

*module five:*

# FINISHING TOUCHES

## DETAIL LAYERS

Congratulations! By the time you get to this stage, your painting should be about 90% done. This last 10% is going to be focused on last tweaks and details.

This last step is your final opportunity to make corrections and add information that might improve the painting.

Unlike the second color layer, where you likely covered most if not all of the painting, this last layer may only address specific areas. Here's how to approach it:

### 1. IDENTIFY THE FOCAL POINT OF THE PAINTING

You want your painting to have a clear focal point. Part of this is done during the composition stage of a painting, but you can also control the focal point through your use of details.

A uniform application of detail can create a boring painting. The eye doesn't know where to focus. Lead the eye by adding detail to areas that you want to become a focal point.

Choose which details are important based on whether they help guide the eye, or add something useful to a painting. In other words, you don't have to include every detail! It's up to you to determine which details are important.

Usually, objects in the foreground should be more detailed, and objects in the background can be less so.



## 2. DECIDE WHICH DETAILS MATTER MOST

Not all details are created equal. It's up to you not only to decide which areas of your painting need more details (and which areas can do without), but also to decide which details to include.

The goal of an oil painting isn't to include every detail that a photo might include. It's more important to achieve the *feeling* of realism. Look for which details are important for achieving that feeling.

I suggest adding details slowly. With every addition, step back and evaluate. Ask yourself these questions:

- Did I get my point across?
- Does it need more? If so, what?
- What single change would make the biggest difference?

## 3. KEEP IT SIMPLE

The temptation is to zoom in and hyperfocus on every small detail, painting it to perfection. Try to avoid this temptation.

Most details can be described more simply than that. You can make an area look incredibly detailed while still working very loosely! It's just a matter of making the most of each mark.

Work slowly. Be intentional about each mark you make. Consider all the variables we've talked about up to now: hue, value, saturation, placement, etc.

At this stage, you shouldn't be guessing or making approximations; you should have a well defined palette and choose your colors very carefully. Again, painting loosely does not necessarily mean fast, nor does it mean imprecise. Take your time.

## 4. DON'T OVERDO IT

Unless hyperrealism is your goal, you may not need too much in this final layer. Again, step back often to evaluate whether the painting is finished. Maybe let it sit for a while and come back to it.

There's a sweet spot for finishing a painting. The closer you get to that spot, the slower you want to go. You decide what level of finish you want, but let it be a choice, not an accident.

## PRESENTING & STORING YOUR WORK

Once your painting is finished, it will typically have one of two fates: it either goes into storage, or gets put on a wall somewhere.

In either case, it's important to be considerate of your work, and to make sure that its surface is protected. I'm going to include a few rules and suggestions for how to care for your paintings, no matter which fate it's assigned.

### FOR HANGING WORK

1. Oil paintings should not be framed under glass. Putting glass over a painting risks dust, condensation, or the glass itself touching the surface and degrading it. Let those paintings breathe!
2. Large frames can be expensive. For larger paintings, use a "gallery canvas" (usually 1-2" deep) and paint the sides. It's an easy and affordable way to make your painting look more finished on a wall.
3. For small work on panels or canvas boards, you can usually make any correctly sized picture frame work by simply removing the glass from the frame.
4. Avoid hanging your painting in places with exposure to lots of steam, grease, or direct sunlight. In other words, you probably don't want to hang a piece in your bathroom, kitchen, or right in front of an east or west facing window.

### FOR STORED WORK

1. Be careful when storing paintings not to let anything stick to their surfaces. No plastic wrap or paper should be pressed up against the painting during storage. It could stick, absorb the oils from the surface, or otherwise damage your painting.
2. Try not to store your paintings in a way that risks things scratching or rubbing against their surfaces. If you have several in a closet, you can use bubble wrap on the corners of the paintings to create buffers between them and protect their surfaces from scratching one another.
3. Ideally, store paintings vertically to avoid too much dust settling on their surfaces.

4. When transporting paintings, wrap corners in bubble wrap and spread soft blankets over the surfaces if you have to stack them during transport.

## VARNISHING

Oil paints are a fairly hardy medium. They last for centuries under the right circumstances. Even very old and discolored oil paintings can often be restored to their original beauty, thanks to a wonderful thing called **varnish**.

Varnish is a protective coating you can put over your paintings which also serves to unify the finish.

Varnish is the easiest way to make a painting look instantly improved. It unifies the surface gloss, makes colors pop, and intensifies dark areas in one fell swoop.

Varnish can also be removed from a painting, enabling restorers to clean and refresh paintings from hundreds of years ago to a like-new condition.

**TIP:** It's important to remember to always apply varnish in a well-ventilated area. Avoid breathing the fumes.

## TYPES OF VARNISH

There are many types of varnish, from hard to soft, glossy to matte.

Traditionally, old masters would use **hard varnishes** such as Copal and Amber varnish. These give a beautiful, enamel-like appearance to a painting, but can also be given to cracking over time, and are much more difficult to remove from a painting if the need arises.

The most common and popular type of varnish for most modern painters is called **Dammar varnish**.

Dammar and Mastic varnishes are known as **soft varnishes**. They dissolve in solvents such as turpentine, and thus are much easier to remove.

While easier to remove than a hard varnish, which requires hot oil rather than simple solvents, soft varnishes are still too stubborn for weaker mineral spirits such as gamsol. Even odorless turpenoid can struggle with it.

If you ever need to remove a varnish layer, use turpentine in a well-ventilated space to avoid inhaling harmful fumes.

**TIP:** You can use dammar varnish as an additive medium in your painting process in later layers or glazing. I often use a mixture of dammar varnish, linseed oil, and a small amount of turpenoid (about 2:2:1) to create a painting medium that is neither too fat, nor too lean, and provides a nice sheen to my paints. Some pre-mixed oil mediums also include dammar varnish as an ingredient.

In addition to the traditional, natural types of varnishes (both hard and soft), there are also many new **synthetic varnishes** to choose from.

Advantages of synthetic varnishes (such as MSA, Gamvar, and Alkyd Synthetic Resins) are first that they are non-yellowing. They remain clear over time. They are also fairly easy to remove without damaging the underlying layers.

Still, and even more so than with Dammar, it's important to wait a significant amount of time before applying a synthetic varnish to your painting.

## WHEN TO APPLY VARNISH

Typically, you want to give your painting between 6-8 months to cure before you apply a varnish layer. Longer if your paint is very thick.

Applying varnish before your paint has fully cured will create a situation where the varnish is bound up in the paint layers, making it impossible to remove later. It can also prevent the oil paint from fully curing, since it requires oxygen to cure.

If you have a painting that is fully dry to the touch, and you don't have time to wait a full 6+ months before showing the work, you can opt for a thin layer of **retouch varnish**.

Retouch Varnish is a temporary varnish which allows the paint to continue to breathe. You will still want to properly varnish the work when the time is right.

Retouch varnish can be applied as a spray or with a brush. As with any varnish, be sure to apply it in a well-ventilated area.