Brown Underpainting for Oil Painters



A classical layered-painting handbook

JAN MATĚJÁK

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PAINTING TECHNIQUES

A map through the brown layer

A map through the theory, materials, value structure, imprimatura, and practical demonstrations that turn brown underpainting into a reliable painting system.

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How to use this book

This book is designed as a bridge between classical theory and studio action. The first part explains why the method works; the practical part will later show how to apply it step by step.

01 Read the theory as a map.

Do not try to memorize every historical or material detail on the first pass. Follow the main logic: surface, imprimatura, value, umber, then color.

02 Study the images as value lessons.

The illustrations are not decoration. Look for the hierarchy of light, half-tone, shadow, edge, and transparency. Ask what was solved before color entered.

03 Keep a studio notebook beside the book.

When a box, quote, or checklist feels relevant to your current painting, copy it by hand. The goal is not passive reading; the goal is better decisions at the easel.

04 Separate understanding from execution.

Do not expect the theory to make your hand perfect immediately. First, use it to understand what the painting is asking for: a stable surface, a clear value structure, a controlled umber layer, and patience between stages. Execution improves when the decisions become simpler.

05 Return to the theory while painting.

This book is not meant to be read once and closed. Come back to specific sections when a problem appears at the easel: muddy shadows, weak values, poor drying, absorbent ground, or color that does not sit correctly over the underpainting. The theory becomes practical the moment it solves a real studio problem.

STUDIO NOTE

The method becomes useful only when it changes how you look at the canvas before the first brown stroke. Do not read these pages as theory separated from painting. Read them as a way of slowing down your decisions before they become mistakes.

Before you begin, ask yourself simple questions: Is my surface ready? Do I understand the main light? Do I know where the deepest shadow belongs? Am I building the painting with thin, controlled layers, or am I already trying to force the final result too soon?

The purpose of this book is not to make the process more complicated. It is the opposite. A good system removes panic from painting. When the surface, imprimatura, value structure, and umber layer are understood, the next step becomes calmer and more logical. Read slowly, then test the idea immediately in paint.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jan Matějka, known as M8 Mate Art, is a contemporary oil painter and instructor dedicated to teaching the practical methods of classical painting. His work focuses especially on layered oil painting techniques inspired by the Flemish and Renaissance traditions, including umber underpainting, grisaille, controlled color application, and value-based construction.

Rather than presenting Old Master painting as a mystery, Jan breaks the process into a clear and repeatable system. His teaching emphasizes structure, patience, material understanding, and step-by-step development, helping artists build depth, realism, and visual impact with greater confidence.

Through his books, videos, and online teaching platforms, Jan helps artists move beyond guesswork and develop a reliable painting process rooted in traditional oil painting methods, adapted for the modern studio.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Matějka Jan".

FOREWORD

A personal invitation into the slow logic of layered painting — why the invisible brown stage changes everything that follows.

STUDIO NOTE

Read this book as a studio companion, not as a rulebook. The theory explains why the method works; the images show what the layer should feel like; the practice section will turn the system into repeatable steps.



Plate 1 — Finished painting beside its brown foundation. Notice how the final color changes the surface, while the main value architecture already exists in the underpainting.

BEFORE YOU TURN THE PAGE

Cover the right-hand image and look only at the finished painting for five seconds. Then reverse the comparison and study only the brown stage. Without searching for detail, write down where your eye lands first in each version.

Next, identify one edge, one contrast, and one shape that directs your attention. These three observations reveal how much of the image's visual movement is established before the final surface appears.

Repeat the exercise with one of your own works and keep the note. Return to it after finishing this book. The useful measure of progress is not how many rules you remember, but whether you can identify more clearly what should be strengthened, softened, or left alone.

Why underpainting? Why so many layers? Why not just paint everything in one go and be done with it? I’ve heard these questions for years — on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Patreon... everywhere.

And I get it.

If someone has never worked with layered painting, the whole process looks slow, excessive, almost absurd. Why build something only to cover it? Why map values when you could just “feel it out” with full color? Why bother with brown, of all things? There were moments when I felt tempted to answer with a joke:

“Well, I guess all those old masters were complete idiots for painting this way, right?”

KEY PRINCIPLE

Do not ask whether the underpainting is visible at the end. Ask whether the final painting would have the same depth, unity, and control without it.

But the truth is simple:

these questions come from people who haven’t experienced what layered painting can actually do — how it changes the depth, the light, the realism, and the longevity of a piece. And I don’t blame them. I was once in their shoes, too.

When I first began painting more seriously, I didn’t understand underpainting either. I thought it was some outdated relic of the past — unnecessary, complicated, slow. I believed real talent was painting everything alla prima: one layer, one shot, one miracle. And then, one day, I saw a Flemish painting up close. I remember leaning in and staring at the skin tones, the glowing atmosphere, the gentle softness of the transitions. It felt like the picture was breathing. Like light was trapped beneath the surface. And suddenly it hit me: No single layer can do that. This kind of depth comes from structure. From preparation. From patience. That moment changed how I understood painting forever.

No single layer can create the kind of depth that begins below the surface.

STUDIO NOTE

Since then, I’ve spent more than twenty years studying and practicing the brown underpainting — especially the classic umber-based approach. I’ve tested every mistake a painter can make, ruined countless panels, celebrated a few victories, and learned lessons the hard way. That journey shaped me not only as an artist, but as a teacher.

So whenever someone asks me, “Why bother with underpainting?” I have two answers. One short, one long. The short one is this: Visit a museum. Stand in front of a Rembrandt or a van Eyck. The answer is right in front of you.

The long answer — the complete explanation, the secrets, the techniques, the practical steps and the philosophy behind it — you'll find in the pages of this book.

Here I share everything I've learned, how underpainting controls your values, why it makes color so much easier, how it supports glazing, why it increases durability, and how a simple brown layer can completely transform the realism of your work. You'll also learn the most common mistakes, what mediums actually work, when transparency is your ally and when it becomes your enemy, and how to build an underpainting that becomes the true backbone of your artwork. By the time you finish reading, I don't just want you to understand underpainting. I want you to feel confident enough to use it, to experiment with it, and eventually — to master it.

Whether you're new to the technique or simply looking to deepen your craft, this book is your guide through everything that makes the brown underpainting one of the most powerful tools in classical oil painting.

So let's begin. Let's uncover the layer that started it all.

STUDIO REFLECTION

“A painting can be beautiful before it is colorful.”

When the brown layer already carries light, depth, and atmosphere, color no longer has to invent the picture; it only has to enrich it.

Studio reflection — The brown stage becomes valuable when it makes every later decision clearer.

OI

THE ORIGINS OF THE BROWN UNDERPAINTING

From ancient earth-toned foundations to the Flemish oil system, this chapter follows the long life of the brown layer.

KEY PRINCIPLE

This chapter places brown underpainting inside a long historical line. The goal is not nostalgia. The goal is to understand why painters kept returning to earth-toned foundations whenever durability, depth, and light mattered.



Plate 2 — Brown monochrome can already carry complex light, bone, atmosphere, and drama. Study how much of the final mood exists before local color is introduced.

When painters talk about the “brown underpainting,” many imagine the Flemish masters of the 15th century and immediately think of Jan van Eyck. And while van Eyck played a major role in shaping the method we know today, he was not the first to paint with a monochromatic earth-toned foundation. The story of the brown underpainting goes back much further—deep into the traditions of ancient and medieval art—long before oil painting as we know it existed.

The earliest seeds of the technique can be traced to antiquity. Greek and Roman painters often used tonal groundwork—typically in shades of red, yellow, black, or brown—to establish the structure and values of a composition before applying colors. Though their materials and surfaces were very different from modern oil painting, the principle was the same: simplify the palette, define the light, and resolve the form before committing to full color.

Centuries later, the tradition continued in Byzantine icon painting. Iconographers used a dark brown or ochre foundation (called *proplasmos*) to sculpt the early stages of faces and drapery. Highlights and color were added later in thin, controlled layers. This method wasn’t oil painting yet—it was egg tempera—but the logic behind it was identical to what we seek today: clarity, control, and a stable architecture of values beneath the color.

By the 14th century, Italian artists such as Cimabue and Giotto brought these ideas into the western European painting tradition. Their tempera underpaintings were often executed in muted earth tones, mapping out shadows and volumes long before the final hues appeared. These early masters weren’t thinking in terms of “brown underpainting” the way we define it today, but they laid crucial groundwork for the transition from tempera to oil and for the emergence of layered painting.

This is where Jan van Eyck enters the story—not as the inventor, but as the innovator. Van Eyck was among the first to fully realize the potential of combining a solid monochromatic underpainting with the transparency and depth of oil glazes. In his hands, the technique became precise, luminous, and extraordinarily durable. He often used earth pigments—burnt umber, raw umber, Kassel brown, chalky blacks, and warm ochres—to build an optical map of the painting. Over that carefully constructed foundation, he layered transparent colors that interacted with the warm brown beneath, creating depth and radiance that felt almost supernatural for the time.

What van Eyck accomplished was more than technical refinement—he created a visual language. His method spread quickly throughout the Flemish and later the entire Northern Renaissance. Painters realized that a monochromatic earth underpainting was not just a preliminary step; it was the backbone of the entire painting. The technique offered stability, accuracy, and an unmatched ability to control light. Without this foundation, the characteristic glow of Flemish paintings simply wouldn’t exist.

So, was Jan van Eyck the first to use a brown underpainting? No—artists had been working with earth-tone foundations for centuries. But van Eyck was the one who perfected the method in oil and placed it at the center of European painting. His mastery transformed a long-standing tradition into a powerful, fully developed system that painters continue to rely on today.

In other words: he did not invent the brown underpainting. He made it immortal.



Artwork — A modern still life can still carry the old logic: one brown structure, one controlled light, and a unified atmosphere before final color enters the painting.

KEY PRINCIPLE

The historical value of van Eyck's method is not in copying the past. It is in preserving a way of thinking: values first, color later, structure always. His achievement was to connect a precise monochromatic foundation with transparent oil color.

By the 16th century, the brown underpainting had become more than a method—it had become the backbone of European painting. After Jan van Eyck and the early Flemish masters established the luminous potential of a warm earth-toned foundation combined with oil glazes, the technique spread across the continent and evolved through the hands of artists who each shaped it according to their vision, materials, and regional traditions. The next three centuries transformed the brown

underpainting from a precise, almost miniaturist approach into a powerful, expressive system that defined the visual language of the Renaissance and the Baroque.

In Italy, the Venetian school took the Flemish idea and expanded it into something richer, broader, and far more sensual. Titian, one of the most influential painters of all time, embraced brown and reddish umbers to build the first stages of his compositions. His underpaintings—often loose, bold, and full of movement—acted as a dynamic skeleton for his later color layers. Unlike the tight, jewel-like precision of the Flemish school, Titian worked with sweeping strokes, large masses of shadow, and warm tones that unified his figures and backgrounds. His brown underpaintings were not simply preparatory; they were alive, breathing through every layer above them and infusing the final painting with warmth and harmony. Through Titian, the brown underpainting became more emotional, more tactile, and more connected to the physicality of paint itself.

In the 17th century, Peter Paul Rubens carried the technique into the Baroque era with explosive energy. Rubens combined the Flemish discipline he inherited with the Venetian warmth he admired. His underpaintings were typically executed in transparent earth tones—burnt umber, raw umber, and red ochre—used to establish the composition rapidly. These early layers set the major shadow shapes, the gesture of the figures, and the overall rhythm of the painting. Rubens worked fast, confident, and with a clarity that allowed him to paint monumental works at a tremendous pace. His underpaintings were often visible through the final layers, giving his paintings their characteristic sense of movement and glowing vitality. The brown underpainting in Rubens's hands became a strategic tool for speed, clarity, and emotional impact.

Then came Rembrandt, who transformed the brown underpainting into something profoundly atmospheric. Rembrandt's early works show a traditional monochrome foundation, but as he matured, he used umbers and earth pigments not just to map values but to build depth, texture, and drama. His shadows were rich and dark, often created with multiple layers of transparent earths, giving a sense of mystery and psychological intensity. While other painters used the brown underpainting as a stage to be painted over, Rembrandt allowed it to remain visible—sometimes almost untouched—in large parts of the final picture, merging the underpainting with the finished work. This approach made his paintings feel sculpted, as if carved from darkness and shaped by light. It was a radical step that pushed the method toward a more expressive and emotional direction.

By the 18th century, the brown underpainting became standard practice in ateliers across Europe. Academic training emphasized the importance of a monochrome foundation—whether in brown, gray, or a reddish imprimatura—as the essential structure on which all color depended. Painters like Fragonard, Boucher, and Gainsborough each adapted the method to their style. For some, it was elegant and clean; for others, loose and spontaneous. But across the continent, the principle

remained the same: values first, color second. The brown underpainting had become a universal language shared by nearly all serious painters.

Across these centuries, the method transformed but never lost its purpose. Whether rendered with Titian's warmth, Rubens's energy, or Rembrandt's profound darkness, the brown underpainting remained the silent architecture beneath every masterpiece. It guided the light, supported the form, unified the palette, and allowed painters to build their worlds one transparent layer at a time.

KEY PRINCIPLE

1. Earth-toned foundations existed long before oil painting.
2. Flemish painters refined the system through transparent oil layers.
3. Later masters changed the handling, but kept the underlying logic: values first, color second.

Studio action: Copy these points into your sketchbook before starting the next painting.

Studio question: Which decision in your current process would become easier if the value structure were solved first?

In the end, the technique outlived its inventors and the eras they shaped. It survived every stylistic revolution because it speaks to something fundamental—the power of light and shadow, the bones of all painting.



Chapter detail — Across centuries, painters changed the handling, but kept the same architecture: values first, color second.

O2

THE BROWN SKELETON: TECHNICAL AND OPTICAL MAGIC OF UMBER

The umber layer is engineering before it is beauty: thin, lean, transparent, and strong enough to carry the painting.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Here the umber layer is treated as engineering first and beauty second. A thin, lean, fast-drying foundation is not only more elegant — it is safer for the future of the painting.



Plate 3 — The brown stage is not a disposable sketch. It is the structural skeleton that organizes light, shadow, and the future color layers.

WHY THIS CHAPTER MATTERS

Read the pages that follow as a study in hidden architecture. The umber stage may look modest, but it is the place where the picture first becomes structurally honest: the light pattern is fixed, the shadows are given weight, and later color is prepared to behave with far greater unity.

Once you begin to see this brown layer as a load-bearing part of the painting rather than a temporary sketch, every later decision becomes clearer.

The umber underpainting plays a crucial role both technically and optically. In this chapter, we'll look at it in more detail—starting with the technical side and how this type of underpainting affects the longevity of a painting.

“The thin, watercolor-like Dutch oil paintings remain, to this day, an unsurpassed example of durability in oil painting.” — Bohuslav Slansky, Technique of Painting II

When most painters hear the words umber underpainting, they immediately think of its optical magic: warm, transparent shadows, a sense of inner glow, depth that seems to come from behind the color. All of that is true. But before the umber layer does anything beautiful for the eye, it does something even more important for the body of the painting itself.

It decides whether your painting will age gracefully, or whether it will slowly begin to crack, wrinkle, and fall apart.

A good underpainting is not only beautiful. It is responsible.

STUDIO NOTE

Now let us look at the umber underpainting purely from a technical point of view, as the structural skeleton of the painting. A very thin umber layer over a light imprimatura can support the upper layers mechanically, reduce cracking and wrinkling, dry evenly and predictably, and create a stable base for glazes and scumbles that can last for decades, sometimes centuries. Once you understand this, you stop seeing the underpainting as “just a brown sketch” and start treating it as the engineering blueprint of the whole painting.

Historically, this way of building a picture appears very clearly in early Netherlandish painting. Jan van Eyck, born around 1390, is often credited with bringing together the technical elements of medieval panel painting and transforming them into a new, fully oil-based system. For more than two hundred years his approach influenced how painters in the Low Countries worked. The core of that method is simple: a light, well-prepared imprimatura, and on top of it a very thin, transparent brown layer, used to model light and shadow almost like watercolor.

This umber layer is not a heavy, pasty underpainting. It is more like stained glass in brown: thin, lean, and tightly bound to the ground. That thinness is exactly what gives these early oil paintings such extraordinary longevity. When conservators compare fifteenth- and sixteenth-century works with many nineteenth- and twentieth-century oils, they often notice something surprising. The older, lavis-based paintings frequently look fresher and more stable than much younger works. The varnish might

have yellowed and dust may have settled on the surface, but the paint structure itself often remains intact and flexible.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Think of a good umber wash as stained glass, not mud. It should tint the light, not bury it.

To understand why, we need to look at what happens to a painting over time. From the moment you put the brush down, every layer of the painting is changing. The support moves with humidity and temperature. Oil films continue to oxidize and harden. Varnishes shrink and become more brittle. Pigments react differently to light and environment. Over years and decades, this leads to familiar defects: cracks in the paint or varnish, wrinkling of soft layers, yellowing or clouding of the medium, loss of adhesion and flaking, and changes in gloss or transparency that completely transform the appearance of the shadows and glazes.

These changes are not mysterious curses of “old age.” In most cases they are the logical result of how the painting was constructed in the first place. If a lower layer is very oily and soft and you place a lean, hard layer on top, the lower layer will continue to move and shrink while the upper layer resists. The internal tension between them almost invites cracking. If a layer is too thick and dries only on the surface, the skin on top hardens while the interior remains soft. As the inner part continues to contract, the stiff outer film has no choice but to buckle and wrinkle.

The strength of the old glazing approach lies in the way it controls these physical processes. The early layers are very thin, relatively lean, and made from pigments that dry fast and hard. They form a stable, slightly absorbent skeleton that can carry richer color layers on top without tearing itself apart. In other words, the painting is built from the ground up according to the natural behavior of drying oils.

This is where the classic rule of “fat over lean” becomes more than a slogan. Lean paint contains less oil, more solvent, and is applied thinly, often with pigments that naturally dry faster. Fat paint contains more oil, a richer medium, and is usually applied somewhat thicker, sometimes with slower-drying pigments and more expressive brushwork. As oil paint dries and ages, it changes volume. Lean, thin layers change less and tend to become harder and more rigid. Fatter, thicker layers change more, dry more slowly, and remain a little more flexible over time.

