

module four:

COLOR LAYERING

Now that we have done our underpainting and mixed our palette, it's time to start painting with color!

We will do this in several stages, starting with a color sketch, on to the first loose layers of color, and continuing into the next module where we'll finish off with a more detailed pass.

This module is primarily demonstration, but for your reference, I will describe the steps here as well.

STEP 1: COLOR SKETCH

In the last module, I showed you how to lay out and mix a palette for your painting. You should at this point have a palette mixed and ready to go.

Before you jump into your final painting though, it's good to warm up, practice, and test your colors. We can do that by completing a color sketch.

Your color sketch can be fairly quick and loose. The focus here is on your colors. You want to get to know your image and the colors that make it up.

PREPARE YOUR SURFACE

Your color sketch doesn't need to be on a fancy or expensive canvas. Use scrap pieces or heavy watercolor paper if you like. Prime the surface with a few layers of gesso and you're ready to go.

SKETCH YOUR IMAGE

Once your surface is ready (the gesso layers are fully dry), thin out a mid-tone color from your palette and use a small (not pencil thin, but slim) brush to quickly sketch in the main forms of your image. Be sure to use enough thinner here so the paint will go on easily and dry quickly.

PAINT IN THE SHADOWS & MOST DISTANT AREAS

The general rule is to paint dark to light and back to front. That means you want to put in your darkest areas first, and/or the farthest objects from the viewer. This helps to create a more dimensional painting and avoid the "pasted on" look that is often a frustration for beginner painters.

PAINT IN THE FOREGROUND OBJECTS

After you've placed your shadows, work your way up through the midtones and finally to the highlighted areas. Focus on making broad strokes and don't get distracted by details such as texture. We'll deal with these later.

CORRECT YOUR COLORS AS YOU GO

As you paint, take note of which colors are working and which ones aren't. You may need to adjust your color mixes, or mix new colors. Use this small test painting as a way to experiment. If you mess up, learn from it so you can avoid the mistake in your final painting.

STEP 2: FIRST LAYER

Once your underpainting is dry and you've completed your color sketch, the next step is the first layer of color.

For this, you'll be repeating a similar process as the color sketch, but instead of sketching in your image on a blank canvas, you'll paint right on top of your underpainting.

You should have a clear picture in your underpainting of where objects are and the relative values of areas of your painting. Use larger brushes and broad strokes, and don't worry too much about blending just yet.

If a color looks too distant from its neighbor in your image, consider adding a transition color between them rather than trying to blend them with your brush.

Once you are finished, step back and make notes of what areas stick out to you: what areas feel good, and what areas aren't working?

You can use the next layer to correct them.

STEP 3: SECOND LAYER

It may take the first color layer a few days to fully dry. During this time, study your painting. Take a photo of it, view it from different angles, try to identify anything that's bugging you. Once it's fully dry, it's time to work into it again.

OIL OUT YOUR PAINTING

Once you are certain that your first layer is dry, take a shop towel and wet it with Refined Linseed Oil. Gently rub it over your painting until it is slightly shiny with the oil. This will help your second layer go on smoothly and blend into the first.

LOCATE PROBLEM AREAS

Address your main problem areas first. Anything that sticks out at you. Identify whether it's color, placement, value, or something else that's causing the problem. Paint over these areas and make corrections as you need to.

ADD INFORMATION WHERE NEEDED

It's still too early to add in all the details, but look for areas where a lot of detail might be required and begin preparing for the detail layers.

In my demo painting, the lacy fabric under the oranges is an area of detail that I anticipate having to go over later. To prepare for the details, I put in shadows and midtones that will set me up to easily describe the texture in later layers. Remember, paint dark to light. That can apply to how you layer as well as to alla prima techniques.

CLARIFY YOUR COLORS

This is one more opportunity to correct any colors that are off, so make sure you double check and really take the time to slowly and intentionally place your colors.

If you need more than one layer during this step, you can do more, but I find that usually 1-2 color layers are enough to get you to the next stage.

When you are done, remember to scrape your palette clean, wash your brushes with brush cleaner, and cover your palette.