



A PATREON COMPANION GUIDE

THE PLATYBELODON UNDERPAINTING

Building Form, Detail, and Atmosphere with Raw Umber

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COMPANION INTRODUCTION

A quiet companion to the full painting video

This companion guide was created for my Patreon members as a supplement to the full painting video. It allows you to revisit the underpainting process at your own pace - from the imprimatura and oiling out to building form with transparent Raw Umber, blending transitions, and controlling edges. The goal is not to follow a rigid formula, but to understand the decisions behind each stage and apply the same principles to your own paintings.

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STUDY GUIDE

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“What matters is not the number.”

BUILD THE PAINTING LAYER BY LAYER

Preparing the Ground: Imprimatura

This time, the technique I used was slightly different from my earlier underpaintings.

As usual, I transferred the drawing onto the canvas with oil paint and let it dry. I'll talk more about that process later.

For the imprimatura, I used a quick and simple mixture of Raw Umber and Ultramarine Blue. The result was a warm gray ground. After applying the paint, I wiped off the excess with a cloth, leaving only a very thin layer behind.

This is a good moment to talk about wiping the imprimatura.

I don't know why, but wiping has never been my favorite method. I've always preferred to start and finish the imprimatura with a brush.

But I have to admit, there have been several occasions when a dried imprimatura turned out to be too oily, and the paint slid across the surface more than I wanted.

That's much less likely to happen with a wiped layer, because more of the excess oil is removed from the surface.

My biggest problem used to be dust and lint. Whenever I used cotton rags or paper towels, tiny fibers were left behind on the canvas and got spread around as I worked.

So, a few years ago, I came up with a simple little studio hack.

I still use paper towels for certain things, but whenever I'm wiping the canvas - or drying my brushes - I use microfiber cloths. They leave virtually no lint or dust behind, so the problem is solved.

I simply use ordinary microfiber towels made for cars.

It's a small trick, but it makes a surprisingly big difference in the studio.

STUDIO TIP: MICROFIBER CLOTHS

I use ordinary microfiber towels made for cars. They leave virtually no lint or dust behind.

CHAPTER 02

Why Raw Umber?

For this underpainting, I decided to use Raw Umber, just as I did with the previous still life.

I normally work with Burnt Umber, but this time I wanted a change and decided to try something new.

For me, painting is always about experimentation. With every painting, I try to explore something different - new materials, different colors, or a new subject.

That's the only way to keep progressing and learning. It also brings new life into what could otherwise become a repetitive layering process.

Although, to be honest, I enjoy that process every single time. Even after creating ten underpaintings using a similar technique, I still get incredibly excited whenever I begin a new one. I simply can't wait to get started.

Raw Umber is much less forgiving, though, and controlling the values is considerably more difficult than when working with Burnt Umber.

In some of the darkest areas, I had to return to the painting three or even four times to build up a sufficiently deep value.

Raw Umber is less warm, with a more neutral, slightly warm tone. It's certainly warm enough for an underpainting, but personally, it doesn't suit me as well.

So, for my next underpainting, I'll probably return to Burnt Umber.

“Raw Umber is a beautiful paint for transparent underpainting.”

CHAPTER 03

Oiling Out

As always, before I apply the paint, I begin with oiling out.

The canvas I used is relatively smooth. I applied three or four layers of acrylic gesso to reduce the visibility of the canvas texture, so after oiling out, the paint glides across the surface exactly the way I need it to.

Sometimes, especially with Raw Umber, it can even glide a little too well.

For oiling out, I used my tried-and-tested mixture of fifty percent odorless mineral spirits (OMS) and fifty percent linseed oil. I used to work with pure linseed oil, but over time I switched to this mixture. It isn't quite as oily, so the paint doesn't slide around as much and I have better control over the brushwork.

MIXTURE

50% odorless mineral spirits (OMS) + 50% linseed oil

I do still use pure linseed oil occasionally, but only when the surface is extremely absorbent and needs a little more help. Most of the time, the fifty-fifty mixture is all I need.

I apply it with a brush, my hand, my palm, or even my fingers - whatever works best for the area I'm about to paint. Since this is a fairly large canvas, I never oil out the entire painting at once. I simply choose one section, prepare that area, and work there while the surface is still in the condition I want.

After applying the mixture, I wipe the surface almost completely dry with a makeup sponge or one of my special microfiber cloths. The goal isn't to leave a visible layer of oil sitting on top. I only want to reduce the absorbency and give the paint a smooth, responsive surface to work on.

Why I Build the Underpainting in Layers

Those of you who know my work already know how I approach underpainting.

I've made a few small adjustments here, of course, but after all these years, the process has become almost second nature to me. Building an underpainting and developing it with transparent umber is simply how I naturally work.

From the beginning, I knew that two layers would probably not be enough in this case. Raw UMBER is a transparent pigment, and you cannot create a very deep value with a single transparent pass.

The only way to do that in one application would be to use a much thicker, undiluted layer of paint - but that is not what I want in an underpainting.

An underpainting needs to remain thin. It has to provide a stable foundation for the color layers that will come later, without creating an overly thick paint film that could cause problems over time.