If you put the hardest, leanest, most stable layers down first and only then gradually increase the richness of the medium in later stages, you are working with the nature of the material instead of against it. If you reverse this order and place fat layers under lean ones, it is like building a house where the foundation is made of rubber and the roof is made of concrete. At the beginning, everything might look fine. But as time passes, the bottom continues to move while the top resists. Sooner or later, something must crack.

TECHNICAL NOTE

Hard, lean, stable layers belong below. Richer, slower, more flexible layers belong above. This is the material logic behind fat over lean.

The umber underpainting, applied thinly over a light imprimatura, is one of the leanest and most stable layers in the whole painting. It is your concrete foundation. Umbers, whether raw or burnt, are not just convenient warm browns. Technically, they are almost ideal underpainting pigments. They dry quickly because they contain iron and manganese, which act as natural driers in oil. In thin layers they form a hard, robust film. They are naturally transparent, which makes them ideal for modeling form and shadow through glazing, and they demand relatively little oil compared to many modern pigments, which helps keep the layer lean.

When you brush a very thin umber wash over your imprimatura and begin to pull out the lights with a rag or a clean brush, you are not only establishing values. You are laying down a fast-setting, structurally sound map that will lock into the ground and support everything you do later. The beauty of this approach is that it achieves a lot with very little physical material. Instead of piling up thick, pasty paint in the shadows, you let transparent depth do the work. The imprimatura acts as the general light of the painting. The umber wash gently darkens this light where you want shadow, and you reopen the brightest areas by removing paint. Lights remain close to the ground, thin and responsive, ready for later color layers and highlights. Shadows are carried by transparency instead of thickness, which reduces internal stress in the paint film.

The choice of medium is also crucial at this stage. For the first umber layers and the early color layers, the medium should not be oily. A classical and safe solution is to rely primarily on a good solvent, such as high-quality turpentine or odorless mineral spirits, with a very small addition of damar varnish. Used sparingly, a lean medium like this helps the paint level smoothly in thin washes, adhere strongly to the imprimatura, and dry hard and relatively fast. Because the proportion of resin is small, the layer does not become brittle and glassy; it simply gains a bit more cohesion.

Many painters are tempted to speed up the process with siccatives, the modern descendants of historical driers. They can be useful in special cases, but they must be treated with great respect. Driers can cause rapid, uneven drying, promote embrittlement, and accelerate yellowing. Misused, they become a source of exactly the kind of defects we are trying to avoid. In most cases, patience, thin layers, and the natural drying speed of umber are far safer allies than any bottle of magic liquid.

TECHNICAL NOTE

Do not solve impatience with driers. Thin paint, good surface preparation, and natural drying are usually safer than adding “magic” liquid to a weak layer.

When you compare a well-built fifteenth- or sixteenth-century painting constructed with thin umber washes with a heavily impastoed work from a later period that

ignored the logic of fat over lean, the difference in preservation often comes down to construction. The older paintings typically have thin, lean underlayers, a controlled introduction of oil in subsequent stages, and an overall economy of material. Many later works, especially from periods of bravura, painterly style, show thick underpaintings that are already quite oily, even fatter paint on top, sometimes enriched with resins and driers, and huge variations in thickness from one area to another. The result is a paint film under constant internal tension.

The *lavis* (French word for thin umber wash) technique might look modest, but it is technically sophisticated. It respects the basic laws of drying oils: lean before fat, thin before thick, fast-drying pigments before slow ones. The umber underpainting is the first conscious step in that sequence. If you treat it as a serious structural layer—thin, lean, and carefully designed—you are already doing more for the longevity of your painting than many artists who think only about color and effect.

From a technical standpoint, the umber underpainting anchors the painting with a hard, fast-drying foundation, respects the fat-over-lean principle from the very beginning, reduces the risk of early cracking and wrinkling, and prepares a stable, unified base for all later color and glaze work. Only when this skeleton is in place can the optical benefits fully unfold: the warmth of umber, the depth of transparent shadows, the subtle vibration between cool upper layers and the brown heart beneath.

In the following section we will turn to those optical qualities in more detail. But it is important to remember that without sound construction, even the most beautiful color effects are temporary. It is the quiet, thin umber layer under everything else that often decides whether your painting will have a long and healthy life.

When we looked at umber underpainting from a technical point of view, we were talking about stability, structure, and the way a thin brown layer can help a painting survive the centuries. Now it is time to look at the other side of the coin: how that same underpainting shapes the color, atmosphere, and emotional depth of the image in ways you simply cannot achieve by painting directly in opaque color.

It may seem at first glance that the umber underpainting is “covered up” and therefore no longer plays a role in the final result. That is a comforting illusion for anyone who wants to skip it, but it is not true. Even when you apply several color layers on top, the umber almost never disappears completely. In semi-opaque passages, thin scumbles, and transparent shadows, it quietly shines through and continues to influence the temperature, saturation, and harmony of the whole painting.

Many Dutch and Flemish painters were acutely aware of this. You can see the effect clearly, for example, in the still lifes of Jan van Huysum. When he paints red flowers over a warm brown underpainting, the red is not sitting on a neutral gray; it is interacting optically with the umber beneath it. The brown underlayer subtly warms the red from below, enriching its saturation and giving it a deeper, more velvety quality, especially in the shadow planes of the petals. Instead of a flat “tube red” lying

on the surface, you get a red that seems to glow from within, because it is being colored both by the pigment itself and by the warm undertone shining through.

In practical terms, when you paint reds, oranges, or warm flesh tones over a burnt umber underpainting, you are stacking compatible temperatures. The red receives a gentle push from the brown underneath. In the lighter areas, where the paint film becomes more opaque, the influence of the underpainting is weaker but still present, like a memory of warmth. In the half-shadows and transitions, where you allow more transparency, the umber plays a stronger role and deepens the color without forcing you to pile on additional pigment. The result is a richer range of warm notes with less material and less risk of muddiness.

The umber underpainting shows its full power most clearly in the shadows. When I paint over a brown underlayer, I deliberately allow the umber to show through in the darker passages. Instead of completely covering the shadows with a thick, cool mixture, I build them with transparent glazes and semi-opaque scumbles that cooperate with the underpainting. The deepest areas may receive a slightly darker glaze, but I almost never obliterate the umber entirely. This combination of a warm, transparent brown base and cooler upper notes creates a shadow that is both deep and airy at the same time.

Warm shadows tend to look deeper and more solid; cool shadows often feel more open and atmospheric. When you place a slightly cooler shadow color over a warm umber base, you get the best of both worlds. The warm undertone gives the shadow weight and depth, while the cooler surface color suggests air and space. The viewer's eye does the final mixing. Up close, you can see small variations: warm brown, cool gray, hints of local color. At a normal viewing distance, the eye blends these micro-contrasts into a single, convincing shadow that feels alive and luminous instead of dead and flat.

There is also a psychological effect at play. Our brains associate warmth with proximity and solidity, and coolness with distance and atmosphere. By combining warm and cool notes in the same shadow—warm from the underpainting, cool from the upper paint—you create an internal vibration that suggests both volume and air. The shadow is not just an absence of light; it becomes a colored environment, a place where light still exists, albeit in a subdued and transformed state.

This warm umber foundation does something else that is easy to underestimate: it harmonizes the entire color scheme of the painting. When a thin brown undertone is present everywhere, even the coolest colors must in some way negotiate with it. A blue painted thinly over umber will never be the same blue as one painted on a cold white ground. It will always carry a slight warmth in its depths, a subtle “sepia memory” that connects it to the rest of the image. This prevents the colors from breaking apart into isolated patches. No matter how intense or varied the local hues become, they all share a common ancestry in that warm underpainting.

You can see this principle beautifully in the work of Peter Paul Rubens, who stands as a bridge between the restrained luminosity of early Flemish painting and the full-blooded, theatrical Baroque. Rubens no longer worked exactly like the early Renaissance masters; his method evolved. He often began with a noticeably darker *imprimatura*, very likely composed largely of raw or burnt umber, sometimes enriched with other earth pigments. Over this darker ground he built his compositions by pulling up the lights with lead white and light earth colors, while allowing the warm underlayer to play a major role in the half-tones and shadows.

If you look closely at details of his drapery, you will often see the umber ground shining through the lighter passages. The darker *imprimatura* in those areas is not fully covered; instead, it acts as a ready-made half-tone. Where the light is strongest, Rubens applies a thicker, more opaque mixture, usually based on lead white. In the middle tones, however, he lets the ground remain visible with only a thin veil of color over it. This simple choice does two things at once: it extends the tonal range of the painting without forcing him to pile up thick paint, and it creates the impression of a golden light that seems to arise from within the fabric rather than sit on top of it. The underpainting becomes the color of the half-shadow, and by not overpainting it completely, Rubens allows it to function as a glowing middle register between light and dark.

The same interplay is visible in flesh tones. If you examine a foot or a hand in one of his paintings, you can see how transparent and opaque layers interact. In the deeper shadows of the flesh, the shade of umber is clearly visible, giving the skin its warm, blood-filled depth. Over this, Rubens adds semi-opaque flesh tones and sometimes cooler, greenish-gray glazes in the half-tones. Those faint greenish notes are not a mistake; they create a complementary contrast to the reds and pinks of the skin. The eye reads this subtle opposition between warm and cool as realism. At the same time, the umber base keeps the entire structure warm and unified, preventing the cooler notes from becoming chalky or corpse-like.

In the background, Rubens often becomes even more economical and revealing. Many of his backgrounds are painted with a very loose, sketch-like technique. Compared to the carefully modeled figures, the surroundings are simple, almost casual. Yet they are permeated with a strong warm underpainting that shines clearly through the colored layers. Here the brown foundation is not just a technical convenience; it is a primary design element. It supports atmospheric perspective by slightly softening and warming the far forms, making them recede without losing connection to the foreground. Because the background is so permeated with warm undercolor and simplified in detail, it does not compete with the figures. The viewer's eye is naturally drawn toward the areas where the underpainting is most carefully modulated and the upper layers are richest: the flesh, the faces, the key draperies.

When we translate this logic into a contemporary working method with burnt umber underpainting, the underlying idea remains the same. On a light imprimatura, you begin with a thin, watercolor-like layer of burnt umber to establish the drawing, the main light and shadow pattern, and the basic tonality. You deepen the shadows gradually, often in several transparent passes, instead of trying to reach maximum darkness in one go. At every stage, you remain aware that this brown structure will continue to participate in the final color scheme. When you later glaze cool shadows over it, or lay in opaque lights, you are not erasing the underpainting; you are collaborating with it.

The “golden inner glow” so many painters admire in Old Master works is not a mysterious varnish recipe or a special tube color. It is the cumulative effect of this layered approach: a warm, transparent underpainting in burnt umber, a thoughtful balance of opaque and translucent color on top, and a conscious decision to let the underlayer breathe through in the half-shadows, transitions, and backgrounds. Light seems to come from within the painting because, in a very real sense, it does. You are not simply painting light on the surface; you are building it into the structure from the very first brown stain on the imprimatura.



Artwork — Warm transparency gives shadow a living depth. Notice how the bird remains readable because the value structure is clear before color is needed.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Glow is built by layers. It cannot be faked by a bright color placed on top of a weak value structure.

Seen from this perspective, the umber underpainting is not just a technical step you rush through to “get to the real painting.” It is the moment when you decide what kind of world your colors will inhabit: cold and disconnected, or warm, unified, and luminous from within. Once you have experienced how much depth, harmony, and glow a carefully handled umber base can give to even the simplest subject, it becomes difficult to go back to painting directly on a blank white ground. The thin brown layer under everything may be quiet and unobtrusive, but it is the quiet that allows all the higher notes of color and light to sing.

KEY PRINCIPLE

The glow is not a single ingredient. It is a relationship: warm transparent underlayers, controlled opacity above, and enough restraint to let the lower structure breathe.

So there you have it. After everything we have just explored, it should be clear that questions like “Why bother with an umber underpainting?” come only from a lack of understanding. Using an underpainting is not a superstition or an outdated ritual; it is a conscious choice that shapes the final result in all the ways described above. Yes, you can paint alla prima in a single layer, and there is nothing wrong with that if it serves your vision. You do not have to use an underpainting. But if you want to master the Old Masters’ method in its pure form, the choice becomes obvious: you build an umber underpainting because you want to, not because someone forces you to.

The problem is that our time is obsessed with speed and instant results. Everything has to be quick, efficient, and optimized for immediate impact. Slow, careful, layered work is often overlooked, because its value is invisible to anyone who does not understand what they are looking at. Yet the truth is still there, quietly present in every durable, luminous painting: real quality takes time, knowledge, and patience. An umber underpainting is one of those hidden decisions that separates a merely finished picture from a work that is built to last and to glow from within for generations.

KEY PRINCIPLE

1. UMBER works because it is thin, lean, transparent, and fast drying.
2. The underpainting supports both the body and the optics of the work.
3. Shadows become deeper when they are built with transparency rather than thickness.

STUDIO ACTION

Copy these points into your sketchbook before starting the next painting.

STUDIO QUESTION

Which decision in your current process would become easier if the value structure were solved first?



Artwork — Even in a monochrome passage, the hierarchy of light, half-tone, and shadow can carry the full weight of the image. This is the structural promise of umber.



Detail — The open fruit and surrounding grapes show how lifted lights and transparent darks can describe complex form without thick paint.

PAINTER'S NOTE

The degree of resolution in the underpainting should match the ambition of the final work.

A loose, expressive painting may need only a clear map of the large values. A highly refined painting benefits from resolving smaller plane changes, edge hierarchy, and transitions in brown before color begins. At its most complete, the umber stage becomes a monochromatic rehearsal of the finished painting: not because every surface effect is present, but because the essential structural decisions are already secure.

03

THE POWER OF VALUE

Before color can become convincing, value must organize the light. This is where the painting learns to stand.

KEY PRINCIPLE

This is the heart of the method. Once value is solved, color becomes easier. The underpainting is where the painting learns how to stand before it learns how to dress.



Plate 4 — Value first. Form, depth, and the illusion of light are solved before color begins to complicate the process.

STUDIO TEST

Step back from Plate 4 and squint until the details begin to disappear. Try to see only three large families: light, half-tone, and shadow. If the jug, fruit, and drapery still read clearly, the value structure is working. This is the standard for every underpainting: simplify first, refine later, and never let detail weaken the larger pattern.

Now you already understand how umber functions—both structurally and optically. You know what it does inside the painting. But at this point, a far more important question emerges: what does it actually do for you as a painter during the process itself?

At first glance, the answer may seem almost trivial. If all we need is a brown layer beneath the colors, why not simply tone the entire canvas with a flat brown and move on? Wouldn't the result be essentially the same? The answer lies in something far more fundamental—something that stands behind every painting, every drawing, and every image ever created. That element is value.

Value is the single most important component in the construction of an artwork. Not color, not saturation, not even temperature. All of these come later. Before a painting becomes color, before it becomes atmosphere or emotion, it exists as a structure of light and shadow. Without value, color has no stability. Without value, form cannot exist. A painting without value is nothing more than surface decoration.

Color can seduce the eye, but value convinces it.

STUDIO NOTE

KEY PRINCIPLE

Before you ask whether a color is beautiful, ask whether its value is true. A correct value can survive weak color; incorrect value destroys even the most seductive mixture.

This is why every serious artistic training begins in the same way. Before students are ever allowed to work with color, they are trained to see. They spend months—sometimes years—drawing plaster casts, working in charcoal, studying how light describes form on the simplest objects. This is not tradition for its own sake. It is necessity. You cannot paint what you do not understand, and you cannot understand form without understanding value.

From this perspective, underpainting reveals its true nature. It is not a preliminary step or a technical formality. It is the art of value in its purest form. Every underpainting, no matter how complex it may appear, is built on a single ability: the ability to control light through value. If this foundation is weak, no amount of color can compensate for it.

Before we move further into the process of applying umber, we must therefore return to this foundation. Not to color, not to materials, but to the one element that ultimately determines everything. Value is not just part of painting—it is the condition that makes painting possible at all.

3.1 The Illusion of Reality

Take a look at the image in front of you. You recognize it instantly. Of course you do—it's the Mona Lisa. But the real question is not what you see. The real question is: how is it possible that you recognize it so easily—even without color? The answer is simple, and at the same time, fundamental. You don't need color to understand reality. You don't need temperature, saturation, or even detail. To recognize form, space, and identity, you need only one thing: value.



Figure 1 — Value alone can describe volume, overlap, and depth. Observe how the eye reads form even when local color is absent.

Value is the language through which we perceive the world as three-dimensional. It is the translation of light into form. Without value, there is no volume. Without value, there is no depth. Everything collapses into a flat surface. This becomes immediately clear when we look at the simplest possible experiment.

Imagine a perfectly white sphere placed under neutral, even lighting. If the light hits it equally from all directions, the sphere begins to lose its identity. It appears flat—almost like a circle cut out of paper. There is no information to tell your eye that it is a three-dimensional object. But the moment the light shifts—even slightly—the illusion changes completely. A highlight appears. A shadow begins to form. A gentle transition emerges between light and dark. And suddenly, without any outline or explanation, your mind understands: this is not a flat shape. This is a solid object occupying space.

The same principle applies to the cube. When evenly lit from all sides, it can appear almost flat, like a simple geometric drawing. But introduce directional light, and everything changes. One plane becomes lighter, another darker, edges begin to separate, and the illusion of depth becomes undeniable. The cube reveals itself not through lines, but through value relationships.

This is exactly how we perceive the entire world around us. Our brain does not read objects as “things.” It reads differences in light. It interprets value shifts and constructs reality from them. What you experience as a three-dimensional world is, in essence, a constant interpretation of light and shadow.

And once you begin to see it, you cannot unsee it.

The next time you look at the full moon in the night sky, notice what happens. At first glance, it may appear as a flat disc—a perfect circle glowing in darkness. But you

know it is not flat. It is a sphere, a massive three-dimensional body floating in space. The only reason it can appear flat is because of how it is lit from your point of view. Change the light, and the illusion would change with it.

This is the core of everything we do as painters.

“We are not painting objects. We are not painting colors. We are painting light. And through that light, we construct the illusion of reality.” —Jan Matějčák

STUDIO NOTE

Squint at your subject until color and detail disappear. What remains is the true subject of the underpainting: the large pattern of light and dark.

Value is not just a tool—it is the foundation of perception itself.

Now it should be much clearer. The purpose of underpainting is to establish the distribution of light and shadow before color ever touches the canvas. It is here, in this early stage, where the structure of the painting is built—the invisible architecture that everything else will rely on.

