

*module two:*

# **UNDERPAINTING MAGIC**

# 2.0 UNDERPAINTING

## WHAT IS AN UNDERPAINTING?

Underpainting is a painting technique that has been used by artists for many, many years. It's an effective way to "draw" in your image using value to support your later painting layers.

There are many ways to do an underpainting. Some people complete an entire black and white painting with nearly full detail and paint over that; others use sketchier, simplified underpaintings to establish form and composition.

I teach a method often called "imprimatura." It's a looser technique that's intended to help you establish the drawing and composition as well as values, without going into deep detail.

Your underpainting will replace the use of drawing your image with charcoal or pencil. The benefit of using an underpainting is that it's very flexible and workable, even, to a degree, after it has dried.

I use raw umber or sepia extra (both a dark earthy brown) for the underpainting. Thin the paint with turpenoid or gamsol to create lighter values, and use more paint or more layers to establish darker values.

The process of your underpainting may involve multiple stages. I'll go over the steps here as well as in the video.

## STEP 1

Start out with a grid using a fine pointed permanent marker. You'll want to use a measurement that can be easily divided to fit your painting. You may have to do a little math to create a proportionate grid on your reference image as well.

**For example:** If my painting is 16x20...

16 and 20 are both easily divisible by 2 and 4. Your grid could be a 2 inch grid (for more complex images with lots of details) or a 4 inch grid (for simpler images, for example, a large portrait).

Measure out your grid on your canvas and mark it with a fine pointed marker or colored pencil that won't smudge.

Next, apply the grid to your reference. It's important to keep your ratios equal, so we'll have to do a little math.

You will want to crop your reference to the same ratio as your finished painting. This means that for a 16x20" painting, your reference might be 8x10 (half-sized—divide each side by 2), which would fit nicely on regular printing paper.

To find the correct size of your grid for your reference photo, you first have to find the ratio between canvas and reference. In this case, that's simple since we already know that we are using a 1/2 ratio, but let's go through the math:

Divide the measurements of your canvas by the measurements of your reference.

Since our canvas is 16" wide and our reference image is 8" wide:

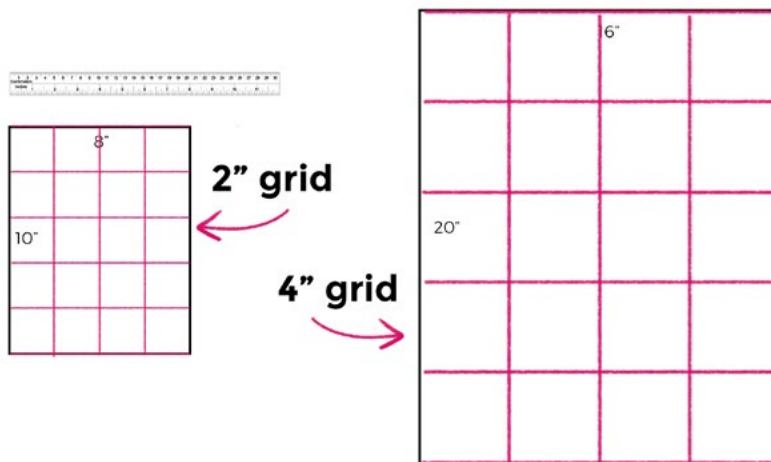
$$16 \div 8 = 2$$

(You could also use the height measurements: 20" and 10" —but you have to compare apples to apples. In other words, width to width, height to height.)

Then divide the size of the grid on your canvas by that ratio (I'm using a 4" grid as an example):

$$4 \div 2 = 2$$

Your reference grid will be 2"x2" squares.



**NOTE:** *If your painting includes lots of light colors, you may want to use a softer colored marker (a medium-brown or another mid-tone color) rather than black to avoid the lines showing through later layers of paint.*

**NOTE #2:** *The bigger your painting, the bigger your grid should get. Avoid using tiny 1" boxes on a large painting. Rely on your drawing skills and use the grid as backup. Grids are useful tools, but can become crutches which prevent us from looking at the whole image when painting or drawing if we rely too heavily on them.*

## **STEP 2**

Once your canvas is gridded, place a large glob of your Raw Umber paint on your palette and mix a portion of it with your thinner to create a quick-drying, transparent color.

With a broad brush, cover your canvas or panel with a layer of transparent raw umber to lay down a midtone on which to work.

Using a mid-sized bristle brush (preferably one that is firm but yielding—it should have a good bounce to it), begin to sketch in your image slowly, using the grid to help you.

The grid creates reference points that you can use to anchor yourself as you draw. Use it to keep yourself from getting too off track with your sketch.

## **STEP 3**

Use a shop towel (blue paper towels) or a clean brush (add thinner for a more dramatic effect) to wipe away paint where you want to create lighter values. Add paint where you want darker values.

As your paint begins to get too dry to work well on your image, take a dry shop towel or soft, dry brush and lightly wipe at your image to soften it. Repeat the process until you have a value drawing that you're happy with.

The goal with an underpainting is to establish the drawing in a more complete way than a simple line sketch. Especially when we are working larger, line drawings can be difficult to get right, and they don't tell the whole story.

An underpainting with a full value scale will tell you more than where the edges of forms are -- it will tell you where the forms turn, and how the light is hitting the form, etc.

**NOTE:** *Take your time during this step. Be patient and make sure you are absolutely happy with the black and white version of your painting before you move on. This is the easiest time to change things.*

## REWORKING/CORRECTING AN UNDERPAINTING



Paint that's been thinned with as much thinner as you'll typically use in an underpainting doesn't seal itself well to the surface. This means that even after your underpainting dries, you may still be able to work into it a little, especially where the paint is thinnest.

You can do this by taking a clean brush (bristle works best; the stiffer the brush, the more extreme the effect), dipping it into your thinner, and scrubbing at the paint where you want to lift it.

Wipe away the thinner and excess paint with a dry paper towel.

Using this method, you can come back to a dry underpainting and make changes and corrections without much difficulty.

**NOTE:** *If you're unhappy with your underpainting, the best way to start over is to scrub it out as well as you're able with thinner and paper towels, and start again.*

**NOTE #2:** *Do not use acrylic paint or gesso over oils, and do not paint with white oil paint over your underpainting if you intend to redo your underpainting. We've talked about "fat over lean" and this would break that rule, which could compromise your painting and cause cracks. (The white paint would be fatter than the underpainting layer you would put down on top of it.)*