KEY PRINCIPLE

An underpainting needs to remain thin. It has to provide a stable foundation for the color layers that will come later.

That is also why I don't try to solve everything at once.

I don't believe it is realistic to paint all the details, values, shapes, forms, and transitions in a single umber pass. Instead, I divide the process into several stages, with each layer solving a different part of the painting.

The first layer is mainly about the initial details and roughly establishing the large structure. I look at the main light and shadow pattern, the proportions, the drawing, and the basic overall value relationships.

Once that layer dries, I can return to the painting and develop the forms and details more carefully. I can strengthen the darker passages, improve the transitions, correct the drawing, and add more specific details where they are needed.

CHAPTER 04 · CONTINUED

Let the Painting Tell You

I never decide in advance that a painting will require exactly two umber layers.

I might begin with that intention, but the painting itself always tells me whether another pass is necessary. Sometimes two layers are enough. Sometimes a particular area needs to be revisited two or three more times before it reaches the value and depth I'm looking for.

There is no strict limit to the number of umber layers I can apply. It makes no real difference to me whether the painting is completed in one layer or in three thin layers.

What matters is not the number.

The painting is finished when I am satisfied with what I have built.

In general, two layers are often enough to establish a strong umber foundation. But every painting is different, and this particular subject required more work in some of the darkest areas.

As I have said many times before, because Raw Umber is transparent and more difficult to control than Burnt Umber, I had to return to certain passages several times. I simply kept deepening and refining them until they matched the way I imagined them.

That is a completely normal part of the process.

I don't add layers just to follow a rule or reach a certain number. I add another layer whenever the painting still needs more depth, stronger values, clearer forms, or better transitions.

So I continue building the underpainting for as long as necessary - until the structure is convincing and ready to support everything that will come later.

*"The painting is finished when I am satisfied with what I
have built."*

CHAPTER 05

Building Detail and Form Together

As you can see from my process over the years, I've developed a system that works reliably for me.

I use this same approach whenever I create a detailed underpainting. Of course, I made a few adjustments here because this is not the final painting. Several color layers will eventually be added on top, so I didn't take every detail as far as I possibly could.

There are several ways to approach an underpainting.

You can work more freely, almost alla prima, by applying a broad layer of umber and then wiping out the lighter areas with a dry cloth. This allows you to reveal the imprimatura and gradually develop the painting from the larger masses toward the smaller details.

Or you can work the way I do here, gradually building the form and the details together.

To understand this process, imagine the form of a trunk. A trunk has a basically cylindrical structure, which means it contains a gradual transition from light into shadow.

You need the light side, the halftone, the shadow, and the reflected light. Together, these values describe the three-dimensional form.

But the surface also contains details - folds, cracks, wrinkles, and different kinds of texture. All of these elements contribute to the final appearance of the surface.

The problem is that you cannot realistically solve all of this at once, especially if you want a more detailed underpainting. That's why I divide the process into several stages.

THE WORKING IDEA

Gradually build the form and the details together.

CHAPTER 05 · CONTINUED

Beginning with the Surface

I usually begin with the details.

Using a small brush, I start describing the surface with tiny brushstrokes. I paint the folds, cracks, and other irregularities. Wherever possible, I also add a little bit of modeling - a darker passage here, a halftone there, or a small transition that helps the detail sit naturally within the form.

Of course, this is easier in some areas than others.

Sometimes I can model the form without destroying the structure of the lines and the drawing. In other places, I may only establish the details first, allow the paint to dry, and return to the area later.

In some passages, I paint a few details and then fill in parts of the surrounding surface with a value of umber. In other areas, the structure is relatively simple, so I can establish the entire form with umber and then paint the folds and surface details directly into it.

I simply develop each area as far as the situation allows.

Once the details are established, I return with a larger brush and begin working over and around them. I fill in the larger areas with shadow and halftone, strengthen the value relationships, and gradually model the volume of the form.

At this stage, I'm constantly balancing two things: the smaller surface details and the larger structure of light and shadow.

Sometimes a detail needs to be adjusted. Sometimes the detail is already working and all I need to do is improve the volume around it. I may soften an edge, deepen a shadow, or clarify a transition without disturbing the drawing I have already created.

"I usually begin with the details."

CHAPTER 05 · CONTINUED

From Detail to Volume

There are areas where I return twice, and others where I may come back four times. It all depends on the level of detail and refinement I want to achieve.

This is how it's possible to create a genuinely detailed umber underpainting using thin, transparent layers. I'm not trying to force everything into a single application. I'm gradually building the surface, the form, the values, and the details until they begin to work together.

So the process is not a rigid formula.

It constantly changes according to the needs of each particular area. But the entire method is based on a clear understanding of value and form.

Everything I do in the underpainting can ultimately be traced back to the simple exercise of shading a sphere.

If you understand how light moves across a basic sphere - where the light, halftone, shadow, reflected light, and cast shadow belong - you can apply that same knowledge to almost any surface.

A trunk may look complicated because of its texture, but underneath all those folds and cracks, it is still a three-dimensional form responding to light.