By organizing light and shadow in advance, you simplify the entire process. Instead of solving multiple problems at once, you divide them into clear, manageable steps. When painting directly—*alla prima*—you are forced to make every decision simultaneously. You must find the correct color, with the correct saturation, and at the same time match the correct value. Color and value become intertwined problems that must be solved in a single stroke. Underpainting removes this complexity.

It separates the process into its fundamental components. First, you solve value. You define the structure, the form, and the illusion of light. Only then do you introduce color, building on a foundation that is already stable and resolved. This is the true function of underpainting—not decoration, not tradition, but clarity.

How this works in practice, I will show you shortly. Before we move forward, however, a brief note on theory. The behavior of light—its intensity, direction, and interaction with form—is not something I will fully break down here, as I have already covered these principles in depth in my other books. If you are not yet fully comfortable with these concepts, I strongly recommend exploring them further.

In *Color Mixing Essentials*, you will gain a deeper understanding of color itself, including how value governs its behavior. And in the *Grisaille* booklet, I focus specifically on monochromatic underpainting, where the same principles of light and shadow are explored in their purest form. There, I explain how light creates volume and how value alone can define reality.

Mastering these fundamentals will transform the way you approach painting. What once felt complex and overwhelming will begin to fall into place with clarity and control.

3.2 The Hidden System Beneath Color

Now let's move to the practical application—how I actually apply the umber and what I am doing in that moment. When I begin with umber, I am not just “blocking in” shapes. I am defining the entire value structure of the painting. With this first layer, I decide what will be light and what will be dark. Every major relationship is established here.

Imagine a simple example—a single apple. At the start, I sketch the apple using umber, but instead of thinking in terms of color, I think purely in terms of value. In essence, I am working with a grayscale, only translated into the natural brown of umber. If you strip away the color, the principle is identical. It is still just a scale of light to dark.

Let's say that in the shadow area of the apple I reach a value around 18 on my scale, while the light side sits somewhere around 5. At that moment, everything important has already been decided. The distribution of light and shadow is locked in. The form is established. The illusion of volume already exists—even without color. And this is the key!

What I create in the underpainting is not temporary. It is not something that will be replaced later. It is something that will be repeated and respected in every following layer. So what does this mean in practice? It means that when I start applying color, I am no longer searching for structure. I am no longer solving the problem of light and shadow. That problem has already been solved. Instead, I am simply matching what is already there.

The color I place on a specific area must have the same value as the underpainting beneath it. If I am painting over a darker area, the color must be equally dark. If I am painting over a lighter area, the color must be equally light. I am constantly comparing the value of the color to the value of the underpainting.

This changes everything! I am no longer trying to balance the entire painting at once. I am not asking, “Is this correct in relation to everything else?” That question has already been answered in the underpainting. Now I am asking only one thing: does this color match the value underneath? And because of that, the process becomes dramatically simpler. Value is no longer a problem I need to solve. It is a condition I need to respect.



The color stage follows the brown map. The important lesson is not that color changes the painting, but that it respects the value plan underneath.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Compare the deepest shadows, the half-tones, and the light family. The color layer is more convincing because the underpainting has already organized the painting.

STUDIO NOTE

When color begins, do not repaint the drawing. Match the value underneath and let hue, temperature, and saturation ride on top of that structure.

What changes is not just the process—it is the way you think while painting. When the value structure is already established, your attention shifts. You are no longer constructing the painting from nothing. Instead, you are responding to something that already exists. The canvas is no longer empty—it is guiding you. This creates a very different kind of workflow.

A resolved underpainting turns the blank canvas into a guide.

STUDIO NOTE

STUDIO NOTE

A resolved underpainting changes the psychology of painting. You stop inventing everything at once and start responding to a system already on the canvas.

Each decision becomes local instead of global. You are no longer comparing one part of the painting to the entire composition. You are comparing it only to what lies directly beneath it. The problem is reduced in scale, and with it, the chance of error. This is where control comes from.

The underpainting acts as a reference system. It stabilizes your decisions and prevents the painting from drifting. Without it, small inaccuracies begin to accumulate. A color slightly too light here, slightly too dark there—and over time, the structure begins to collapse. With a defined value foundation, these deviations are immediately visible and easy to correct.

Another important shift happens in how you handle corrections. In direct painting, fixing a mistake often means repainting large areas, because everything is interconnected. In a layered process, corrections are more precise. You are adjusting within a system that is already organized, not rebuilding it from scratch.

And perhaps most importantly, it allows consistency across time. A painting is rarely finished in one sitting. Days pass. Sometimes weeks. Your perception changes, your sensitivity to color shifts. But the value structure remains constant. It becomes your anchor—something stable you can always return to, no matter how much time has passed. This is what makes the process reliable. Not because it is easier in the beginning, but because it remains stable from start to finish.

The creation of an underpainting can take several different forms. There is no single correct approach—only different methods that lead to different results. One option is to apply umber across the entire surface of the canvas and then wipe it away in the light areas, revealing lighter values where the highlights will be. This subtractive method allows you to work from dark to light, carving the form out of the tone.



Figure 2 — A nearly resolved umber stage. Multiple thin passes sharpen edges, deepen the hierarchy of light, and prepare the image for color.

Another approach, which I personally use most often, is to build the image gradually on a light imprimatura by darkening the values step by step. Here, the form emerges through controlled layering, with each stroke reinforcing the structure rather than removing it.

You can also treat the underpainting as a rough sketch—a simplified construction that establishes only the essential relationships. In this case, the values do not need to be perfectly resolved. They serve as a guide, something you refine and develop further

in the color layers. In other words, the underpainting can function either as a foundation or as a nearly complete work in itself.

Personally, I often push the umber underpainting as far as possible, almost as if it were the final painting. I establish all the values, all the major relationships, and even a significant level of detail. When I later apply color, I am not inventing anything new—I am simply repeating the tonal structure that already exists, as described earlier.

At the same time, I do not limit myself to a single method. I combine these approaches depending on what feels right in the moment. Sometimes a loose, simplified underpainting is enough—as long as the umber is present and can interact with the color layers, enriching them through subtle transparency. Other times, I take the underpainting to such a level of completion that it could stand on its own as a finished piece. In fact, there have been occasions when I chose to leave the painting in the underpainting stage entirely—because it already felt complete exactly as it was.

From this, the number of layers becomes a matter of refinement rather than a fixed rule. In my own workflow, I typically work in two layers, but this is not something I plan in advance. The process is gradual. I apply the umber step by step, deepening the values progressively until I reach the desired result. The painting evolves through controlled darkening, not through a predetermined number of passes.

Sometimes a single layer of umber is enough. The structure falls into place quickly, and the underpainting already serves its purpose. At other times, I return to certain areas multiple times—two, sometimes three passes—until the values and transitions feel fully resolved. When working with thin, diluted layers of umber, the process itself allows for flexibility. Technically, you can continue layering without strict limitation. However, in practice, there is a natural threshold. Around three layers, you can already achieve a high level of detail and control. Beyond that, additional layers often bring diminishing returns and may even begin to reduce clarity if not handled carefully.

The key is not how many layers you use, but whether each layer moves the painting closer to its final structure.



Artwork — A refined umber stage can stand almost as a finished image. The question is not how much brown is present, but whether the value hierarchy is already convincing.

STUDIO NOTE

When the brown layer already feels complete, slow down. Color should enrich a strong image, not rescue a weak one.

STUDIO NOTE

Stop the umber stage when the main light, shadow, edge hierarchy, and form read clearly. More detail is useful only if it clarifies the structure.

In the practical section, I will demonstrate this process on specific examples, showing how these layers are built and how I approach them in my own work.

3.3 Raw Umber vs. Burnt Umber

Why Umber? Among all the pigments available to the painter, umber occupies a unique and almost irreplaceable position—especially when it comes to underpainting. Its use is not a coincidence, nor merely a historical habit passed down through generations. It is the result of practical experience refined over centuries. Painters returned to umber again and again because it works. At its core, umber is perfectly suited for one fundamental task: building value.



Figure 3 — Raw umber and burnt umber: related earth pigments with different temperature, handling, and optical weight. Notice how each mixture suggests a different mood.

Unlike more vibrant pigments, umber does not compete for attention. It remains visually quiet, allowing the painter to focus entirely on structure. It offers a natural range of tones that can move from light, transparent washes to deep, rich shadows without becoming visually aggressive. This makes it an ideal tool for constructing form—where clarity matters more than color.

But its strength goes beyond appearance. Umber is also a highly cooperative material. One of its most important properties is its relatively fast drying time. Due to its natural composition—rich in earth pigments and metal oxides—it dries significantly faster than many other oil colors. This makes it particularly valuable in a layered process, where each stage depends on the stability of the one beneath it. A fast-drying underpainting allows the painter to move forward without unnecessary delays, maintaining momentum while preserving structural integrity. This is one of the reasons why umber became such a dominant choice in classical painting. It fits the logic of the process.

Although both umbers belong to the same family, raw umber and burnt umber behave quite differently, and understanding these differences is essential. Raw umber is cooler, often carrying a subtle greenish undertone. This neutrality makes it an excellent foundation, especially when the goal is to keep the underpainting visually restrained. It does not impose a strong color bias, which allows later layers—especially glazes—to remain clean and unaffected. However, this neutrality comes at a cost.

Raw umber can feel heavier and less responsive under the brush. It does not flow as easily, and achieving smooth transitions or fine detail can be more demanding. The paint can appear slightly dull or resistant if not handled carefully, especially in more refined passages.

Burnt umber, by contrast, is warmer, richer, and more fluid. The process of heating the pigment transforms its character, giving it a smoother handling quality and making it easier to manipulate. It spreads more evenly, responds more predictably, and allows for greater precision when working into detail.

For this reason, many painters find burnt umber more comfortable to use—especially when pushing the underpainting toward a higher level of finish. But again, there is a trade-off. Burnt umber carries a noticeable warmth. If used without consideration, it can influence the entire tonal character of the painting, introducing a warmth that may not always be desirable. In some cases, especially when aiming for cooler atmospheres or neutral lighting, this can become a limitation.

In practice, the choice is rarely absolute. Some painters prefer raw umber for its neutrality and use it as a base, then introduce burnt umber selectively for areas that require more fluidity or warmth. Others favor burnt umber for its handling and compensate for its temperature through later layers. Personally, I often move between the two depending on what the painting demands. There are moments when I need control and neutrality, and others when I need speed, flow, and precision. The key is understanding what each pigment offers—and using it intentionally.

Another important aspect of umber is how it behaves within a layered system. Because it is naturally low in chroma, it integrates seamlessly with subsequent color layers. It does not fight against them. Instead, it supports them—subtly influencing the final result without overpowering it. This is especially important in transparent or semi-transparent painting, where the underlayer remains visually active.

Umbre also allows for both additive and subtractive approaches. You can build it up gradually through thin layers, deepening the values step by step. Or you can apply it broadly and remove it in the light areas, revealing the ground beneath. This flexibility makes it an incredibly versatile tool, adaptable to different methods and personal workflows.

Ultimately, the reason umber works so well is not just because of what it is, but because of how well it fits into the logic of layered painting. It dries at the right speed. It behaves predictably. It offers the right tonal range. It stays visually subordinate to the final layers. Everything about it supports the process rather than complicates it. And that is why it has endured. Not because tradition demands it—but because, from a technical standpoint, it remains one of the most efficient and reliable materials a painter can use when building a painting from the ground up.

KEY PRINCIPLE

1. Underpainting is value training inside the painting process.
2. Raw umber is cooler and more neutral; burnt umber is warmer and more fluid.
3. The color layer should respect the value layer beneath it.

Studio action: Copy these points into your sketchbook before starting the next painting.

Studio question: Which decision in your current process would become easier if the value structure were solved first?

BURNT UMBER

warmer / redder



RAW UMBER

cooler / quieter



Pigment detail — Burnt umber is warmer and redder; raw umber is cooler, quieter, and more neutral.

STUDIO TEST

Prepare two small swatches on the same imprimatura. Thin raw umber and burnt umber to the same consistency and place them side by side. Compare their temperature, transparency, flow, and handling.

Choose raw umber when you need cooler restraint and neutrality. Choose burnt umber when you want warmer movement, smoother transitions, and richer transparent shadows.

Do not choose by habit. Choose the pigment that supports the atmosphere of the painting.

04 PAINTING SURFACE

The surface is not passive. It determines how the wash moves, how values lift, and how the painting will age.

KEY PRINCIPLE

The surface is not a background. It is the stage on which every later decision happens. A poor ground makes even good technique feel difficult; a refined ground makes control feel natural.



Plate 5 — A prepared surface gives the umber layer room to breathe. Smoothness, absorbency, and tooth all influence how cleanly values can be controlled.

Choosing the right painting surface is one of the most important decisions you make before a single brushstroke touches the panel. It directly influences not only how your underpainting behaves, but also how well the finished artwork will stand the test of time.

Centuries ago, artists had far fewer options. Long before oil paintings appeared on stretched canvas, most works were executed on wooden panels—surfaces that offered stability, longevity, and a finely controlled texture. Today, we're fortunate to have a wide range of materials available: linen, cotton, MDF, hardwood, aluminum composite panels, and more. Each one comes with its own strengths and limitations.

For umber underpainting in particular, the quality of the surface is crucial. A smooth ground with minimal tooth allows for delicate blending, subtle transitions, and precise control of values. A rough or heavily textured surface, on the other hand, can make blending difficult and break the continuity of fine details, especially in the early tonal layers.

In this chapter, we'll explore how to choose the right substrate and, more importantly, how to prepare it properly. The goal is simple: to create a stable, archival, beautifully receptive surface that supports the underpainting process and allows your work to endure—unchanged—for generations.

Before we begin laying down the first transparent strokes of umber, we must address the most fundamental question: what should you paint on? Rather than diving into a long historical overview of past practices, let's focus on what you can choose from today—and why certain modern materials may serve you better than others.

STUDIO NOTE

Choose the support for the kind of control you need: canvas for liveliness and touch, panel for precision and stability.

While it is absolutely possible to follow the traditional path using chalk gesso and hand-prepared wooden panels, just as the Old Masters did, we now have access to materials that are more stable, easier to prepare, and far more consistent in quality. These newer surfaces can be seen as refined evolutions of those historical methods—modern upgrades that preserve the essential qualities of the old approach while reducing its labor and unpredictability.

Everything discussed in this chapter aims to translate the spirit of classical preparation into a contemporary workflow: honoring the timeless principles of the craft, but wrapping them in materials and techniques that make the process more efficient without compromising the durability or beauty of the final painting. Let's begin with the most fundamental choice of all: the stretched canvas. For me personally, it remains one of my favorite surfaces to paint on—and I suspect many painters feel the same. There is something unmistakable about the gentle give of canvas under the brush, the way it responds to pressure and movement, and the subtle

vibration that no rigid panel can replicate. Canvas has a unique “feel,” and for underpainting it offers a balance of control, comfort, and tradition that many artists simply gravitate toward.

4.1 CANVAS – CHOOSING THE RIGHT WEAVE AND WEIGHT

When selecting a canvas, two parameters matter more than anything else: the weave (texture) and the weight (grammage).

Weave / Texture:

For detailed umber underpainting, a surface that is too coarse becomes a real obstacle. Heavy texture disrupts blending, breaks soft transitions, and forces the brush to skip across the peaks of the weave. For this reason, I choose canvases with a fine or extra-fine weave, often made from cotton-linen blends. They provide the smoothness needed for delicate tonal work while still offering the pleasant elasticity that pure linen sometimes lacks.

Weight / Grammage:

A good canvas should feel substantial. Too light, and it may sag or distort over time; too heavy, and the weave becomes unnecessarily aggressive. A balanced medium-to-heavy weight—typically in the 300–450 g/m² range—offers an ideal compromise between durability and smoothness.

Linen, Cotton, and the Belgian Standard

Linen has long been considered the gold standard, and Belgian linen in particular is prized for its strength, stability, and long fibers. However, for underpainting work where subtle blending is essential, I often prefer a cotton-linen mix or a fine cotton duck with a tighter weave. These blends soften the surface slightly, making it gentler for controlled strokes and eliminating the roughness that can interfere with small value shifts. Pure linen is magnificent—but sometimes too textured straight out of the package. Blends can solve that.

The Feel of Canvas vs. Rigid Panels

One of the biggest advantages of canvas is its elasticity. A brushstroke on a stretched canvas feels alive—it yields, it absorbs the gesture, it carries a softness you simply cannot get from a rigid panel. Panels offer precision and absolute stability, but canvas offers movement, and that movement can make the underpainting process more intuitive and expressive. This responsiveness is exactly why so many painters prefer canvas for the early stages of a layered painting, where transitions and brushwork matter deeply.

Stretcher Bars: Why Cheap Ones Fail

Modern stores are filled with inexpensive pre-stretched canvases, and while they're perfectly fine for color studies or quick sketches, there's a major issue: most of them

cannot be tightened. Their corners are stapled or glued instead of joined with wedges, which means you can’t adjust the tension as the canvas naturally loosens over months and years. A professional canvas should always have: expandable stretcher bars, proper corner joints and wooden keys (wedges) for tightening.

TECHNICAL NOTE

For serious layered oil painting, look for fine weave, stable stretcher bars, real corner keys, and a surface that can be re-tensioned over time.

Canvas is a living material—it responds to humidity, temperature, tension, and time. Being able to adjust it is not optional; it’s essential. For any serious painting, especially one created with multiple layers, always choose a professional stretcher frame that can be re-tensioned.

Advantages of Canvas	Disadvantages of Canvas
Lightweight and easy to transport or store.	Lower mechanical durability — can tear more easily than a panel.
Pleasant elasticity and a soft, responsive feel under the brush.	Sensitive to humidity and temperature changes.
A traditional surface with centuries of use in oil painting.	Can loosen over time and may require re-tightening.
Excellent for subtle transitions and value work.	Requires proper priming; raw canvas is highly absorbent.
Professional stretcher bars allow re-tensioning with keys.	Cheap store-bought canvases usually cannot be tightened.
Available in a wide range of weights and textures.	Rough textures make blending and underpainting more difficult.
Works beautifully with umber underpainting and later glazing.	Elastic surface can be a drawback for hyper-precise detail work.

4.2 ACM PANELS – STABILITY, PRECISION, AND THE MODERN UPGRADE

While canvas offers a soft, responsive feel, aluminum composite panels—commonly referred to as ACM panels—represent almost the complete opposite end of the spectrum. They are rigid, perfectly flat, dimensionally stable, and nearly immune to the environmental issues that plague traditional supports. For many contemporary realist painters, ACM has become the ultimate foundation for detailed, layered oil painting.

