

Oil Painting — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into studio practice. Each section pairs hands-on painting exercises with planning worksheets and check-off lists so you move deliberately from a bare palette to a varnished, finished painting. Use the templates to log colour mixtures, plan your layers fat-over-lean, and record each painting — the habits that turn scattered experiments into a sound, repeatable practice.

Materials, the Palette, and a Safe Studio

Assemble an archival kit, set up a healthy studio, and lay out a palette you can mix from confidently.

Worksheet: Starter Palette and Materials Audit

List what you own and what you still need before your first painting, with a rough cost for each gap. Aim for a limited palette plus the right surfaces and a clean-up setup.

White owned (Titanium PW6 / Zinc-blend / other)

Yellows owned (Cadmium Yellow Light / Hansa / Yellow Ochre)

Reds owned (Cadmium Red Light / Alizarin or Quinacridone)

Blues owned (Ultramarine PB29 / Phthalo PB15 / Cerulean)

Earths owned (Burnt Umber / Burnt Sienna)

Brushes owned (hog filberts/flats sizes; soft blender; painting knife)

Surfaces (primed canvas panel / stretched canvas / self-gessoed board)

Solvent and oils (Gamsol / linseed / stand oil / alkyd medium)

Palette type (glass / sealed wood / tear-off paper)

Brush-cleaning setup (oil + brush soap, NOT a solvent bath)

Gaps to buy and estimated cost

Exercise: The Grey-Scale Mixing Drill

Mix a stepped value scale of 5 to 9 even steps from your darkest dark (try Ultramarine + Burnt Umber) to pure white, painting each step as a swatch. Photograph the row in greyscale to test whether the steps are evenly spaced.

- Where did your middle grey (value 5) land — was it much darker than you first expected?

- Which steps bunched together or jumped too far, and how did you correct them?

- How little dark pigment did it take to noticeably darken a large pile of white?

Checklist: Safe-Studio Setup

- Room ventilated — window open or fan running before solvent is opened
- Solvent in a closed jar, capped between dips
- Nitrile gloves or barrier cream on; no eating at the easel
- Cadmiums, cobalt, and any lead white handled with no dust or skin contact
- Oily rags stored in a sealed metal can or dried flat outdoors (fire risk)
- Brush-cleaning station set with oil and brush soap, not a solvent bath
- Hands washed before leaving the studio

Checklist: Logical Palette Layout

- Colours squeezed in a fixed order, white first, every session
- More white put out than any other colour
- Centre of the palette left clear for mixing
- Non-absorbent palette in use (glass / sealed wood / paper)
- Painting knife on hand for mixing
- A parking spot kept for useful leftover neutral greys

Colour Mixing and Value

Train your eye to read value first, then mix neutrals, greens, and skin tones from a small palette.

Exercise: Match-the-Swatch Value Hunt

Set up a simple still life (a few objects in directional light) or use a strong photo. Squint to find the big value masses, then mix and paint a swatch to match each major value, ignoring hue at first. Convert a photo of your swatches and the subject to greyscale and compare.

- Which objects turned out to be the same value despite being different colours?

- Where did colour fool you into mis-judging a value before you squinted?

- After greyscale comparison, which swatch was furthest off, and in which direction?

Exercise: Complement Neutralising Chart

Take three pairs of complements (red/green, blue/orange, yellow/violet). For each pair, mix a row that runs from the pure colour, through several greyed steps, to the pure complement, passing through a near-neutral in the middle. Keep the chart for reference.

- What did the equal-parts middle mixture look like — a lively grey or a dead one?

- Which neutralised colours looked more natural than the raw tube colour, and where would you use them?

- Did any pair refuse to make a clean grey, and what did adding white reveal about its value?

Worksheet: Mixing Recipe Worksheet

Before a painting, work out the key mixtures you will need and record a rough recipe for each so you can re-mix mid-session.

Target colour / where it appears

Base hue pigments (which two, e.g. Ultramarine + Cad Yellow)

Value set with (white amount / dark amount)

Chroma lowered with (complement or earth, rough amount)

Temperature nudge (warmer / cooler, and how)

Swatch note (how it reads next to its neighbour)

Exercise: Skin in Three Zones (Zorn Palette)

Using only Yellow Ochre, Cadmium Red, Ivory Black, and White (the Zorn palette), mix a base flesh tone, then paint a simple sphere or a small head study modelling warm light and cool shadow across the three warmth zones.

- How did you keep the shadow cool and slightly greyed rather than just dark brown?
 - Where did you place the warmest (cheeks/nose) and coolest (forehead, jaw) notes?
 - Did limiting yourself to four colours make the result more harmonious? Where did you miss a colour, and could you mix around it?
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Direct Painting — Alla Prima

Paint a finished study wet-into-wet: block in the masses, control edges, model form, and stop in time.

Exercise: Block-In from Large to Small

Tone a canvas with a thin neutral wash, then paint a 60-to-90-minute alla prima study. Cover the whole canvas in the fewest big value masses before refining anything, keeping the paint thin and lean at this stage.