That is why I always recommend studying the simple sphere.

The exercise may seem basic, but everything you learn from it can later be applied to more complicated subjects, more detailed surfaces, and eventually to an entire painting.

STUDY TIP: LEARN TO SHADE A SPHERE

Everything I do in the underpainting can ultimately be traced back to the simple exercise of shading a sphere.

Blending and Edge Hierarchy

As always, blending is an essential part of my process. In many ways, the painting stands or falls on the quality of the blending.

I may simply be wired this way, but I genuinely enjoy working with subtle transitions - softening the movement from light into shadow and gradually modeling the volume of the form.

To do this accurately, you need the right brush. Blending can sometimes take longer than the actual application of the paint.

The process is usually simple: I apply the paint with one brush, then use a clean, dry brush to move, soften, and blend the paint exactly where I need it.

You may have noticed that I constantly switch between my application brush - which, by the way, is just an inexpensive synthetic brush - and my dry blending brush.

The main goal is to avoid unnecessarily hard edges.

I don't like sharp edges everywhere. Of course, the foreground should generally contain sharper edges, but even there, I usually try to give them some degree of blending.

The basic principle is simple: the farther something is from the viewer, the softer its edges should become. Background transitions are usually more diffused, while objects and details in the foreground can be described with greater sharpness.

CHAPTER 06 · CONTINUED

Brushes and Complete Edge Control

“Some edges should be sharp, some should be soft, and some should almost disappear completely.”

One of the easiest ways to recognize an inexperienced painting is by the edges. Many beginners paint everything with the same level of focus - every edge equally sharp, almost like an image on a television screen.

But as you progress, you begin to understand the importance of edge hierarchy. Some edges should be sharp, some should be soft, and some should almost disappear completely.

Every time I paint a line or establish an edge, I return to it with a small, flat brush made with natural sable hair and soften it slightly - or more heavily - depending on where that edge is located in the painting.

It may sound obsessive, but I don't even think about it anymore. I constantly have an application brush in one hand and a blending brush nearby, and they move back and forth across the canvas almost automatically.

That gives me complete control over the edges.

I mentioned the natural sable brush. If I'm not mistaken, natural sable is already restricted in the United States because of animal-protection regulations.

Here in Europe, it is still possible to find sable brushes, at least for now, so I've made sure to keep a few in reserve.

However, I recently had the opportunity to try a brush from Rosemary & Co that is designed as a synthetic alternative to sable.

And I have to say, without exaggeration, that it performs even better for blending than I expected.

It handles the paint beautifully, softens transitions without disturbing the underlying structure, and gives me very precise control over the edges.

I was genuinely surprised that a synthetic brush could work so effectively as an alternative to natural hair.

I'll probably buy several more in the future because it has become a very useful part of my blending process.

So, if you're looking for a good blending brush, this one is definitely worth trying.

EDGE HIERARCHY

The farther something is from the viewer, the softer its edges should become.

Drawing, Transfer, and Lighting

As I promised at the beginning, I'm coming back to the drawing and the process of transferring it onto the canvas.

People ask me about this quite often. I use several different methods, depending on the subject. Sometimes I draw directly onto the canvas with a pencil. Other times, I create the drawing on paper and transfer it to the canvas with oil paint. And when I need to save time, I may also use a projector and trace the projected image.

Some people consider that cheating. I see it simply as another tool - just like the Old Masters used the technologies available to them in their own time. You might be surprised by how extensively optical devices were used to help transfer images onto a painting surface. But that is a subject for another video.

When I'm painting a still life, the process is relatively straightforward. The objects or the entire setup are right in front of me, so I can draw them from life or work from a photograph.

This painting was different because the subject is an extinct animal. Fortunately, the anatomy and research had already been developed by a specialist who created the three-dimensional model. I allowed myself to use that model as a reference.

In Canva, I adjusted the positions of the animals and arranged the composition the way I wanted it. I then projected the image onto a sheet of paper, traced it, and transferred the drawing onto the canvas using oil paint.

After that, I completed the landscape and the clouds freehand, and placed the animals into their natural environment.

There was one more problem I had to solve: the lighting.

The animal models were lit differently from the way I needed them to be in my painting. My scene takes place during sunset, while the models were illuminated mainly from above.

So I couldn't simply copy the values and shadows exactly as they appeared in the reference. I had to remodel the forms according to the lighting of my own scene and according to what I understood about the anatomy.

In the end, I borrowed the anatomy from the model - but everything else, including the lighting, the shadows, and the way the forms are modeled, had to be adapted to my own vision.

CHAPTER 08

Final Thoughts

And that brings us to the end of this stage of the painting.

The drawing is transferred, the anatomy is in place, and the umber underpainting has established the main forms, values, and atmosphere of the scene.

It is not the finished painting yet, but the foundation is now strong enough to support the color layers that will come next.

That is what I enjoy most about this process. The painting is built gradually, layer by layer, until the image finally begins to come alive.

“The painting is built gradually, layer by layer, until the image finally begins to come alive.”

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MATE ART