What ACM Panels Actually Are

ACM panels are made from two thin sheets of aluminum bonded to a polyethylene or mineral-filled core. The result is a surface that is incredibly strong yet surprisingly lightweight. Unlike wooden panels, they do not warp, swell, or contract with humidity. Unlike canvas, they never loosen, sag, or vibrate under the brush. This structural stability makes ACM one of the most reliable supports available today.

Why ACM Works So Well for Underpainting

For umber underpainting—especially if you enjoy working with very fine details—ACM panels provide a perfectly controlled environment. Their rigidity allows you to make precise value adjustments without any movement beneath the brush. Transitions can be razor-sharp or extremely soft depending on your medium and technique, and the absence of texture means the brush glides effortlessly.

The smoothness of ACM is especially helpful if you work in multiple layers. Because the panel doesn't flex, the dried lower layers remain intact and undisturbed even when you apply pressure in later stages. Every stroke behaves exactly as you intend, which makes ACM ideal for polished realism.

Surface Feel: Canvas vs. ACM

Painting on ACM feels different—more like skating on a polished floor than walking on rich soil. There is no give, no vibration, no softness. Some artists find this liberating, others find it sterile. For me, ACM panels are perfect when I want total control: clean edges, crisp forms, glassy transitions, and a surface that never surprises me. However, what you gain in control, you lose in tactile feedback. If canvas feels alive, ACM feels clinical. The choice between the two often comes down to the style of painting and the emotional connection you want with the surface.

Longevity and Archival Concerns

Because ACM does not warp, crack, or flex, it offers remarkable archival qualities. In controlled indoor conditions, an ACM panel may outlast traditional wooden panels by centuries. The aluminum skins are corrosion-resistant, and the composite structure is designed to stay flat even under thermal shifts. For artists who think in terms of generational longevity, ACM is one of the most stable options available.

When to Choose ACM Panels

ACM panels are perfect if you're aiming for:

STUDIO NOTE

I reach for ACM when the underpainting needs to become almost final: crisp edges, polished detail, and a surface that will not move under pressure.

1. extreme detail,
2. polished realism,
3. multi-layered processes,

- 4. a surface that never moves,
- 5. maximum archival stability.

They may not give you the emotional softness of canvas, but they give you an unmatched level of control—and sometimes, that’s exactly what the painting demands.

Advantages of ACM Panels	Disadvantages of ACM Panels
Extremely rigid and dimensionally stable.	No elasticity — the surface feels “hard” and less expressive.
Does not warp, swell, or contract with humidity.	Requires proper priming; raw aluminum cannot be painted on.
Perfectly smooth surface ideal for fine detail and realism.	Smoothness may feel too slick for artists who prefer texture.
Lightweight despite its strength.	Less traditional; some collectors prefer classic canvas supports.
Highly archival and long-lasting.	More expensive than standard canvas or MDF.
Ideal for multi-layered painting, glazing, and fine underpainting.	Provides no tactile feedback; can feel sterile compared to canvas.
Edges stay sharp, transitions stay clean, and layers stay intact.	Harder edges may require adjustments in brushing technique.

In the end, the surface you paint on becomes more than a technical choice; it becomes part of the creative dialogue. In this chapter, I focused on the two supports I use most often in my own studio: stretched canvas and ACM panels. There are, of course, many other options available—wooden panels, MDF boards, hardboard, and traditional hand-prepared surfaces—but in my workflow, these two offer the best balance of practicality, feel, and long-term stability.

As you’ve seen, neither surface is objectively “better.” Each one carries its own characteristics. Canvas gives you softness, movement, and a familiar traditional feel. ACM gives you precision, stability, and absolute control. The choice ultimately depends on what the painting needs and how you want the brush to react beneath your hand.

Personally, I switch between the two depending on the vision I have for the piece. When I know that the underpainting will essentially become the final artwork—when the umber layer itself will hold the form, the values, and even the emotional impact—I often reach for an ACM panel. Its rigid, perfectly smooth surface allows the

underpainting to stand confidently on its own, sometimes with only a touch of gray or white accents. In these cases, the panel almost becomes part of the final aesthetic.

But when I want more softness and a livelier interaction with the brush, or when I want the subtle vibration of the surface to influence my strokes, I choose canvas. There are days when the painting simply “asks” for it. And I’ve learned to trust that instinct.

You may find that alternating between the two brings clarity to your own process as well. The right support is not just a technical choice—it shapes the entire experience of painting, from the first transparent wash of umber to the final layer of varnish. Over time, you’ll discover which surface aligns best with your vision, your touch, and the kind of paintings you want to create. Canvas speaks softly beneath the brush, and for many of us, that conversation is what makes it such a timeless favorite.

4.3 PRIMING THE SURFACE – PREPARING THE GROUND FOR UMBER

Preparing the Ground for UMBER Underpainting

Before we speak about *imprimatura*, before the first transparent wash of umber touches the surface, there is a decision that quietly determines everything that follows. It is a decision most painters rush through, underestimate, or treat as a mere technical necessity. And yet, it is here—long before the painting visibly begins—that the fate of the entire work is often decided.

The ground is not a neutral backdrop. It is the interface between your painting and time. It controls how the umber wash behaves, how easily values can be adjusted, how light travels through later layers, and how the paint film will age over decades. A poorly prepared ground can sabotage even the most refined technique. A well-prepared one, on the other hand, works silently in your favor from the first stroke to the final varnish. In layered oil painting, priming is not preparation in the casual sense of the word. It is the first structural layer of the artwork.

The surface is the first collaborator in the painting.

STUDIO NOTE

Strictly speaking, two different processes are involved here, although modern painters often merge them into one and forget their original purpose. The first is sealing: protecting the support itself—canvas, panel, or board—from direct contact with oil. Oil slowly penetrates fibers and porous materials. Over time, this weakens canvas, embrittles organic supports, and introduces instability that no amount of skill can fully undo later. The second process is priming: creating the actual paintable surface, the layer on which the underpainting will live and interact.

Modern materials often combine these functions, especially in acrylic-based systems, which is why many painters never consciously think about sealing at all. But

the principle remains unchanged. The support must be protected, and the painting must sit on a surface whose behavior is predictable and controlled.

For umber underpainting in particular, the single most important property of the ground is not its brand, nor even its color or texture, but its absorbency. UMBER underpainting is typically thin, lean, and transparent. It behaves more like a stain or wash than like body color. The surface can either allow you to move that wash, soften it, lift light, and model form gradually—or it can seize the paint instantly, staining too fast and locking you out of subtle control.

A ground that is too absorbent will drink the umber immediately. The wash goes down darker than intended, dries unevenly, and becomes patchy. Soft transitions turn grainy, lifting lights becomes difficult, and the underpainting takes on a dry, dusty appearance that later glazes struggle to revive. On the other extreme, a surface that is too slick can cause the paint to bead up, slide unpredictably, or lose adhesion.

What we are looking for is not maximum absorbency or maximum sealing, but balance. A surface that grips the paint just enough to anchor it, while still allowing manipulation, adjustment, and refinement.

TECHNICAL NOTE

A good ground should let a thin umber wash move for a moment before it locks in. If it stains instantly, it is too thirsty. If it beads up, it is too sealed.

In contemporary practice, most painters work within one of three broad ground systems. The first is the acrylic gesso system, which has become the modern standard due to its speed, availability, and ease of use. The second is the oil-based ground, including traditional lead grounds, which more closely resemble historical painting behavior. The third is a hybrid approach that combines modern sealing with carefully controlled surface preparation to achieve a more classical response.

Acrylic gesso is ubiquitous, and for good reason. It dries quickly, is easy to apply, and provides reasonable protection for the support. When applied correctly, it can serve as a perfectly viable foundation for umber underpainting. However, acrylic gesso has a distinct character that must be understood. Straight from the brush, many acrylic grounds are excessively absorbent and slightly chalky. For thin umber washes, this can be problematic if left unaddressed.

The solution is not to reject acrylic gesso, but to refine it. Multiple thin coats are far superior to a single thick one. Thick applications tend to shrink unevenly, exaggerate texture, and can even crack. Thin, evenly applied layers create a more uniform surface. Once fully dry, light sanding plays a crucial role. It reduces excessive tooth, removes surface irregularities, and transforms a raw, grabby ground into something far more cooperative. With proper sanding, acrylic gesso can feel surprisingly close to more traditional grounds and respond beautifully to umber-style underpainting.

Oil-based grounds behave differently. They are generally less absorbent, smoother under the brush, and more forgiving when working with transparent paint. A thin umber wash on a good oil ground remains workable longer, allowing edges to be softened and values to be adjusted with ease. This is one reason many painters associate oil grounds with a sense of depth and richness. However, these advantages come at the cost of longer drying times and greater demands on patience and discipline. Traditional lead grounds, in particular, offer exceptional handling qualities, but they also require careful, responsible use and an understanding of their material risks. They are not magical solutions; they are simply one option among many, and not a necessary one for achieving classical results.

Between these two extremes lies the hybrid approach favored by many contemporary realists. In this method, the support is sealed and primed using modern materials, but the surface is then refined—through sanding, surface control, and the use of a carefully designed imprimatura—to achieve the desired absorbency and behavior. This approach preserves the practical advantages of modern materials while restoring much of the handling quality associated with older techniques.

Regardless of the system used, surface texture deserves special attention. Underpainting reveals texture mercilessly. Thin paint exaggerates every ridge, every irregularity, every inconsistency in the ground. For controlled umber underpainting, smoother surfaces are generally more forgiving and more versatile. Fine-weave canvas, carefully prepared linen, and smooth panels allow subtle transitions, clean lifting of lights, and precise value control. Rougher textures can certainly be used, but they lead to a different kind of underpainting—more broken, more painterly, and less controlled. Neither is inherently wrong, but the choice must be conscious.

When preparing canvas, the goal is to create a stable, evenly tensioned support with a refined surface that neither resists nor devours the paint. Proper stretcher bars, thin and even applications of ground, sufficient drying time, and gentle surface refinement all contribute to this. On rigid supports such as ACM panels, the priorities shift slightly. These panels offer exceptional dimensional stability and smoothness, but they require proper surface preparation to ensure adhesion. Once prepared correctly, they provide an almost ideal environment for precise, layered underpainting.

There are several mistakes that consistently undermine underpainting before it even begins. Painting directly on raw canvas is one of them. Applying ground too thickly is another. Leaving the surface excessively absorbent is a frequent and often unrecognized problem. Skipping surface refinement entirely, or constantly switching preparation systems from one painting to the next, prevents the development of true control. Underpainting is about predictability, and predictability begins with a surface you understand intimately.

4.4 MY PERSONAL WORKFLOW

With the theory behind us, it is time to move directly into practice. In the following lines, I will describe how I personally prepare my painting surfaces in the studio. Fortunately, we live in a time when high-quality materials are readily available, whether online or in specialized art supply stores. For that reason, whenever possible, I prefer to leave the basic preparation to manufacturers and focus my time and energy on painting itself.

I work most often on stretched canvas and ACM panels, and more recently I have also been experimenting with wooden boards. In terms of surface smoothness, well-prepared wooden panels can be very similar to ACM, though they retain a slightly more traditional feel under the brush. Regardless of the support, my approach to preparation follows the same underlying logic.

For basic priming, I use acrylic gesso. Some painters may see this as a questionable choice and argue that classical techniques demand classical grounds—chalk gesso, lead-based preparations, and other historical methods. That view is understandable. For me, however, acrylic gesso represents a practical compromise between speed and quality. Because I apply an imprimatura afterward, the painting process transitions naturally from an acrylic base to an oil-based system. I will return to this transition in more detail in the next chapter.

4.4.1 Method 1 – Fine-Weave Canvas

Canvas is the surface I use most frequently. To save time, I usually buy canvases that are already stretched and pre-primed with acrylic gesso. In most cases, I choose canvases from Belle Arti, a well-established Italian manufacturer. This choice is not based on any belief that their canvases are somehow exceptional or unique. Rather, they are widely available in my region, and I have found their quality to be consistent and reliable. In practice, any fine-weave canvas from a reputable manufacturer will perform in much the same way.

The key factor is the fineness of the weave. A coarse canvas texture interferes with the development of detailed underpainting, making subtle transitions more difficult and forcing the paint to break across the surface. For umber underpainting, a finer weave is simply more cooperative.

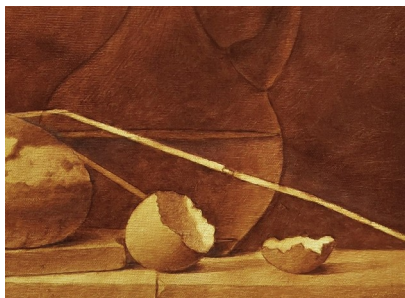


Figure 4 — Thin paint reveals the surface. A refined ground makes subtle transitions easier to control and prevents the wash from turning patchy.

Most of these canvases arrive already primed with acrylic gesso, but I never consider them ready to paint straight out of the packaging. I always apply additional layers myself.

My basic process looks like this:

1. After unpacking the canvas, I lightly sand the surface using a fine sanding block. This removes small irregularities and softens the factory-applied texture.
2. I then apply four thin layers of acrylic gesso. For application, I use a large, flat brush made from relatively soft natural hair. If the gesso is too thick, I dilute it slightly with water until it reaches a smooth, flowing consistency. It should not be watery, but fluid enough that brush marks level out on their own. A smooth surface at this stage is essential; heavy texture is undesirable.

TECHNICAL NOTE

Four thin coats are safer than one thick coat. Thickness creates texture and risk; controlled repetition creates a refined, predictable surface.

3. Each layer of gesso is applied thinly and allowed to dry completely. Once dry, the surface is lightly sanded before the next layer is added. With each new application, I change the direction of the brushstrokes, crossing the previous layer. Over time, this creates a subtle, grid-like micro-texture that gently follows the underlying weave of the canvas without exaggerating it.

After the final layer, the canvas is ready for work. The surface is no longer rough, but it still retains enough tooth to hold the paint securely. The umber wash does not slide uncontrollably, yet it remains responsive to lifting, softening, and gradual value modeling. This balance—neither too slick nor too absorbent—is exactly what I want for underpainting. Prepared in this way, the canvas stops being something you have to fight. It becomes quiet, predictable, and reliable, allowing you to focus entirely on the development of form, light, and structure.

4.4.2 Method 2 – Preparing an ACM Panel

As mentioned earlier, this option offers several clear advantages, and from time to time I deliberately choose ACM panels—especially for paintings that I already consider complete at the umber stage. Yes, some works I intentionally leave in underpainting. I like their raw honesty, and they exist slightly outside the realm of conventional finished paintings. In those cases, the umber layer is not a step toward something else; it is the final statement.

The preparation process is very similar to that of canvas, with one important difference: there is no need to worry about moisture isolation or fabric protection. ACM panels are dimensionally stable, rigid, and unaffected by humidity, which makes them exceptionally reliable supports.

The preparation itself follows these steps:

1. ACM panels are supplied with a factory-applied lacquered surface on both sides. This smooth finish is not suitable for painting; gesso would not adhere properly. The first step is therefore to mechanically roughen the surface. I use a coarser sanding block and work the panel with circular motions, abrading the glossy coating until a fine network of micro-scratches appears. These scratches provide the necessary mechanical key for the ground to grip. Once the surface is evenly abraded, I remove all sanding dust thoroughly before moving on.
2. Degreasing is a crucial step and should not be rushed. For this, I use clean alcohol and lint-free pads or paper towels. I lightly moisten the pad with alcohol and wipe the entire surface, removing any remaining grease, fingerprints, or invisible contaminants. From this point on, I am careful not to touch the cleaned surface with my bare fingers, as skin oils can compromise adhesion. The alcohol evaporates almost immediately, leaving the panel clean and ready for priming—whether with acrylic or oil-based gesso.
3. The gesso is applied according to the same principles described earlier: four thin layers, applied in alternating directions. Each layer is allowed to dry fully before the next is added. This cross-application creates a perfectly even, refined surface that is ideally suited for detailed umber underpainting. The result is a ground that is smooth, stable, and entirely predictable under the brush.

Once prepared in this way, the ACM panel becomes an exceptionally precise painting surface. There is no vibration, no flex, no hidden movement beneath the paint. Every adjustment in value, every lifted highlight, every softened edge behaves exactly as intended. For detailed umber work—and especially for underpaintings that are meant to stand on their own—this level of control can be invaluable.

4.4.3 Method 3 – Preparing a Wooden Panel

Wooden panels represent the most traditional painting support discussed in this book. Long before the widespread use of stretched canvas, painters relied almost exclusively on wood as their primary surface. Even today, despite the availability of highly stable modern materials such as ACM, wood retains a particular presence and character that many painters instinctively associate with the Old Master tradition.

I still return to wooden panels from time to time. While they cannot rival ACM in terms of absolute dimensional stability and resistance to environmental change, they offer something else in exchange: a tactile, classical feel that subtly influences the way the brush moves and the way the painting is perceived. When prepared properly, wood can behave very similarly to ACM in terms of smoothness and precision, while carrying a more traditional visual and material language.

The preparation process is largely identical to that of ACM panels, with one crucial additional step. Unlike aluminum composite material, wood is organic. It reacts to humidity, temperature, and changes in the environment. For that reason, it must be carefully isolated before any ground is applied.

The preparation follows these steps:

1. Surface sanding begin by sanding the wooden panel to create an even, smooth surface and to remove any factory residues or surface irregularities. Depending on the initial condition of the board, I use a medium to fine sanding block, working evenly across the surface. The goal is not to aggressively shape the panel, but to create a clean, uniform base for the following layers. Once sanding is complete, all dust is thoroughly removed.
2. Moisture isolation (sealing the wood). This step is essential and must not be skipped. Before applying any gesso, the wood must be sealed to protect it from moisture and from direct contact with water-based or oil-based layers. For this purpose, I use an acrylic sealing product, although any high-quality isolation medium designed for this purpose can serve the same function.

The sealer is applied in one or more thin, even coats, ensuring full coverage of the surface. Once dry, it creates a barrier that prevents the wood from absorbing moisture and swelling beneath the paint layers. After sealing, I avoid touching the surface with bare hands to keep it free from oils and contaminants.

