

# Introduction

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Welcome to the London Art College's course in oil painting. We aim to provide you with an enjoyable course which will furnish you with the necessary knowledge and skills to work creatively and artistically with oil paints. We advise you to purchase the minimum of materials listed herein, to work through the course from beginning to end – methodically, and to keep up a regular pace of interaction with your tutor by sending in completed course units as you do them. Doing this enables you to get the maximum benefit from your investment in distance learning.

To acquire the skills needed for oil painting and for artistic development means you will have to put in the work yourself at a practical level. The difference between pure book study and what we are offering here is that you are able to get valuable feedback from an assigned course artist. If you are currently too shy or not confident enough to take what you do out into the world and accept praise, criticism and rejection alike, then this is the place for you to begin.

Prior to commencing you will need to organise your home, your time and materials. Oil paints can be messy and it is advisable to make a place where you can work uninterrupted and where you can tolerate an 'accident' or two, i.e., not on the best Axminster carpet in the living room or on a new divan in the bedroom!

Additionally, please provide your tutor with the information asked of you so he/she can tailor responses to suit your individual requirements.

Oil painting is a particularly Western cultural phenomenon. It is alleged to have begun in Europe, in the low countries (Holland and Belgium) around the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, its discovery being attributed to the Van Eyck family – though there are accounts (literally) of its having been used as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> Century in England, and in his 'Lives of the Artists', Vasari indicates that oil painting came about gradually through trial and error by numerous different artists across Europe. As a painting medium it really got going during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

It was preceded by tempera (in which egg yolk is used as the binding medium). The winning properties of oil paint being a heightened realism, almost photographic in quality; this being due to the optical clarity made possible through the use of refined linseed oil. Tempera is fast drying and consequently the method of working it allowed for little alteration or 'fudging', the result is a more wooden feel to the form in a picture. Oil painting superseded tempera in part, because of the novelties of the medium at the time. Oil paintings can be done on canvas, which makes an eminently portable form of property. Tempera paintings tended to be done on wooden panels which are heavier and more cumbersome and a canvas can be taken off its stretcher and rolled up. But essentially, oil painting is suited to the artistic temperament. With oil paints there is opportunity for protracted manipulation of the paint; when painting to achieve natural, illusionistic effects it offers great plasticity and has a lengthy drying period. These characteristics mean an artist can make

### **SUGGESTED TECHNIQUE FOR WORKING**

Squint if it helps you to see the light/dark values better. Apply some of the colours in their pure state – without admixture of another. Try using a *Claude mirror*. (See glossary) You should have about 4 to 5 levels of tone in your picture when you have completed it, finishing with the brightest areas and the white parts, if there are any. What you should have is a rough sort of 'sepia print' account of your subject.

Allow this to become touch dry (no stickiness to the fingers), undisturbed, in a warm, dust free place where no people or pets will come into contact with it. Turn the board you are working on to face the wall and prop it up against the wall without letting the paint stick to it! So the surface doesn't come into contact with the wall. When it is touch dry, you are to give it a quick scrape over with the edge of a palette knife to remove any bumps and rivulets in the surface, taking care not to alter the brushwork too much. Photo it or copy it if you have a digital camera or access to a copier (this will help you see your development later).

The reason for doing all this is so you can do a second and final working of the surface. Before you go ahead, set yourself up at the scene again and look at what you've done. What is your reaction to it? How do you reconnect with your feelings as they were at the point in time when you stopped working? This process is normal to painting. Generally speaking, it is not advisable to let oil paint become very dry before re-working the surface. This is because the surface of a painting is still chemically active for some time after it is apparently dry and for the sake of artistic manipulation it is best to reconnect with the paint chemistry whilst it is fresh. Fully dried oil paint will not accept further layers as well and there is a risk of any further workings either: a) flaking off or b) allowing ghost images from the previous workings to show through. In this instance, we are encouraging you to have the experience of advancing your vision by re-contemplating your efforts.