- How many big shapes did you reduce the scene to before refining? Could it have been fewer?
 - Did toning the canvas first make your value judgements easier than working against white?
 - Where were you tempted to add detail too early, and what did you do instead?
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Exercise: Edge-Control Study

Paint the same simple subject twice. In the first, deliberately make every edge hard. In the second, make only the focal point hard and soften or lose all other edges. Compare which reads with more depth and air.

- Which version looked flatter, and why did uniform hard edges cause that?
 - Where did a lost edge (two similar values merging) create a sense of air?
 - How did edge choices steer the viewer's eye to your focal point?
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Worksheet: Form-Modelling Map

For one rounded object in your study, plan the five light-on-form notes in order before you paint them, recording the value you intend for each.

Highlight — location and value

Halftones — value range on the lit side

Core shadow — location and value (the turning point)

Reflected light — value (must stay darker than any light-side value)

Cast shadow — location and value (often the darkest)

Light temperature (warm/cool) and the shadow's opposite temperature

Checklist: Know-When-to-Stop Check

- Stepped back six feet and viewed the whole every few minutes
- Photographed it small and in greyscale to test value and composition
- Darkest accents and brightest highlights placed last and sparingly
- A few decisive hard edges at the focal point; others softened
- No signs of overworking (greying, lost marks, uniformly soft edges)
- Stopped slightly early to keep the study fresh
- Time taken and late fixes noted for next time

Indirect Painting, Glazing, and Finishing

Build a painting in dried layers fat-over-lean, glaze and scumble for luminosity, then dry, varnish, and present it.

Exercise: Umber Underpainting (Wipeout)

Cover a panel in a thin layer of Burnt Umber thinned lean with a little solvent, then wipe out the lights with a rag and lift the brightest areas to bare ground. Resolve the entire drawing and value structure in this one monochrome layer and let it dry (an alkyd medium speeds it overnight).

- Did solving value in monochrome first make the later colour decisions easier?

- Where did wiping out lights work better than painting darks in?

- Is the value structure complete enough that thin colour layers could now sit on top?

Worksheet: Fat-Over-Lean Layer Plan

Plan the layers of an indirect painting in order, recording the medium and relative oil content of each so every upper layer is fatter (or no leaner) than the one below.

Layer 1 (underpainting) — medium and lean/fat note

Layer 2 — medium and oil added vs layer 1

Layer 3 — medium and oil added vs layer 2

Glaze layers — glazing medium used

Confirm each layer is fatter than the one below (Y/N)

Confirm thick impasto is on top, not buried (Y/N)

Planned drying time before each next layer

Exercise: Glaze and Scumble Pair

On a dry light-valued passage, lay a thin transparent glaze (small amount of a transparent pigment in plenty of glazing medium) and observe how it glows. Separately, drag a thin broken scumble of a lighter, semi-opaque colour over a dry darker passage with a dry brush. Compare the two effects.

- How did the glazed colour differ from the same colour mixed opaquely with white?

- What atmospheric effect did the scumble give that flat opaque paint could not?

- Did you confirm the layer beneath was dry before glazing? What happens if it is not?

Checklist: Cure, Varnish, and Present

- Painting stored flat or upright, away from dust, heat, and damp while curing
- Full cure reached (commonly 6–12 months) before final varnish; retouch varnish used if a surface was needed sooner
- Signed in paint before varnishing
- Removable picture varnish chosen (e.g. Gamvar / dammar), never a permanent coating
- Varnish applied thin and even in a clean, dust-free, warm, dry room
- Framed without glass (floater or spacer frame) where appropriate
- Hung away from sunlight, heat, and damp; cleaning left to a conservator
- Finished work photographed straight-on in even, glare-free light

Your Action Plan

1. Buy or confirm a limited starter palette by name: Titanium White, a warm and cool yellow, a warm and cool red, a warm and cool blue, plus Burnt Umber and Burnt Sienna; with hog and soft brushes, a knife, primed panels, Gamsol, linseed or stand oil, and an alkyd medium.
2. Set up a ventilated studio and an oil-and-soap brush-cleaning station, and lay out the palette in a fixed order with white first.
3. Mix a stepped grey scale and check it in greyscale until the steps are even — value before anything else.
4. Make a complement-neutralising chart and a small set of mixing recipes for your first subject.
5. Tone a canvas and paint a 60–90 minute alla prima study, blocking large-to-small and thin-and-lean before any detail.
6. Practise edge control and the five light-on-form notes, then stop the study slightly early to keep it fresh.
7. Lay an umber underpainting that resolves drawing and value in monochrome, and let it dry.
8. Plan and paint upper layers fat-over-lean, building colour in thin transparent glazes and soft scumbles.
9. Let the painting cure fully, sign it in paint, and apply a thin, even, removable varnish in a dust-free room.
10. Frame, present, and photograph the finished work, and log the painting and what you learned for next time.