Applying the ground. After the isolation layer has fully dried, the panel is ready for gesso. From this point onward, the process mirrors the preparation of an ACM panel. I apply four thin layers of gesso, alternating the direction of the brushstrokes with each layer. Each application is allowed to dry completely before the next is added. This cross-layering produces a smooth, refined surface that is ideal for controlled umber underpainting and detailed value work.

Once prepared in this way, the wooden panel becomes a highly responsive and precise painting surface. It lacks the absolute rigidity of ACM, but when properly sealed and grounded, it behaves predictably and supports fine, layered work extremely well. The underpainting develops cleanly, transitions remain controllable, and the surface retains a quiet solidity beneath the brush.

Wood will never be as indifferent to time and climate as aluminum composite material. That is simply the nature of organic matter. But when prepared with care, it offers a compelling balance between classical tradition and modern control. For painters drawn to the historical lineage of panel painting, this method provides a way to honor that tradition without sacrificing the technical demands of contemporary layered oil painting.

With the surface now prepared, we have reached the final moment before the painting truly begins. At this stage, the support is no longer just canvas, aluminum, or wood—it has become a stable, controlled ground, ready to carry everything that will follow. The decisions made here may seem invisible once color arrives, but they remain quietly present for the entire life of the painting, influencing adhesion, handling, and longevity from the first wash to the last glaze.

And yet, even a perfectly primed surface is not the ideal starting point for an umber underpainting. Between the neutral white of gesso and the first transparent brown stain, one more layer must come first—an intentional transition layer that sets the tonal key, calms the absorbency of the ground, and prepares the painting for the watercolor-like behavior of umber. That layer is the *imprimatura*. In the next chapter, we will move from preparation into the first real act of painting: the thin, controlled film that precedes the brown underpainting and determines the atmosphere of the entire work before a single shadow is modeled.

KEY PRINCIPLE

1. Smoothness controls detail and blending.
2. Absorbency controls how the wash behaves.
3. Canvas gives touch; ACM gives precision; wood gives tradition with extra preparation.

Studio action: Copy these points into your sketchbook before starting the next painting.

Studio question: Which decision in your current process would become easier if the value structure were solved first?



*Portrait study — A firm, clearly established drawing beneath the *imprimatura* keeps the structure visible through later paint layers. If that drawing is allowed to disappear uncontrollably under color, the painter wastes valuable work and must struggle to find the form again instead of developing it with confidence.*

OS IMPRIMATURA

A quiet tonal bridge between the white ground and the first brown wash — the layer that sets the climate of the painting.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Imprimatura is the quiet layer that turns a white support into a painting environment. It sets value, temperature, absorbency, and atmosphere before the first umber shadow begins.



Plate 6 — A toned beginning can already suggest atmosphere, direction of light, and the emotional key of the whole work.

Before the first brown stain of the underpainting touches the surface, there is a quieter, often underestimated step that fundamentally shapes everything that follows. This step is the *imprimatura*. At its most basic level, *imprimatura* is a thin, translucent layer of tone applied over the ground before any real modeling begins. It is not drawing, not underpainting, and certainly not color in the usual sense. It is a deliberate transition — a bridge between the raw, artificial whiteness of the primed surface and the living structure of the painting itself.

A pure white ground may seem neutral, even ideal, but in reality it is anything but. White is optically aggressive. It exaggerates contrast, distorts value relationships, and forces the painter to judge light and shadow against a reference that does not exist in nature. Almost nothing in the visible world is perceived against absolute white. As a result, painting directly on a white surface often leads to overly dark shadows, chalky lights, and a constant struggle to judge true tonal balance.

KEY PRINCIPLE

White makes every first shadow feel too dark. A toned surface calms the eye and makes value judgment less dramatic and more accurate.

This is why the *imprimatura* should be judged before the drawing becomes complicated. A good toned ground does not call attention to itself. It simply lowers the tension of the white surface and gives the first umber decisions a calmer place to appear.

In the studio, look for a tone that feels quiet rather than decorative. If it is too dark, every later light must be forced back upward. If it is too bright or patchy, the first shadows become difficult to judge. The best *imprimatura* almost disappears as a separate layer because it has become the air of the painting.

The test is simple: place a first transparent stroke of umber on the surface. If the stroke can be softened, lifted, and compared without panic, the ground is ready for the brown structure.

This small test protects the entire sequence. If the surface accepts a delicate correction at this stage, later modeling will feel natural. If even one simple stroke becomes hard, patchy, or uncontrollable, the problem belongs to the ground and *imprimatura*, not to the drawing or the brush.



Figure 5 — A toned ground calms the white surface and lets the first value decisions read more naturally.

The first and most immediate purpose of the imprimatura is therefore optical. By removing the blinding whiteness of the ground, it sets an initial tonal key for the entire painting. This thin veil of tone compresses the value range slightly, bringing lights and shadows closer together and making their relationships easier to control. Instead of fighting extreme contrast from the very first stroke, the painter begins within a moderated, unified tonal environment.

This compression of values is subtle but profound. Lights no longer need to be forced downward to compensate for the white beneath them, and shadows no longer feel artificially heavy. The entire painting starts from a middle ground — not in terms of subject matter, but in terms of perception. From that point on, every value decision becomes more accurate, more natural, and more closely aligned with how light behaves in the real world.

Historically, the imprimatura served another crucial role that is easy to forget today. In traditional painting systems, the ground was often highly absorbent. Chalk-based gesso, glue grounds, and other classical preparations could draw oil aggressively out of the paint layers placed on top of them. This absorbency made it difficult to control thin washes, caused uneven drying, and could weaken the cohesion of early paint layers.

The imprimatura acted as a form of isolation. By sealing the ground with a thin oil-containing layer, painters reduced excessive absorbency and created a more predictable surface for subsequent work. In this sense, imprimatura was not merely an aesthetic choice but a technical necessity. It stabilized the interface between the ground and the paint, allowing transparent layers to behave consistently and adhere properly.

Over time, as materials evolved, the role of the imprimatura expanded. What began as a practical solution gradually became a powerful expressive tool. Painters realized that the color and temperature of this initial tone could influence the entire emotional character of a painting. A warm imprimatura could infuse the work with a subtle inner glow; a cooler one could create restraint, distance, or clarity. Even when barely visible in the final image, its presence continued to shape how colors interacted and how light was perceived.

The development of oil painting in Northern Europe brought the imprimatura into sharper focus. Early Netherlandish painters worked on light grounds but rarely left them untouched. Thin tonal films — often warm, sometimes slightly gray or ochre — softened the surface before detailed work began. In Italy, particularly during the Renaissance, darker and warmer imprimature became more common, serving both to unify the composition and to provide a ready-made half-tone against which lights could be built.

By the time of the Baroque, the imprimatura was no longer just preparation; it was part of the design. Painters used it consciously to establish atmosphere, to unify large areas of the canvas, and to accelerate the painting process by allowing parts of the ground to remain visible as mid-tones. In many cases, the imprimatura is not something that disappears beneath the painting — it becomes one of its silent structural layers.

Today, with modern primers and manufactured surfaces, it is tempting to treat the imprimatura as optional or purely stylistic. In reality, its function remains as relevant as ever. Even on contemporary acrylic-primed canvases or composite panels, the transition from ground to paint still matters. The surface must be visually calmed, absorbency must be moderated, and the painting must begin within a controlled tonal space.

Seen in this light, imprimatura is not a ritual borrowed from tradition, nor a decorative stain applied out of habit. It is the first conscious decision about light, value, and atmosphere. Long before form is modeled and long before color enters the picture, the imprimatura quietly defines the conditions under which everything else will exist.

Only once this tonal foundation is in place does the brown underpainting truly make sense. The imprimatura prepares the stage. The umber will soon build the

structure. And together, they form the opening act of a painting that is designed not for speed, but for clarity, depth, and longevity.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Imprimatura is not decoration. It is a controlled tonal climate for the painting.

5.1 Light and Dark Imprimatura: Setting the Point of Departure

Imprimatura can be either light or dark, warm or cool, depending on the historical period, the intended workflow, and the painter's way of thinking about light. What matters, however, is not the exact tone, but the principle behind it. A painting that follows a layered classical structure never begins directly on the raw white of the ground. The white of a primed surface is an artificial condition, one that does not exist in nature and actively distorts the painter's perception of value. For this reason, an umber underpainting is always executed over an imprimatura and never on bare white. The imprimatura establishes the first tonal reality of the painting and creates the visual and technical conditions in which the brown underpainting can function properly.

For practical work, think of light imprimatura as a value agreement made before the painting begins. It tells the painter which areas must remain close to the ground and which areas can be gradually darkened. This prevents the early stage from becoming a fight between raw white and sudden dark brown.

A darker imprimatura can be beautiful, but it changes the entire logic of the process. The painter must then rebuild light with more opacity. In the method used in this book, the light already belongs to the surface. UMBER is used to shape that light, not to replace it.

For that reason, choose the starting tone according to the painting process you intend to use. A light system rewards patience, transparency, and gradual darkening. A darker system rewards stronger opaque reconstruction of light. Both are valid, but they should not be mixed accidentally.

TECHNICAL NOTE

In this method, umber belongs on an imprimatura, not on raw white. The toned ground is part of the system, not an optional cosmetic step.

In the context of this book, which focuses specifically on umber underpainting, the emphasis lies on a light imprimatura. This approach is historically associated with early Netherlandish painting and reaches a refined clarity in the work of Jan van Eyck. In this system, the painting begins from a light tonal ground that already represents a unified field of illumination. Shadows are not constructed by piling darkness onto white, but by gradually darkening this light foundation with transparent umber. Light remains structurally close to the ground, while shadow is built through

controlled subtraction and glazing. The logic is simple but powerful: light is the given state, darkness is the intervention. This method allows for exceptional control over values and produces a sense of inner luminosity that becomes one of the defining characteristics of early Flemish painting.



Figure 6 — Light remains close to the ground while form develops through gradual darkening. This is the essential logic of a light imprimatura system.

Later periods approached the problem from a different angle. During the Baroque, imprimatura often shifted toward a darker or middle-value ground. Instead of beginning from light and moving into shadow, painters started in a compressed mid-tone and developed the image in both directions—darkening with umbers and deep earths, and lightening with lead white. The function of the imprimatura changed accordingly. It was no longer primarily a field of light to be darkened, but a tonal middle register that could serve simultaneously as half-tone, shadow base, and unifying atmosphere. While this approach is highly effective and expressive, it represents a fundamentally different way of constructing the image.

Because this book is devoted specifically to umber underpainting as a structural and optical foundation, the following sections will focus on the light imprimatura tradition. This is not a judgment of superiority, but a matter of clarity and consistency. A light imprimatura makes the logic of umber underpainting most transparent: values are easier to read, the relationship between light and shadow remains explicit, and the role of the brown layer as a shaping and deepening force becomes unmistakable. Before examining optical effects, material behavior, and technical variations, it is essential to understand this starting point. The character of the entire painting is already implied in the tone chosen at this earliest stage.

5.1.1 Optical Function of the Imprimatura

The tone of the imprimatura is not chosen arbitrarily. It is determined by the lightest meaningful value in the finished painting, and this decision has far-reaching optical and structural consequences. In a light-imprimatura system, the ground is set to match the value of the brightest area of the subject. Imagine a simple example: a white ceramic jug placed in light. The value of the imprimatura is chosen to correspond to the value of that jug in its brightest illuminated area. In that specific zone, nothing is painted in the conventional sense. The light already exists. Form is created not by adding paint, but by gradually darkening the surrounding areas. Shadows are introduced by subtraction and modulation, not by building light upward from darkness. The image grows out of light, rather than being forced onto it.

This approach has an important optical consequence that extends far beyond the underpainting stage. Once the umber underpainting is completed and the color layers are added, each area of the painting maintains a consistent tonal identity across all layers. If we translate this into a neutral grayscale to make it easier to visualize: if the illuminated part of the jug has a value of, for example, 4 on a twenty-step value scale, then the imprimatura, the umber underpainting beneath it, and the subsequent color layers all correspond to that same value of 4 in that location. The color may change, transparency may vary, and saturation may increase or decrease, but the underlying value relationship remains stable through the entire stratigraphy of the painting. All values in the image are aligned vertically, layer by layer. This coherence is not only optically convincing; it is structurally intelligent.

The long-term implications of this system become visible with age. Oil paint inevitably changes over time as the refractive index of the medium shifts, oils polymerize, and layers become more transparent or darker. In paintings constructed on a dark or mid-tone imprimatura, especially those typical of later Baroque practice, these changes often lead to a visible darkening of the light areas. Highlights that were once built with lighter paint over a dark ground gradually lose contrast as the upper layers become more transparent and the dark foundation asserts itself. In contrast, paintings built on a light imprimatura do not suffer from this problem to the same extent. Because the value of the color layer corresponds to the value of the underpainting beneath it, there is no hidden darkness waiting to emerge. The light remains light, not because it resists time, but because it was structurally correct from the beginning. The color sits on a value that matches it, and even as materials age, the tonal logic of the painting remains intact.

KEY PRINCIPLE

The safest light is not painted over darkness. It is supported by a light foundation that continues to cooperate as the oil film ages.

5.1.2 Structural Function of the Imprimatura

Beyond its optical role, the imprimatura plays a critical structural function in the life of a painting. It is the first oil-based layer that mediates between the ground and the subsequent paint structure, and as such, it quietly determines how all later layers will behave, adhere, and age. In a layered system, this role is not secondary. It is foundational.

In Renaissance practice—particularly in the context of light imprimatura—the layer was applied extremely thin. It was not meant to form a body of paint, but rather a translucent film: diluted pigment bound with oil and reduced further with solvent. The result was a lean, flexible layer that penetrated just enough into the ground to reduce absorbency without sealing it completely. This balance was essential. A surface that is too absorbent draws oil aggressively from the paint above, weakening cohesion and causing uneven drying. A surface that is too sealed, on the other hand, can lead to poor adhesion and instability in later layers. The light Renaissance imprimatura occupied the narrow, ideal zone between these extremes.

Structurally, this thin oil-containing layer acted as a regulator. It calmed the ground, unified its behavior, and created a predictable interface for the umber underpainting. Transparent washes of umber could then be applied evenly, lifted cleanly, and modified without the paint sinking uncontrollably into the surface. From a mechanical standpoint, this is crucial. Underpainting built on a raw or excessively absorbent ground is often forced to carry too much material too early, leading to thicker, weaker paint films that are already under stress before the painting has truly begun.

The lean nature of the imprimatura is equally important for long-term durability. Because it contains relatively little oil and is applied in a very thin layer, it dries quickly and forms a stable, hard film. This makes it an ideal foundation for the principle of fat over lean. The imprimatura becomes the first step in a controlled progression of increasing oil content and flexibility. Each subsequent layer is allowed to be slightly richer, slightly more elastic, without being placed over an unstable or overly soft base. In this sense, the imprimatura is not just preparation; it is the first structural decision in the engineering of the painting.

From a longevity perspective, this system has proven itself repeatedly in historical works. Paintings built on thin, light imprimature tend to show fewer structural failures in their early layers. Cracking, wrinkling, and delamination are far less common when the initial paint film is lean, evenly distributed, and well bonded to the ground. The painting ages as a coherent whole rather than as a stack of competing layers, each shrinking and hardening at different rates.

There is also a subtle but important relationship between structure and optical stability. As oil films age, they tend to become more transparent. In a poorly structured painting, this can reveal darker layers beneath and alter the intended balance of light

and shadow. A light imprimatura reduces this risk. Because it does not introduce unnecessary darkness at the base of the paint structure, it ensures that increased transparency over time does not undermine the image. Structurally sound layers support optical clarity, and optical clarity, in turn, reinforces the perception of stability.

In this way, the light imprimatura functions as a quiet safeguard. It does not demand attention, and it is often barely visible in the finished work. Yet it influences everything that follows: how easily the underpainting can be controlled, how securely the paint layers adhere, how the painting responds to time, and how faithfully the original tonal relationships are preserved. What may appear to be a simple toned wash is, in reality, one of the most consequential layers in the entire construction of the painting.

5.1.3 Imprimatura as Part of a System

In the context of classical layered painting, the imprimatura does not exist as an isolated step. It is not a stylistic preference, nor a preliminary stain applied out of habit. It belongs to a continuous, internally consistent system in which each layer prepares the conditions for the next. Ground, imprimatura, umber underpainting, color layers, and glazes are not independent decisions; they are stages of a single construction logic.

Historically, painters did not choose to “add” an imprimatura for visual effect alone. It emerged as a response to material behavior and gradually became an integral part of how paintings were built. Once this system was established, skipping a step was not a simplification—it was a structural change. When the imprimatura is omitted, the umber underpainting no longer performs the role it was designed for. Its transparency behaves differently, its value relationships become harder to control, and the painting begins to compensate later with thicker, less stable layers.

It is precisely here that the technical intelligence of the early Netherlandish painters becomes evident. From a purely structural point of view, the Dutch layered painting system represents the most refined and complete solution oil painting has ever achieved. The logic of light ground, controlled imprimatura, transparent umber underpainting, and gradual color buildup is not accidental. It is the result of an exact understanding of how oil paint behaves over time, how layers interact mechanically, and how optical depth can be achieved without sacrificing stability.

Everything that followed in later centuries was, in essence, a modification of these foundations. Baroque painters did not abandon the system because it was flawed, but because they sought speed, freedom, and expressive breadth. Darker imprimature, more direct modeling, heavier paint application, and stronger contrasts allowed for faster execution and greater spontaneity. These developments brought undeniable artistic gains—but they also came at a cost. The further painting moved away from the light, layered Netherlandish structure, the more it relied on thicker paint films, stronger tonal shortcuts, and increased internal tension within the paint layers.

From a technical perspective, this shift inevitably weakened structural qualities. Paintings became more vulnerable to darkening, cracking, and loss of tonal clarity over time. What was gained in immediacy and drama was often paid for in long-term stability. The Dutch system, by contrast, sacrificed speed in favor of coherence. Every layer had a clear function. Nothing was redundant, and nothing was forced to compensate for an earlier decision.

This is why, within the framework of this book, the umber underpainting is always understood as a process that begins on an *imprimatura* and never on raw white. The two layers are inseparable. The *imprimatura* defines the tonal environment; the umber operates within it. Together, they establish a structural and optical backbone that remains readable not only at the moment of completion, but decades—and often centuries—later.