Using the same palette, be critical of your efforts. This again is normal to the process of oil painting and in fact you must develop the skill of self awareness through rigorous self criticism in order to improve. A mentor or tutor is of great benefit whilst you are doing this. Ask yourself: does my painting echo the feel of the subject? Have I captured the light effects to the best of my ability? Am I happy with the result? What can I do to give my painting a feeling of poise and balance? Have I done all I can to ensure it is complete? A word of caution here though, don't torture yourself in the process of doing this and don't overlook the positive aspect of your efforts. What you should do now is lay in adjustments to the overall drawing in the picture. Be strong about making changes and push the paint around to get the areas of tone where you think they should be. Put in any final strokes with concentrated colour and fine brushes. Use the range of colours available to animate the scene. Burnt Umber has a distinctly warm or red cast to it, whereas Raw Umber is a sort of muddy green by comparison – much cooler. Use the black as if it were blue (mixing with white to form tints). Sit the final brushwork over the initial painting sensitively, so you make the most of your efforts. Artful developments like this will invoke more 'air' in the brushwork, so the painting suggests physical depth and 'breathes'. Imagine the brush strokes as if they were scattered and interlaced like ribbons, feathers or leaves. Keep your attitude light, upbeat and mobile – if you can. Stop when you feel it is appropriate to do so. If you can't sense this point, then cease painting when you cannot find any further way forward and resolve to come back again later. Usually, this is the best way to gauge when to stop, forcing the painting will cause botched results and frustration.

## Developing drawing skills for painting

Up until now you have been asked to work chiefly with paint and the conventional wisdom that you need to have mastered drawing before you can paint has been put aside. This is because in the author's experience, it helps to have an awareness of paint, how it handles and the painting process before attempting to gain drawing skills which relate to painting.

You now have some experience of painting, to build on that, you need to develop your own way of making drawings which serve your particular method of painting. To do this we want you to use charcoal. So you will require: a stick or two or better still, a box of scene painters charcoal. Don't be tempted to purchase the thinner sticks – there is a reason for asking you to work with scene painters charcoal. This is the thickest gauge of *charcoal* stick and will make you work broadly, forgetting detail and registering tone most of all. You will also require a plastic eraser, a putty rubber, a can of a supermarkets own brand odourless hair spray and some sheets of artist's quality cartridge paper, white *conté*, *pastel* or chalk, a board or surface to work on, some clips or masking tape and a sharp knife, i.e.. a Stanley knife.

Again, subject matter matters. So, if you can't find something new to focus on, work with the subject matter you used for the previous two exercises and if you are working on something new, stick to the themes of still-life, landscape/cityscape or the figure. Recall the emphasis there was on relative simplicity in the subject matter – so it needs to suit being translated into paint. Whatever it is that you choose to draw, ensure it is something you are interested in and can see/witness in *3D* reality (not a photo or a print of someone else's artworks) because again, you are to work directly *from observation*. This time we want you to experience working on a larger scale, so your sheet of paper should be A2 in size (4 x one sheet of A4). Fix it to the board or work surfaces with masking tape or clips. Make sure where you work is protected from the dust which arises from using charcoal and take care to protect your hands if you've got sensitive skin. Using charcoal can be drying to the fingertips. Also, try not to breathe in too much of the dust it generates.

When you begin to draw, do not expect yourself to be able to make a perfect result straight away. Use the tip and the side of the charcoal stick and lay in broad areas of tone, avoid trying to record detail or wanting to make out *linear* (line) descriptions of the subject. Occasionally however, you will want to make some details apparent and contrast thicker marks with tiny, shrill ones. You can shape the end of the charcoal to an edge by paring it down with a sharp knife. Cut it carefully by wearing away about a millimetre at a time until you have a really fine edge. You can then make precise and clear linear marks.

### **WORKING WITH THE PALETTE KNIFE**

Some artists like to paint exclusively with the palette knife. This offers a different and sometimes very effective way of making images which gets away from the fussy and picky methods that brushes can lead us into. A little known English figurative artist called Norman Blamey, RA, ended up doing entire paintings with the palette knife, achieving a remarkable degree of pictorial realism in the process. Blamey manipulated the paint during application with the knife and masking tape. He would use masking tape to define the painted mark which was in effect 'squeegeed' onto the canvas with the blade of the palette knife. The Tate Gallery in London owns an example of his work, sometimes known as 'Self-portrait with decoy duck'. Try to see this if you can and recall how it was done. You can find Norman's picture on the internet if you type his name into Google.

If you have a palette knife you might like to try making a painting with it. You may want more than one knife and there are a great many to choose from. A trowel shaped one with a crank in its handle is always useful. Choose from the usual themes supplied for choice of subject matter, the still-life, the landscape or the figure. Now make a painting, A4 in size, where you do not use a brush at all, but instead you use a palette knife. That is the only rule. Mix your colours as you've been shown. Put the paint on as best you can, it will feel awkward. You can work the paint quite thickly, however, you must remember that it has to dry. But the process of learning isn't always easy or comfortable, so try it and don't worry, have fun!

When you've done this, step back and look at it. Reflect on what it was like and if you want to further explore the process. If you liked it, do one or two more works where you try to develop your technique. Send photographs of however many you have done into your tutor when they are ready.

