

Painting White in Chromatic Grays

Problem: To create an illusionistic painting of a white piece of crumpled paper on a white ground, in warm and cool chromatic grays. This conventional exercise results in sophisticated work, no matter what level the student enters. It is all about seeing.

Objectives/Assessment Targets:

- Understanding of the fundamentals of mixing value and color.
- To use value to create form, referencing an 11-step value scale.
- To create the illusion of volume using value, planar description, blending and edges.
- To perceive, mix and apply warm and cool chromatic grays in both light and shadowed areas.
- To logically construct a painted image through multiple layers (fat over lean, and back to front).

Materials: This is a beginning oil painting project, but could also be done as a color theory project in acrylic, gouache, pastel or even cut paper.

- Oil colors: Raw Umber, Payne's Gray, Titanium White, Cadmium Yellow Light, Yellow Ochre, Alizarin Crimson, Cadmium Red Medium, Phthalo Blue, Ultramarine Blue
- Other materials: odorless thinner, Liquin, round and flat brushes, palette, palette knife, rag

Strategy:

- Perception: By rendering the simplest of forms, crumple white paper, the students are pushed to see beyond its mundane properties. The abstraction found in the facets and planes of folded paper is an ideal subject for beginning realist painting or drawing. Students are unable to make assumptions about what they know, and are asked to look more carefully at the details and nuances of observed reality.
- Technique: Through a structured approach that includes demonstrations throughout the process, particular rules within each layer of the painting (3 total layers), and hands-on teaching, most students will quickly master many basic concepts within oil painting including, mixing paints, creating and organizing their palette, painting fat over lean, working from back to front, seeing value and temperature, and the basics of creating illusion with shading, blending, and edges.

Timeline: Four in-class sessions. Students are expected to resolve each layer in-between class times.

Day One:

1. Students are given a sheet of 8.5" x 11" white copy paper, 9" x 12" piece of Bristol, tape and a stapler, and are asked to create a folded paper still-life. This is then taped to their easel at eyelevel with their canvas. This is similar to a trompe l'oeil assignment, since the still life is vertical and the same size and orientation of their canvas.
2. Students receive a demo on how to create black and shades of gray using Raw Umber, Payne's Gray & Titanium White. This includes a discussion of the nuances of a warm or cool gray being created depending on the amount of Raw Umber or Payne's Gray used. The goal at this point is to create a truly Achromatic Black (neither warm nor cool).
3. Students paint an under-drawing of their still life using middle gray and mineral spirits.
4. Using 5 values (white, black, and 3 shades of gray) students block in the underpainting using paint and thinner. We reference an 11-value scale from white to black, with nine shades of gray. (Note: Usually these paintings are high to mid key, without super dark values. A strong light source could increase the value range, but I find a limited value scheme more appealing and

challenging, so I just use the studio lighting without individual spotlights.)

Day Two:

1. Students mix a palette with at least 5 values (high to mid key).
2. Students receive a demo on using Liquin, and discuss the concept of “fat over lean.”
3. The second layer is painted from background to mid-ground to foreground in that order. In this phase students are matching values, learning to blend gradients, reinforcing the planes and facets of the object, and creating edges through adjacent values.

Day Three:

1. Today we look at temperature, finding warm and cool tones in highlights, shadows, and in reflected light.
2. Working from background to mid-ground to foreground, the students perceive, mix and paint their chromatic grays, working fat over lean. I also discuss using complements to create chromatic grays, but students more often are tinting their gray tones with warm or cool colors.
3. Students look carefully. Although we are rendering white paper on white Bristol, the tones differ. Although the subject matter is paper, we consider exterior edges as well as folded edges. This is a time of refinement.

Day Four: Critique, then final revisions. Students are expected to present completed work at critique, but are given time (typically one more week) to revise their paintings, based on class feedback, before grading.

Critique Strategy: For this project I have students hang their finished paintings on the wall at eyelevel. As a class we discuss the challenges of this project. Students are asked to share what they learned through this process. Then one student is chosen to start a discussion of another student's painting. The student whose painting was chosen then chooses the next, and so on until we finish the entire class. I have other students describe the work, not the artist, although they are allowed to respond once the class has finished giving feedback. General criteria/topics for critique include: illusionistic form/sense of volume, “looks like or feels like paper,” accurate value structure (typically high to mid key), effective use of warm and cool chromatic grays, discussion of various techniques employed and their effectiveness (blending/edges/brush marks/paint quality/etc.), and room for growth. Usually we end up talking about how these abstracted forms begin to look and feel like other things.

Resources: David Hornung's book called *Color: A Workshop for Artists and Designers*, for color theory, terminology and methodology.

Examples: Edouard Vuillard, Janet Fish, Wayne Thiebaud, Gerhard Richter, Pere Llobera

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