Seen this way, the *imprimatura* is not preparation in the casual sense of the word. It is the first active layer of the painting, both technically and conceptually. It marks the moment when the surface stops being a neutral support and becomes part of the image. Only after this transition does the umber underpainting truly begin—not as an isolated technique, but as the next step in a system that, from the standpoint of material logic and longevity, has never been surpassed.

TECHNICAL NOTE

Light ground -> light *imprimatura* -> transparent umber structure -> controlled color -> glaze and scumble. Each step prepares the next.

5.2 My Working Method: From Theory to Practice

Up to this point, we have been speaking about principles—about optical logic, structural behavior, and historical systems that shaped the way classical paintings were built. Theory, however, only has value if it can be translated into a working process. What follows is not a reconstruction of historical recipes, nor an attempt to imitate any single master step by step. It is simply the method I use in my own studio today, informed by historical practice but adapted to contemporary materials and realities.

In the vast majority of my work—roughly ninety-five percent—I paint on surfaces primed with acrylic gesso. This choice is not ideological. It is practical. Modern acrylic gesso, when applied and prepared correctly, offers consistency, availability, and a level of control that suits a layered workflow very well. Because the painting process transitions into oil through the *imprimatura*, the system naturally shifts from an acrylic-based ground to an oil-based structure without conflict. What matters is not the label on the material, but how it behaves once paint is applied.

Within this framework, I use two types of *imprimatura*: acrylic and oil-based. Both work. Both are structurally sound when handled correctly. The choice between them is not about right or wrong, but about timing, working rhythm, and practical constraints. Acrylic *imprimatura* has one clear advantage: it dries very quickly. This

makes it ideal when time matters, when multiple stages must be completed in a short window, or when I want to move forward without waiting days for a surface to become workable. Oil-based imprimatura, on the other hand, behaves more traditionally and integrates seamlessly into the oil painting system, but it requires patience and respect for drying time.

In the following sections, I will describe how and when I use each approach, what differences they create at the level of handling and surface behavior, and why both can serve as reliable foundations for umber underpainting. The goal is not to prescribe a single correct method, but to show how the principles discussed earlier can be applied flexibly without breaking the logic of the system. Theory sets the direction. Practice gives it form.

STUDIO NOTE

Use acrylic imprimatura when you need speed and consistency. Use oil imprimatura when you want slower, softer, more traditional handling.

5.2.1 Color Choice: Why an Olive Imprimatura

The first and most important decision when working with imprimatura is color. In the classical approach I use, the imprimatura is neither neutral nor arbitrary. Its tone is carefully chosen, and it consistently leans toward a light, slightly olive hue. This choice is not stylistic decoration—it is functional, optical, and deeply connected to how layered oil painting behaves over time.

The backbone of a classical imprimatura is yellow ochre. This pigment has been used for centuries for very practical reasons. It is stable, predictable, and—most importantly—fast drying. Because early layers must dry reliably and form a sound foundation for everything above them, yellow ochre is ideally suited for the lowest stages of a painting. It does not remain soft, it does not wrinkle, and it does not introduce unnecessary oil into the structure.

To shift yellow ochre away from a purely warm, earthy yellow, I add a small amount of black. This addition is subtle but essential. Black, especially bone or ivory black, carries a cool, slightly bluish undertone when lightened. When mixed into yellow ochre in small quantities, it pushes the color gently toward an olive green. The result is not a green in the literal sense, but a cooled yellow—restrained, balanced, and optically calm. This olive bias is the key.

I then lighten the mixture further with white until the imprimatura reaches a light value—approximately a value 5 on a standard grayscale. As explained earlier in the book, this value corresponds to the brightest meaningful area of the painting. The imprimatura is set to the level of light, not shadow. From that point on, form is developed by darkening, not by building light upward. This decision alone eliminates a wide range of structural and optical problems later in the painting.

Now comes the crucial question: why this olive tone specifically?

To understand it, imagine gold. Not symbolic gold, but a real piece of gold—say, a gold bar under neutral light. Its color is not a single yellow. It is a complex orchestration of warm and cool yellows, shifting subtly depending on angle and illumination. Cooler, slightly greenish yellows coexist with warmer, umber-like tones. Gold owes its depth and richness to this internal contrast.

The same principle operates here. The cool, olive-leaning imprimatura provides the restrained, cooler yellow foundation. The warmer yellow-brown tones introduced later—through umber underpainting and subsequent color layers—interact optically with this base. Warm over cool. Transparent over restrained. Depth is created not by force, but by cooperation between layers. This interaction is one of the fundamental sources of the so-called “golden light” effect associated with Old Master paintings.

There is another important aspect to this system, and it lies in the behavior of the white ground beneath the imprimatura. When the olive imprimatura is applied thinly over a white surface, it inevitably lightens. The white ground reflects light back through the translucent paint film, lifting its value by half a tone or even a full tone, depending on dilution. For this reason, the mixture always appears darker on the palette than it will on the surface. A value that reads as 6 on the palette may settle closer to 5 once applied. This is not a flaw—it is a predictable and useful effect.

In optical terms, the white ground functions as a passive light source. Light enters the paint layers, reaches the reflective white beneath, and is returned back through the same layers toward the viewer. Color is therefore not simply placed on the surface; it is formed by the interaction between reflected light and translucent strata. Much like a backlit system in which light is shaped by semi-transparent filters, the brilliance of the image depends on what happens beneath the surface as much as on what is applied on top.

If traces of this olive imprimatura are later allowed to show through the umber underpainting or even the color layers, the effect becomes cumulative. Light seems to rise from the lower strata of the painting. The image gains a sense of internal glow that cannot be imitated by surface color alone. This “golden light” is not painted on—it is constructed through the deliberate layering of cool and warm tones, from the ground upward.

The golden light is not painted on. It is built upward from the ground.

STUDIO NOTE

At this point, the logic of the system becomes clear. Nothing here is accidental. The choice of pigment, the temperature shift, the value, and the translucency all work together. Renaissance painters refined this sequence to an extraordinary degree, pushing the available materials to their maximum potential. What may appear to be a

simple toned wash is, in reality, the opening movement of a carefully composed orchestration—one that unfolds from the lowest layers to the final surface.

Color Recipe

As a practical starting point, I use a simple and reliable mixture:

Yellow Ochre – 80%

TECHNICAL NOTE

Start with yellow ochre as the dominant note. Cool it slightly with black, then lift the value with white. The target is a quiet olive light, not a strong green.

Black – 10%

White – 10%

These proportions are not meant to be followed dogmatically. They serve as a reference point, not a formula carved in stone. Depending on how light you want the imprimatura to be, or how strongly you wish to cool it, the ratios can be adjusted slightly. What matters is the relationship between the components, not the exact percentages.

Yellow ochre remains the dominant pigment. It establishes the character of the imprimatura and ensures fast, stable drying in the lower layers. Black is added in small quantity to cool the mixture and push it gently toward an olive tone. White is used to lift the value into the light range, bringing the imprimatura to approximately the tonal level of the brightest area of the painting, as discussed earlier.

In more advanced stages—particularly when working with an oil-based imprimatura—the mixture can be refined further. A very small addition of Prussian blue or burnt umber may be introduced. Both pigments accelerate drying and allow subtle control over temperature. Prussian blue shifts the mixture toward a cooler, greener bias, while burnt umber introduces warmth and reinforces the relationship with the later umber underpainting. These additions must remain minimal; they are adjustments, not replacements for the basic structure of the mixture.

In its default form, however, the combination of yellow ochre, black, and white is more than sufficient. It is the simplest and most dependable solution, and it provides a neutral yet responsive foundation for umber underpainting. Used correctly, this mixture works consistently and predictably, making it an ideal starting point in almost any layered painting process.

5.2.2 Application of Acrylic Imprimatura

The acrylic version of the imprimatura effectively replaces the traditional oil-based one in a modern workflow. This does not mean that it reproduces all the technical properties of classical oil imprimatura used on chalk or glue gesso. It does not—and that is perfectly fine. Today, the vast majority of painters work on acrylic gesso, and

from the standpoint of material quality and long-term reliability, modern grounds represent a significant technical step forward. What changes is the chemistry of the lower layers, not the logic of the system.

What remains fully intact is the optical function of the imprimatura. The elimination of the harsh white of the canvas, the establishment of a tonal environment, and the effect of light reflecting from beneath the paint layers are just as relevant now as they were centuries ago. In fact, this is often the most immediate psychological relief for the painter. The raw white surface is intimidating for a reason—it exaggerates contrast, distorts judgment, and creates unnecessary tension. The moment the imprimatura is applied, that pressure disappears. The painting becomes approachable.

For application, I prepare the mixture in a bowl or a deeper plate so that I can work freely without splashing paint around the studio. I begin by diluting yellow ochre with water, then gradually introduce black until the mixture reaches the desired olive tone. Only then do I add white to lift the value. Everything is thinned with water until the consistency resembles strong coffee—not as thin as tea, but certainly not thick like cream or paste. The mixture must flow easily, yet still carry enough pigment to stain the surface evenly.

Surface preparation is crucial at this stage. The smoother the ground, the easier the application and blending will be. A coarse canvas texture makes it significantly harder to distribute the thin acrylic layer evenly and increases the risk of streaks and patchiness. A well-prepared, lightly sanded surface allows the imprimatura to behave predictably and respond to the brush.

I apply the mixture using a large, flat brush—most often a soft synthetic. Working quickly and confidently, I spread the paint across the surface with broad strokes. Speed matters. Acrylic dries rapidly on an acrylic ground, and hesitation leads to uneven patches and visible overlaps. The goal is not refinement, but uniformity. The surface should be evenly stained, without heavy buildup or obvious brush marks.

If needed, the process can be made more forgiving by lightly misting the surface with water beforehand or by adding a small amount of acrylic retarder to slow drying. In most cases, however, water alone is sufficient. As long as the paint is kept moving and distributed quickly, the layer settles evenly. Once the surface is covered, I make a few final passes with the brush to smooth out any remaining inconsistencies—and then I stop. Overworking at this stage does more harm than good.

TECHNICAL NOTE

Work quickly. Acrylic imprimatura rewards confidence and punishes hesitation. Make the layer even, then stop before you disturb it.

When done correctly, the acrylic imprimatura dries into a thin, stable, optically effective layer that quiets the surface and prepares it perfectly for umber underpainting.

It is simple, fast, and reliable—and it allows the painting process to move forward without delay.

Advantages of Acrylic Imprimatura

Fast drying time — ready for underpainting within minutes or hours.

Efficient and practical for modern workflows.

Simple preparation — no complex medium required, only water dilution.

Stable and non-reactive once dry.

Provides immediate tonal control by eliminating the white ground.

Works seamlessly with acrylic gesso.

Allows rapid progression in layered painting.

Consistent and predictable behavior.

Disadvantages of Acrylic Imprimatura

Does not form a continuous oil-based structure from the beginning.

Very short working time — requires fast and confident application.

Mistakes are difficult to correct once applied.

Can create a “closed” surface if applied too thickly.

Requires careful control of dilution and thickness.

Less forgiving during application.

Lacks the natural integration of traditional oil layers.

5.2.3 Application of Oil Imprimatura – A classical approach

When I choose to follow a more classical path—when I am not pressed for time and want a stronger connection to traditional handling—I use an oil-based imprimatura. The decision is not about nostalgia. It is about working within a system that behaves in a particular way, both mechanically and materially, and allowing the process to unfold at its natural pace.

From a technical standpoint, oil imprimatura plays a different role than its acrylic counterpart. Historically, its primary function was not optical but structural. Traditional grounds—especially chalk and glue-based gesso—were highly absorbent. If oil paint was applied directly onto such a surface, the ground would draw oil out of the paint film, weakening its cohesion, causing uneven drying, and leaving the pigment underbound and vulnerable. The imprimatura acted as a regulating layer. By introducing a thin film containing oil, it partially sealed the surface, reduced excessive absorbency, and created a stable interface for subsequent paint layers.

This was essential in earlier systems. Without this step, the entire structure of the painting could be compromised from the beginning. The imprimatura ensured that the underpainting and later layers retained sufficient binding medium, adhered properly, and dried in a controlled, predictable manner.

In a modern context, where acrylic gesso is widely used, this function is no longer as critical. Acrylic grounds already provide a level of sealing and stability that traditional chalk grounds did not. They do not aggressively draw oil from the paint, and they offer a more controlled surface from the outset. For this reason, oil imprimatura today is not a technical necessity in the same way it once was.

However, this does not make it irrelevant. It simply changes its role.

An oil-based imprimatura still influences how the first oil layers behave. It creates a more unified, slightly less absorbent surface than raw acrylic gesso, allowing the paint to move more freely and remain workable for longer. The transition between layers becomes softer, less abrupt. The underpainting does not “grab” the surface as quickly, which can be an advantage when subtle control and gradual development are desired.

At the same time, oil imprimatura establishes the first true oil layer within the structure of the painting. This has implications for how subsequent layers are built. Because the process begins with oil rather than transitioning into it later, the entire system becomes more continuous from a material standpoint. Each layer relates more directly to the one beneath it, and the progression from lean to fat can be managed with greater consistency from the very beginning.

The trade-off, of course, is time. Oil imprimatura requires patience. It must be allowed to dry sufficiently before the umber underpainting is applied. Rushing this stage introduces instability and undermines the very advantages the method is meant to provide. This is why I reserve it for situations where I can afford to slow down and let the painting develop without pressure.

In the end, using an oil imprimatura is a conscious choice. It does not replicate historical conditions exactly, nor is it required for structural integrity when working on modern grounds. But it does reintroduce a certain continuity of material behavior and a way of working that aligns closely with traditional layered painting. For those willing to accept the slower pace, it offers a different kind of control—one that unfolds not through speed, but through time.

The pigments I use for oil imprimatura are exactly the same as in the acrylic version: yellow ochre as the base, modified with a small amount of black to shift it toward an olive tone, and lightened with white to reach the desired value. The logic of the mixture does not change with the binder. What changes is the way it is handled. Instead of water, I thin the paint with turpentine or odorless mineral spirits (OMS), allowing it to behave as a true wash. At this stage, the imprimatura must remain strictly lean. No additional oil is introduced into the paint mixture itself. The goal is a

thin, fast-drying film that sits lightly on the surface and prepares it for the next stage without creating unnecessary richness or softness in the lower layers.

Before applying the paint, however, I often prepare the surface through a process known as oiling out. This step is particularly important when working on acrylic gesso or other absorbent grounds, including traditional chalk-based preparations. Even though modern grounds are more controlled than historical ones, they can still be slightly thirsty, especially when working with very thin oil paint. If applied directly, the wash can drag, break, or sink unevenly into the surface.

To address this, I take a small amount of linseed oil and apply it directly to the surface by hand. The oil is spread evenly across the entire area, and then immediately wiped down until the surface is almost dry. What remains is not a visible layer, but a very thin, barely perceptible oil film. This subtle adjustment is enough to reduce absorbency and create a more receptive surface for the imprimatura.

The effect is immediate. The diluted paint flows more easily, spreads more evenly, and can be controlled with greater precision. Instead of catching on the surface, the brush moves smoothly, allowing the imprimatura to settle into a uniform, coherent layer. At the same time, because the excess oil has been removed, the surface does not become overly slick or unstable. The balance between grip and flow is preserved.

TECHNICAL NOTE

Use the smallest amount of oil possible. If the surface looks wet or glossy, you used too much. The goal is cooperation, not slickness.

It is important to keep this step restrained. The purpose of oiling out is not to saturate the surface, but to modify it slightly. Too much oil introduces exactly the kind of softness and imbalance that the lean structure of the lower layers is meant to avoid. The surface should not appear glossy or wet. It should feel just slightly more cooperative under the brush—nothing more.



Process detail — Thin applications reveal the character of the ground. Watch for dry dragging, patchy absorption, or paint that slides without grip.

TECHNICAL NOTE

A good surface is balanced: absorbent enough to hold the wash, smooth enough to lift lights, and stable enough to carry later layers.

When working on an oil-primed surface, this step is generally unnecessary. Oil grounds are already less absorbent and naturally compatible with oil paint. In such cases, the imprimatura can be applied directly without additional preparation. The behavior of the paint remains stable, and the surface provides the right balance on its own.

In this way, the oil imprimatura integrates seamlessly into the layered system. The mixture remains simple, the structure remains lean, and the surface is adjusted only as much as needed to support controlled, even application. Every step is minimal, but each one contributes to the overall stability and clarity of the painting.

Advantages of Oil Imprimatura

Creates a continuous oil-based structure from the very first layer.

Integrates naturally with subsequent oil layers.

More forgiving during application — longer working time.

Allows smoother transitions and softer blending.

Reduces surface absorbency in a controlled way.

Provides a more traditional handling and “Old Master” feel.

Better control over paint flow and brush movement.

Supports a consistent fat-over-lean progression from the beginning.

Disadvantages of Oil Imprimatura

Significantly longer drying time.

Slows down the overall painting process.

Requires patience and proper timing before underpainting.

Incorrect handling can lead to overly oily or unstable lower layers.

Often requires oiling out on absorbent surfaces.

More sensitive to environmental conditions (temperature, humidity).

Less practical for fast or production-based workflows.

Requires more experience to control properly.

Conclusion: The Role of Imprimatura

At first glance, imprimatura may appear to be a simple preliminary step—a thin stain applied to remove the whiteness of the ground before the “real” painting begins. In reality, it is far more than that. It is the moment when the painting quietly comes to life. The surface stops being an empty support and becomes an active part of the image, shaping both how the painting is built and how it will be perceived.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen that imprimatura operates on multiple levels at once. It establishes the first tonal key, allowing the painter to work within a controlled value range rather than against the artificial contrast of white. It defines the environment in which the underpainting will function, making the development of form through darkening both natural and precise. At the same time, it participates in the optical structure of the painting, working together with the ground to create the impression of light emerging from within the layers.

From a structural standpoint, imprimatura forms the first bridge between the ground and the paint. Whether in its traditional oil-based form or in a modern acrylic adaptation, it regulates the surface, stabilizes the behavior of the layers above, and ensures that the painting develops as a coherent whole rather than a collection of disconnected applications. Even though modern materials have changed the necessity of some of its historical functions, the underlying logic remains unchanged.

We have also seen that the choice of color is not arbitrary. The slightly olive tone derived from yellow ochre, black, and white is the result of a deliberate balance between warm and cool. It prepares the ground not only for the umber underpainting but for the entire color structure that follows. Through the interaction of cool and warm layers, the painting gains depth, harmony, and the subtle inner glow often associated with Old Master works.

In practice, the imprimatura adapts to the needs of the painter. Acrylic versions offer speed and efficiency, making them ideal for a modern workflow. Oil-based versions provide a deeper integration with traditional methods, allowing for a slower,

more continuous development of the painting. Both approaches can function successfully, as long as they respect the same fundamental principles: thin application, controlled value, and a clear understanding of their role within the layered system.

In the end, *imprimatura* is not about technique for its own sake. It is about clarity. It defines the starting conditions of the painting and determines how every subsequent decision will unfold. When handled with intention, it simplifies the process, strengthens the structure, and enhances the final result in ways that remain visible long after the painting is finished.

PRACTICE BRIDGE: FROM QUIET GROUND TO BROWN STRUCTURE

The practical section begins only when the surface is already behaving like a controlled painting environment. A useful *imprimatura* has three qualities: it softens the white, it leaves the light family open, and it gives the first umber wash a brief moment of movement before it settles. If any one of these qualities is missing, the painter will feel it immediately in the brush.

Before placing the first brown marks, decide what must remain untouched. The cleanest lights are not painted later as an apology; they are protected from the beginning. This is why the first pass should be thin and selective. Let it identify the large shadow family, the main turning planes, and the direction of the light. Save the deepest accents for a second pass, when the image can be judged as a whole.

Think of the umber layer as a conversation with the *imprimatura*. The olive tone provides the quiet air of the painting, while the brown layer introduces structure. When these two layers cooperate, color no longer has to explain everything. It enters a surface where value, atmosphere, and hierarchy are already present.

The test is simple: step back, squint, and ask whether the subject still reads before detail appears. If the large value masses are clear, continue. If the image collapses, simplify the brown structure before adding more marks. A calmer underpainting makes every later color decision easier.

Studio action: name the three largest value families before mixing more paint. If you cannot name them clearly, draw them again lightly in your mind before touching the panel.

One more check belongs here. Do not confuse a dark passage with a finished passage. The first umber pass should keep some air inside the shadow, because transparent darkness can always be strengthened later. If a shadow is made opaque too early, it loses the quality that makes the method powerful. The painting should feel organized, not sealed shut. Leave room for correction, for a second pass, and for the color that will follow.

PART II

PRACTICAL DEMONSTRATION

From drawing transfer to finished umber underpainting

With this foundation in place, the next step becomes inevitable. The surface is no longer white, the tonal key is established, and the conditions for controlled painting are set. Now, the umber underpainting can begin.

The demonstrations that follow translate the theory into a working sequence. The goal is not to decorate the pages with separate tricks, but to show how the same decisions repeat: protect the drawing, keep the first wash thin, strengthen values only after the layer has dried, and let color enter a structure that already works in brown.

Read the photographs as a studio rhythm. The images are placed close to the text they explain, so the page behaves more like the theoretical chapters: normal paragraphs, simple captions, and clear visual evidence without large decorative boxes.

Case Study One – Still Life: Drawing, First Pass, Second Pass

The first demonstration follows a still-life arrangement from transfer to a finished umber structure. The subject contains cloth, metal, glass, flower, and table, but all of them must belong to one shared light. That shared light is the real subject of the underpainting.



The practical work begins with a clean drawing transfer; the brown layer will follow this architecture.

ON BUILDING AND TRANSFERRING THE DRAWING

The drawing stage solves placement before paint is involved. Keep the transfer clean and limited to contours, reflections, structural divisions, and the few edges that the brush will truly need later. Too many lines make the first wash nervous; too few lines leave proportion to chance.



Close work clarifies the main shapes before paint is involved.

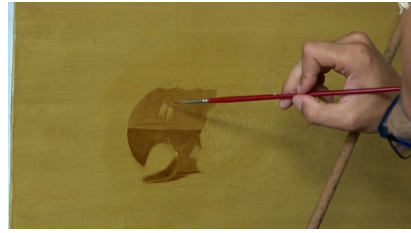


Raw umber on the back of the drawing creates an oil-based transfer.

A transferred line should behave like a quiet instruction, not like a finished drawing. Once the brush enters the painting, every mark will become part of the value structure, so the drawing must guide the hand without trapping it. The best transfer contains enough information to protect proportion and enough emptiness to let the first umber pass breathe.



A red pen makes it easy to see which lines have already been traced.



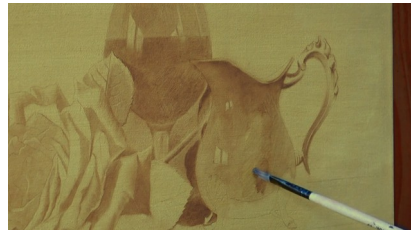
The first umber marks enter the light imprimatura carefully.

02 THE FIRST UMBER PASS

The first pass should behave more like a stain than a body of paint. It separates the largest masses, protects the lightest areas, and begins the value map without trying to reach final darkness too soon. At this stage the brush should stay light and the imprimatura must still participate.



A thin wash separates the largest masses without burying the light.



Early modeling of metal and glass stays restrained; corrections come later.

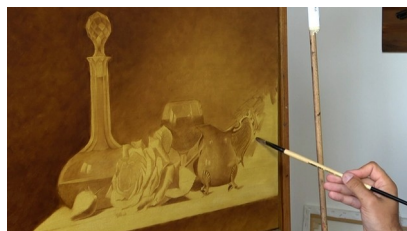
The most important discipline is restraint. Do not use the first wash to prove how dark the painting can become. Use it to discover where the broad shadow families belong. If a passage becomes too opaque too early, the later color stage has to fight against a heavy foundation instead of cooperating with a transparent one.

03 FROM STRUCTURE TO FORM

Once the first stains are in place, compare each object to the whole arrangement. The table, background, glass, metal, and flower cannot be solved as isolated objects; they must sit inside the same value world. The first pass is successful when the large masses begin to separate clearly from a normal viewing distance.



The background is deepened so the central light can gain strength.

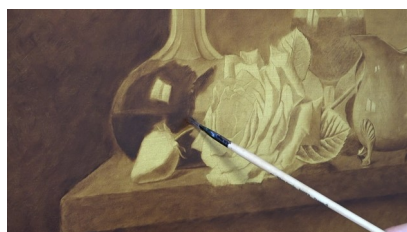


Smaller forms are suggested without forcing final detail too early.

A clean, unfinished structure is better than a muddy attempt at completion. This is also a useful drying pause. Let the first pass settle, then return with fresh eyes and compare the whole image before deciding where a second umber layer is truly needed.



The first pass now contains drawing, early values, and a first sense of depth.



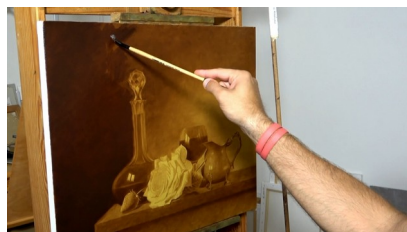
The second layer begins after the first has dried.

04 THE SECOND UMBER LAYER

After the first layer is dry, the second pass evaluates the structure. It is not a new beginning. It deepens selected darks, adjusts edges, and strengthens the hierarchy between background, object, and focal light. Most of the improvement comes from relationships, not from tiny marks.



The background is strengthened so illuminated forms read with greater contrast.



Glass and metal passages are refined through darker transparent notes.

Use larger brushes where possible. Save the smallest brush for accents that truly need it. A second layer should make the painting calmer and clearer, not busier. The painter is now asking: which values must deepen, which lights must remain open, and which edges should disappear into shadow?



Selective accents begin to clarify focal transitions.



The background mass is darkened to protect the focal light.

OS REFINING VALUE RELATIONSHIPS

The darker background is a design tool, not decoration. By lowering the surrounding values, the light areas can appear brighter without forcing artificial white. This is how the eye is led toward the center of interest while the rest of the painting stays supportive.



Final small transitions are adjusted while the brown layer remains transparent.



Focal detail — Rose, glass, and metal are held together by one shared light family.

At this point the question is no longer simply whether an object is light or dark. The better question is how it relates to the object beside it. The rose, vase, glass, and background must all agree about the direction of light. If one passage shouts too loudly, it must be softened before color begins.

06 FINISHED UMBER STRUCTURE



Drawing, value, atmosphere, and edge hierarchy are already present before color.

The finished brown stage should be judged as a complete monochrome painting. The lightest areas are preserved, the background supports the focal point, the major objects read from a distance, and the surface is dry enough for the next layer.

Color will enrich this structure, but it should not have to rescue it. Correct muddy darks, accidental hard edges, or any passage that fights the main light before moving on.

The still-life example ends with a simple test: if the image is reduced to brown values only, does it still feel complete? The answer must be yes before color begins. The rose should remain the light anchor, the glass should still feel transparent, and the background should support the light without becoming an empty dark wall.

This pause also prevents the next example from feeling like a disconnected chapter. The T-Rex study uses the same method, but the subject changes the problem. Instead of smooth surfaces and controlled reflections, the painter now has to organize scales, bark, claws, and folds without losing the large value design.

Case Study Two - The T-Rex Study: Texture, Form, and Value

The second demonstration uses the same two-pass umber logic, but the subject changes the problem. Instead of smooth still-life objects, the painting must organize skin folds, bark, claws, ridges, and overlapping textures. Detail becomes useful only when it supports form.



Texture detail — Head, claws, and rock remain subordinate to the larger value pattern.

In this example, the first pass records important structural marks; the second pass unifies them into larger light and shadow families. The goal is not to show every scale equally, but to decide which marks describe the form and which marks should sink quietly into the larger value pattern.

01 ESTABLISHING THE FIRST MARKS

The first marks should be precise enough to guide the animal, but light enough to remain flexible. I begin around the head, mouth, eye socket, claws, and first turning planes because these small structures are easy to lose later.



The first umber marks follow the drawing rather than overpowering it.

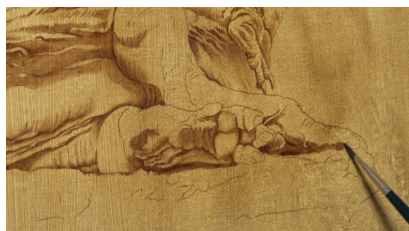


Early modeling begins around the head and torso, where character must remain readable.

These early marks are not decoration. They explain where a plane turns, where an edge overlaps, and where the texture follows the volume. If the line does not explain something structural, it can wait.

02 DETAIL BEFORE FULL VALUE

A textured subject can be built in two ways: broad values first, or small structural information first. Here I choose the second approach so the fine forms remain clear before the broader shadows are glazed over them.



The rock and the small forms beneath the body begin to organize the foreground.



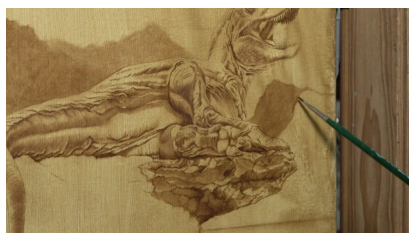
The leg and torso are developed with directional strokes that follow the anatomy.

Keeping these marks separate from the broad value correction prevents the surface from becoming muddy. The first layer records information; the following pass decides how much of that information should remain visible.

Notice that the marks are directional. They follow the turn of the body and the grain of the rock rather than floating randomly on the surface. Direction is what makes texture belong to form.

03 COMPLETING THE FIRST UMBER PASS

By the end of the first pass, the image should feel like a detailed map. The animal has volume, the rock has weight, and the background begins to suggest space, but the layer is still open enough for the second pass to control it.

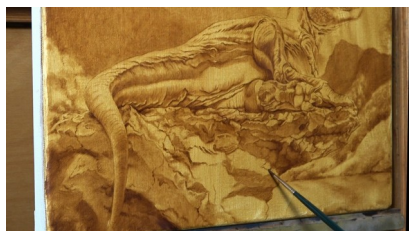


The background and atmosphere are suggested while the creature remains the focus.

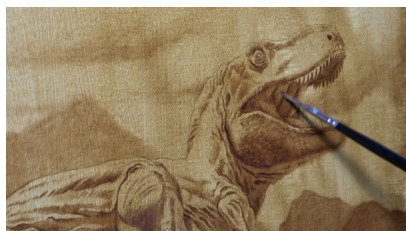


The tail, rock, and lower forms are clarified with controlled darkening.

Step back before continuing. If the pose reads only from close range, the first pass is still too fragmented. The silhouette and shadow arrangement must be clear from across the room before refinement continues.



The first pass now contains enough information to guide the second layer.



The head is refined with deeper notes around the mouth, eye socket, and turning planes.

04 THE SECOND UMBER LAYER

The second layer strengthens value relationships rather than redesigning the painting. The drawing is already set; now the questions are about hierarchy: which shadows must deepen, which lights must remain open, and where the darkest accents belong.



The torso and upper forms receive stronger shadows and cleaner edge hierarchy.



The body is deepened with a larger value movement while earlier small marks remain visible.

Because the first layer is dry, a transparent pass can darken a whole area without smearing the smaller marks underneath. This is the difference between more detail and better hierarchy. Some marks remain sharp, some soften, and some disappear almost completely.

05 TEXTURE INSIDE FORM

Texture must wrap around the volume. If every bump, fold, and crack receives equal importance, the form becomes noisy. The second layer groups small marks into larger shadows so the creature still reads as one solid body rather than a collection of separate textures.



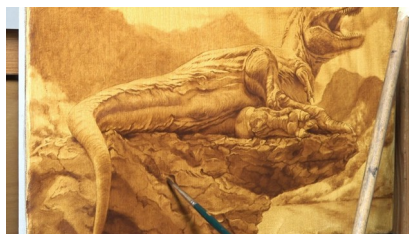
The bark and lower forms are strengthened so the creature rests believably in space.



The rock body, and foreground values are unified into a stronger tonal structure.

Before adding another detail, ask whether it describes the form or only decorates the surface. Good texture explains the object. Weak texture competes for attention and pulls the eye away from the main light.

06 FINISHED BROWN STRUCTURE



Finished underpainting: form, texture, depth, and atmosphere are carried by the brown layer.

At the end of the second layer, the painting should already read as a complete monochrome statement. The light direction should make sense, the animal should feel three-dimensional, and the background should support the main form without competing with it.

The lesson is the same as in the still-life demonstration: the number of layers is not the point. The point is whether the underpainting has reached enough clarity to guide everything that follows.

Final check before color: the subject should read from across the room, the main light should be clear, the darkest accents should have purpose, and the surface should be dry before richer paint is added. When those conditions are met, the brown layer has done its job.

Studio Reference – Materials, Timing, and Stopping Point

The demonstrations show the sequence, but a painter also needs practical boundaries. Most failed underpaintings do not fail because the idea is wrong. They fail because the surface is not ready, the first layer is too heavy, the next layer begins too soon, or the painter keeps refining after the structure has already done its job.

Materials used in the demonstrations

Burnt umber is the main working pigment because it flows well and dries reliably in thin layers. Raw umber can be used when a cooler, quieter note is needed. The support is a refined surface with a light olive imprimatura. Brushes should include one larger soft brush for broad stains, one medium brush for control, and a small brush only for selected accents.

Medium and dilution

The first pass should be lean. Use solvent or a very lean mixture so the umber behaves like a stain. Avoid making the lower layer oily. If the paint feels sticky, glossy, or heavy, stop and let it dry before continuing.

Drying between layers

The first pass should be touch dry before the second pass. It should not move under a soft brush, and it should not feel tacky when gently tested at the edge. Depending on paint thickness, surface, and studio climate, this can mean overnight or several days.

How dark is too dark?

If the light areas can no longer breathe, the layer is too dark. If the surface becomes opaque brown before the main structure is solved, it is too heavy. The first pass should establish shadow families, not final blackness.

When to stop

Stop when the painting reads from across the room, the light family is clear, the darkest accents have a purpose, and the edge hierarchy is visible. More detail is useful only if it clarifies form. If it only decorates, it should wait for later.

This reference is deliberately simple. It is not a recipe for one brand of paint or one exact medium. It is a set of studio limits: thin first, dry before stronger correction, keep value relationships clear, and stop before the brown layer becomes a substitute for the entire painting.

Common Problems in Umber Underpainting

The same problems appear again and again in the studio. Most of them can be corrected if they are noticed early, before color begins. Use this section as a diagnostic page while the painting is still in brown.

The first layer is too dark.

Wipe back while the paint is still open. If it has dried, restore the light with a very thin scumble only where necessary, then rebuild the shadows more gradually. Do not try to solve darkness by adding thicker dark paint everywhere.

The underpainting looks muddy.

Too many values were pushed at once, or the surface was overworked while wet. Let it dry, simplify the big shadow families, and re-establish the main light before returning to smaller forms.

The shadows are opaque.

Thin the next pass and allow more imprimatura to participate. Shadow in this method should feel transparent and deep, not like a flat brown patch.

The drawing disappears.

Strengthen only the structural lines that matter: major overlaps, key contours, and focal edges. Do not redraw everything. A few accurate accents are stronger than many nervous lines.

The second layer lifts the first.

The first layer was not dry enough, the surface was over-oiled, or the brush pressure was too strong. Wait longer, wipe excess oil thoroughly, and apply the next pass with a lighter hand.

The surface absorbs too fast.

The ground is too thirsty or not sufficiently calmed by imprimatura. On the next work, refine the ground more carefully. On the current painting, work in smaller areas and avoid fighting the whole surface at once.

The painting reads up close but not from distance.

The detail is stronger than the value design. Step back, squint, and group small marks into larger masses. The underpainting must read as light and shadow first, texture second.

Troubleshooting is not separate from the method. It is the method under pressure. When something goes wrong, return to the same sequence: surface, imprimatura, drawing, large values, dry time, second pass, edge hierarchy. The answer is almost always somewhere in that order.

From Brown Stage to Color

The brown stage does not end by being covered. It continues to work underneath the color. This is the most important mental shift before moving on. Color should not restart the painting; it should sit on the value structure that has already been solved.

In the first color pass, match value before chasing hue. A beautiful red that is too light will destroy the shadow. A blue that is too dark will flatten a plane. The underpainting gives every area a value assignment, and the color layer must respect that assignment even when the temperature and saturation change.

Keep shadows more transparent than lights. In shadow, let the umber remain visible and use color to modify temperature rather than to rebuild the entire form. In the lights, more opacity is acceptable, but it should be controlled and placed only where the light family needs strength. This difference between transparent shadow and more opaque light is one of the reasons layered painting can feel luminous instead of heavy.

The first color layer should feel like a conversation with the brown map. It can warm a passage, cool a passage, enrich a halftone, soften an edge, or sharpen a focal note. It should not erase the decisions that made the image stable. When color respects value, the painting becomes calmer immediately.

Before adding color

Ask whether the brown image already reads as a complete monochrome painting. If it does not, color will only make the problem harder to see.

During the first color pass

Compare every mixture to the value beneath it. Hue can change; value must remain loyal to the structure.

In the shadows

Stay transparent as long as possible. Let the umber give depth and use color as a veil, not a wall.

In the lights

Use opacity carefully. Strong lights should clarify form, not cover every trace of the lower layers.

A good underpainting makes the color stage feel less like a rescue operation and more like an enrichment. That is the practical reason for the whole system: the painter solves the hardest structural questions before color begins to complicate the surface.



Transition study — The brown map remains active beneath the first color decisions; color enriches the structure rather than replacing it.

06

WHAT COMES AFTER THE UMBER UNDERPAINTING?

Two paths toward color: painting directly over the finished umber, or building a grisaille first.

When the umber underpainting is complete, the painting reaches an important turning point.

The drawing has been established. The main value relationships are already organized. Light, shadow, atmosphere, and form have been tested in a simplified monochrome structure. The painting is no longer an empty surface waiting for decisions. It already contains a clear visual architecture.

The next question is therefore not whether the painting is ready to continue, but how it should continue.

In my own work, I generally use two approaches. The first is to begin painting color directly over the finished umber underpainting. The second is to place a grisaille layer over the umber before introducing color.

Both methods are valid and both belong naturally to a layered painting process. The choice depends on the subject, the level of refinement I want, the role of the light areas, and how much control I need before color enters the painting.

The umber underpainting provides the common foundation. From that point, the painting can follow two different paths.

6.I PAINTING COLOR DIRECTLY OVER THE UMBER

The most direct approach is to begin applying color immediately over the dry umber underpainting. This works especially well when the brown stage already contains a strong value structure and the local colors of the subject are relatively easy to understand.

The umber beneath the color acts as a tonal map. It tells me how light or dark each color mixture must be. Instead of inventing the value structure while also trying to solve hue, temperature, and saturation, I can concentrate mainly on matching the color to the value already established underneath.

When painting over a dark passage, the color must remain dark enough to respect the underlying structure. When painting over a middle value, the mixture must belong to that same value family. When working over a light area, the color must be equally light or slightly lighter, depending on the intended effect.

“Color should enrich the value structure, not replace it.”

If the color layer ignores the values beneath it, the painting can quickly lose the clarity achieved in the underpainting. Shadows may become too light, half-tones may become too bright, and the focal light may lose its dominance. The underpainting should remain the authority.

6.1.1 Letting the Umber Remain Visible

Painting directly over umber does not mean covering the brown layer completely. In many areas, especially in shadows and transitional passages, I intentionally allow parts of the underpainting to remain visible through the color.

This preserves unity because the same warm brown influence continues to connect the different colors of the painting. It also creates optical depth: a thin color layer placed over transparent umber behaves differently from an opaque mixture placed directly on a white ground. The eye sees both the surface color and the warm structure beneath it.

Most importantly, visible umber prevents the shadows from becoming heavy and lifeless. Instead of filling every dark passage with thick opaque paint, I can let the brown underpainting carry much of the value. The color layer does not need to rebuild everything. It can cooperate with what is already there.

6.1.2 How I Begin the Direct Color Stage

Before applying color, the umber underpainting must be dry enough to resist normal brush pressure. I first examine the painting as a whole and decide which areas should remain transparent, which areas need more opacity, and where the strongest color statements should eventually appear.

I do not begin with the smallest details. Instead, I start with the larger color families: the dominant background color, the principal local colors, the main warm and cool relationships, the shadow family, and the light family.

The first color pass is usually restrained. Its purpose is not to finish the painting, but to establish the color logic without destroying the tonal structure. In shadow areas I often use thinner, more transparent paint. In light areas I gradually introduce more opaque mixtures.

6.1.3 Transparent Shadows and Opaque Lights

One of the most useful principles in layered oil painting is the contrast between transparent darks and opaque lights. The umber underpainting already provides a transparent foundation, and the first color layer should protect that advantage.

The shadows may contain color, but they do not need to become physically heavy. As forms turn toward the light, the paint can become more opaque, more substantial, and more physically present. This difference in handling helps create the impression that light is emerging from the surface.

The painting therefore develops not only through color and value, but also through material contrast: transparent against opaque, thin against thick, warm depth against illuminated surface.



Direct color detail — In the wine glass, the warm underpainting remains visible through the transparent red layer, increasing the apparent saturation of the wine and giving the liquid greater optical depth.

6.1.4 When Direct Color Works Best

Painting directly over the umber is particularly effective when the underpainting is already well resolved, the subject contains naturally warm or earthy colors, the light structure is simple and clear, and the shadows benefit from visible brown transparency.

It is also a practical choice when I want to preserve more of the energy of the brown stage. Too many intermediate layers can sometimes make a painting feel overcontrolled. Direct color allows the original movement of the underpainting to remain visible.



In the white rose, the umber remains active in the shadowed folds, adding warm accents and suggesting light passing through the petals before breaking into the shadows.



Beneath the cool gray metal of the pitcher, warm umber acts as a complementary foundation, enriching the neutral color and preventing the form from feeling cold or lifeless.

6.2 GRISAILLE OVER THE UMBER

The second approach is to paint a grisaille layer over the completed umber underpainting before beginning the color stage.

Grisaille is a monochrome layer built primarily with neutral grays, black, white, or carefully controlled mixtures that describe form through light and shadow. In this system, the umber underpainting establishes the first structure, while the grisaille develops the light more fully.

The umber provides warmth, drawing, atmosphere, and transparent depth. The grisaille adds precision, cooler light, clearer modeling, and greater control over the illuminated forms. The two layers perform different tasks, but they support each other.

6.2.1 Why Add Grisaille?

The first reason is control. Some subjects contain complex forms, subtle modeling, or strong light effects that are easier to solve in monochrome before color is introduced. Grisaille allows me to refine those relationships without the distraction of hue and saturation.

The second reason is light. The umber underpainting is naturally warm and transparent. Grisaille allows me to build cooler, more neutral, or more opaque light passages over that warm foundation. This creates a powerful optical contrast.

The third reason is separation of tasks. Instead of solving drawing, value, light, and color at the same time, the process becomes divided into clear stages: umber establishes structure and shadow; grisaille develops form and light; color enriches the completed monochrome foundation.

6.2.2 The Relationship Between UMBER and Grisaille

The grisaille should not erase the umber underpainting. It should work with it.

I generally preserve the darker brown structure in the shadows and use the grisaille mainly to develop the middle values and lights. The umber remains visible in the

deepest passages, warm transitions, and transparent shadows. Grisaille gradually appears where the form turns toward the light.

This creates a natural progression from warm darkness, through neutral transition, toward cooler or lighter illumination. Grisaille becomes most opaque in the strongest light areas while remaining thinner in half-tones and transitions. The result is not a flat black-and-white painting placed over brown, but an interaction between warm depth and controlled light.

6.2.3 Building the Grisaille Layer

The first grisaille pass should be restrained. I begin by identifying the main light family and the larger turning planes of the form. I avoid jumping immediately to the brightest highlights. The goal is to build the light gradually.

I may use white with a small amount of black, umber, or another neutralizing pigment, depending on the subject and the temperature I want. The mixture should not become chalky. Pure white used too early can create harsh, disconnected lights. It is usually better to begin with middle-light grays and progressively move toward stronger highlights.

The grisaille should follow the value structure already established by the umber. It should clarify the form, not redesign it.

6.2.4 Avoiding a Dead or Chalky Grisaille

A common problem in grisaille painting is excessive opacity. If every passage is painted with thick gray paint, the warm underpainting disappears and the image may become cold, flat, or lifeless.

The solution is to vary the paint film. Half-tones should often remain thin enough to allow some warmth to influence the surface. Shadows should be preserved rather than filled with gray. The strongest opacity should be reserved for the lightest and most solid parts of the form.

A good grisaille should still contain atmosphere. It should not look like a plaster cast cut out and pasted onto the painting. Even in a monochrome layer, edges must vary, transitions must remain sensitive, and the warm foundation should continue to participate.

6.2.5 Color Over Grisaille

Once the grisaille is dry, color can be introduced through thin transparent and semi-transparent layers. Because the value and form have already been developed, the color stage can focus primarily on hue, temperature, and saturation.

The grisaille acts as a light-bearing structure beneath the color. Transparent glazes allow the monochrome modeling to remain visible while the surface gradually becomes chromatic. A red glaze over a light grisaille can appear luminous because the light layer beneath it reflects through the transparent color.

A warm glaze over a cooler gray can create subtle vibration. A cooler glaze over warm umber and neutral grisaille can produce depth that would be difficult to achieve with a single opaque mixture. The final color is therefore not simply mixed on the palette; it is partly created through the interaction of multiple layers.



First color layer — Pink is introduced selectively over the gray structure, while much of the grisaille remains visible beneath the surface.



Finished painting — The completed color enriches the rose without losing the light and value relationships established below.

6.2.6 When Grisaille Works Best

I generally choose the grisaille approach when the subject requires highly controlled modeling, the light is complex or dramatic, the illuminated forms need greater opacity, or the final colors will be built through glazing.

It is especially useful for pale skin, white fabric, bone, stone, metal, or any subject in which subtle transitions in the light must be solved before color complicates the process.

6.3 CHOOSING BETWEEN THE TWO APPROACHES

Neither method is automatically superior. The decision depends on what the painting needs.

If the umber underpainting already contains strong modeling and color can be added without losing clarity, I often begin painting directly in color. If the form still needs development, the lights need to become stronger, or the subject requires a more controlled glazed finish, I add a grisaille layer first.

“Does the painting need color next, or does it still need more light structure?”

If the structure is complete, color can begin. If the structure is not complete, grisaille may be the better next step.

6.4 A PRACTICAL COMPARISON

DIRECT COLOR OVER UMBER	GRISAILLE OVER UMBER
Best when the brown stage is already well resolved and the subject can move into color without more structural work.	Best when the light, modeling, or pale forms still need a more controlled monochrome development.
Preserves warmth, speed, and more visible brown transparency.	Creates greater control over light, form, and the later glazing stage.
Shadows can remain thin and transparent while lights gradually become more opaque.	Warm umber remains active in the shadows while neutral or cooler grisaille develops the light.
Main risk: opaque color may bury the value map or make the shadows too heavy.	Main risk: too much opaque gray can erase the warmth and make the image chalky or lifeless.

6.5 THE UNDERPAINTING REMAINS THE FOUNDATION

Whichever path I choose, the essential principle remains the same: the umber underpainting is not abandoned when the next layer begins. Its structure continues to guide the painting.

In the direct-color method, it controls the value and atmosphere beneath the color. In the grisaille method, it supports the shadow structure and provides warmth beneath the monochrome light. The later layers should not fight the underpainting. They should reveal why it was built.

STUDIO NOTE

Before beginning the next stage, photograph the dry umber underpainting in grayscale. If the image already reads clearly without color, the structure is working. Then ask: Do I need color immediately? Do the lights still need more development? Should the shadows remain transparent? Will the final color be opaque, glazed, or a combination of both? The answers will usually tell you which approach to choose.

KEY PRINCIPLE

1. A finished umber underpainting can lead directly into color or into grisaille.
2. Direct color preserves warmth, speed, and visible brown transparency.
3. Grisaille provides greater control over light, modeling, and later glazing.
4. Grisaille should develop the light without erasing the warm umber foundation.
5. Color must respect the value structure already established beneath it.
6. The correct next step is determined by the needs of the painting, not by a rigid formula.

6.6 FINAL THOUGHT

The completion of the umber underpainting is not the end of the structural process. It is the moment when the painting begins to choose its final language.

One path moves directly into color, allowing the warm brown foundation to remain active and visible. The other develops a grisaille layer first, strengthening light and form before color arrives.

“Build the structure first, then allow color to serve it.”

When the underpainting is strong, either path can lead to a convincing result. The difference lies not in which method is correct, but in how much control, transparency, warmth, and refinement the painting requires.

Final Words – The Brown Layer as Discipline

Umbre underpainting is not impressive because it is brown. It is impressive because it forces the painter to slow down and solve the painting in the right order. It asks for a prepared surface before speed, a clear drawing before effects, value before color, and patience before correction.

That discipline is not meant to make painting rigid. It does the opposite. A reliable structure creates freedom because the painter no longer has to invent everything at once. The surface has been prepared, the light has been set, the form has been tested, and the color can enter with confidence.

When the brown layer is strong, it becomes quiet. It does not need to announce itself in the finished painting. It may remain visible in shadows, half-tones, edges, and warm transitions, or it may disappear almost completely beneath later layers. Either way, it continues to organize the image from within.

The goal of this book is not to turn underpainting into a ritual. The goal is to make the first stages of painting more intelligent. If the brown stage teaches you to see value more clearly, to respect the surface, to delay unnecessary detail, and to let color serve structure, then it has already changed the way you paint.

Before you begin your next work, remember the simplest version of the method: prepare the ground, calm the white, draw clearly, build thin shadows, let the layer dry, strengthen only what needs strength, and do not move to color until the painting can stand in brown. This is the discipline behind the glow.

A final studio test is useful before every color stage: place the underpainting several meters away and look at it without searching for detail. If the main light still holds, the picture is ready. If the light collapses, stay with brown a little longer. Distance tells the truth before color distracts the eye.

Also check the surface itself. The layer should be dry, even, and calm. There should be no sticky islands of paint, no glossy pools of excess oil, and no passage where the brush has turned the wash into mud. A beautiful underpainting is not only accurate; it is ready to receive the next layer safely.

The brown layer is not the beginning of decoration. It is the beginning of order.

Keep the final test practical. Do not ask whether the underpainting looks impressive in isolation; ask whether it makes the next decision easier. A good brown stage tells you where the light belongs, where the shadow can remain transparent, where the focal point needs the strongest edge, and where the painting can stay quiet. That is enough.

The painter who learns to stop at the right moment gains control over the entire process. Stopping is not weakness. It is the recognition that a layer has fulfilled its function. The underpainting should invite the next layer, not compete with it. When it has become clear, dry, and structurally honest, continuing only for the sake of more detail can make the painting less useful, not more finished.

Return to this standard whenever the process becomes confusing: fewer effects, clearer values, thinner shadows, stronger patience. The old method survives because it removes unnecessary confusion from painting. It gives the hand a path, the eye a hierarchy, and the final color a foundation strong enough to carry light.

Let this be the standard for the next painting as well: do not rush the layer that carries the structure. A careful beginning gives the final painting more freedom, not less. The slower brown stage is the part of the process that makes every later decision faster, cleaner, and more confident.

The layered method moves from structure to refinement: umber, grisaille, then color. Each stage simplifies the next.



Umbre structure

The value framework and major masses are established in warm brown.



Grisaille / dead layer

The forms become clearer, cooler, and more resolved before full color begins.



Final color

Color enriches the structure that was already solved in the earlier layers.

FINAL RESOURCE

07

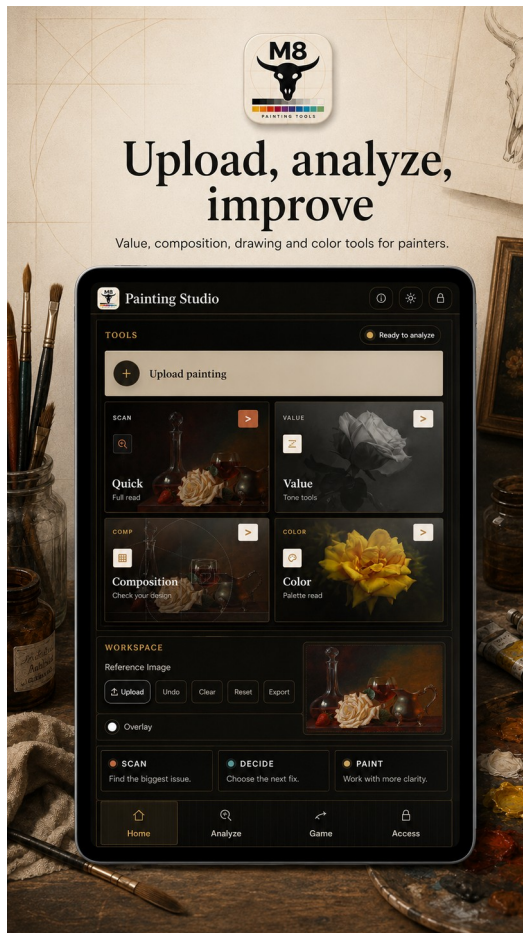
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Reduce the image into clear value groups and see the tonal structure more objectively.

Value Picker

Check the value of specific passages and compare lights, half-tones, and shadows with more precision.

Composition Tools

Use overlays such as grids, diagonals, and proportional guides to evaluate the structure of your design.

Drawing Overlay

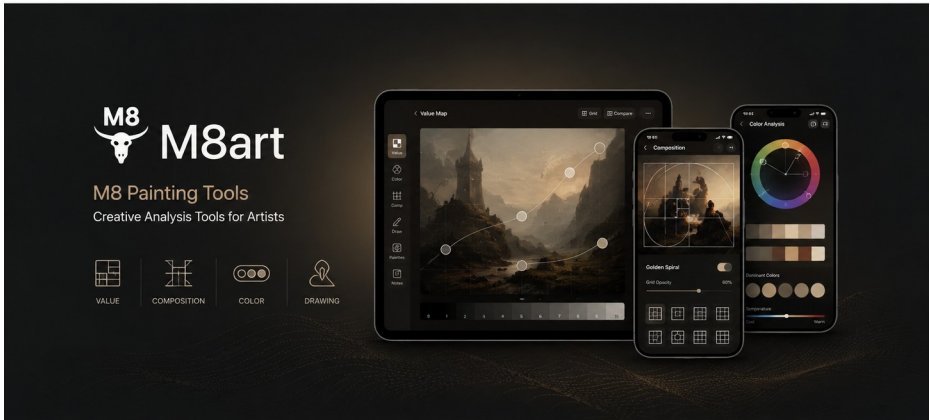
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Color Tools

Study dominant colors, palette tendencies, and overall color relationships more clearly.

Quick Analysis

Get a fast overview of the biggest visual strengths and weaknesses before you continue painting.



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