

Dearest watercolourists,

I hope you have been enjoying the past newsletter looking at different paint mediums. I, for sure, loved writing them!

It is a treat for me this week to talk about oil painting and share a couple of my paintings as well.



Apple study, 2014, oil on board, Bucharest (painted in the studio)

Oil painting has been my biggest passion and love in art and is the reason why I studied Fine Arts and then the History of Art.

I discovered artmaking as a child using watercolours. My mummy showed some of my paintings to a Romanian artist who was sometimes organising workshops in schools. His name is Popa. He is a very old fashioned artist, with a very strong idea of what art is. He paints in the style of Impressionist and makes his pigments from scratch. This painter liked my work and convinced my mum I ought to join his atelier and become one of his pupils. I was the youngest student he had and I was painting alongside university students when I was about 11 or 12 (it made me feel humble and grown up at the same time).

I had a very traditional and old fashioned art education. Unlike in the UK, where experimentation and creativity is key to the creative process, in the Romanian atelier it was all about exercise, repetition, observation, endless drawings and colour work. The artist's philosophy was that Nature is perfect and we ought to study and understand it and then we can create something worthy, inspired by it.

In this world, I discovered oil painting. I felt very grown up to mix oil colours, have my wooden palette and my long, thin, natural hair oil brushes, and the oil, made by the artist in his studio, following his own recipe "because no one makes anything good anymore, you cannot buy this, you have to make it yourself".



Plain air study, Bucharest 2015, oil on board

I discovered oil painting by using the medium and looking at art in the studio. Paul Cezanne was my teachers favourite artist and an endless source of inspiration.



Montagne Sainte-Victoire, Paul Cézanne 1904 oil on canvas

But what is oil paint?

Oil Painting is a medium in which pigments are mixed with oils (linseed oil, poppy seed oil, walnut oil, and safflower oil) as the binder. Pigments were imported from all around the world and they had different properties and qualities.



Likewise, oils were very different, with their viscosities, transparency, hue and drying times making them ideal for different elements in a painting or even mixtures of pigments. It is not unheard of a painter using different oils in their work.



Art Supplies Shop in Venice, 2017

Oils were prepared and processed before they could be used, which I saw first hand in the studio. Oils would be boiled with resins or different additives to

obtain the best viscosity, varnish, transparency and resistance in time. In the studio I grew up my teacher would also age the oils he processed in a dark coloured glass bottle for a couple of months before he used them in painting.

As I mentioned last week, oils were imported from Afghanistan and first used in Europe by Early Netherlandish artists. The medium's qualities made it very appealing for European artists and by the height of Renaissance oils virtually replaced tempera.

Traditionally, oil paints would dry in a two-three weeks. This meant that a much more complex and laborious project could be undertaken and more interesting colours and pigments could be used.

Oil painting traditionally uses stretched canvas as the surface (board can be used as well as a cheaper alternative). There is of course an art in prepping the canvas (or board). The canvas has to be primed. Traditionally it is a rabbit skin glue mixture which makes the canvas strong and stretchy. It smells awful. With the emergence of new technologies and plastics, there are some artificial primers, PVA, derived from plastic which can be used instead of the rabbit skin glue. Some oil painting purists may say that PVA glue is sacrilegious and not nearly as good as the traditional method, but to that I would say, try it. The options are there.



Once the canvas was ready, the artist would sketch the subject on the surface using charcoal or thinned paint. To thin oil paint one can either add more oil or a spirit. Imagine how we paint in watercolours, and we have our glass of water nearby, which we use to thin out the pigment, well when painting in oils, one would have a recipient of oil and they would thin out the pigment that way. Using oil will affect the drying time of the sketch, making it longer, when an artist is interested in a fast drying pigment, then they would use spirit instead of oil to thin out the pigment.

A rule in oil painting, similar to watercolour, is thin/ translucent layers first and thicker/denser layers on top. In oil painting, using a thin layer over a thick one would result in cracks.



Image from <https://sflac.net/uncategorized/cracks-painting-and-conservation-part-i/>

Because oil dries slowly, it allows artist to revisit an area and mix colours and textures.

To erase an unwanted painted area, artists would use a rag with turpentine while the paint was still wet. This is very similar to how we use a tissue with water to lift off pigment.

One way of using oils would be in layers. Artists would apply a thin layered of oil paints in one colour for the sketch, another sienna or brown layer for the chiaroscuro, meaning applying the shades, once that would dry another thin layer will be applied on top, with the actual colours. And the image could be build from here. It is a very time consuming process.



Not my painting, Image from https://www.tes.com/lessons/AHxtBZIT_cYHyg/s-underpainting

The process is fascinating and I highly recommend the film 'Girl With A Pearl Earring' 2003 if you would like to see how the process unfolded. I will not give any spoilers, but it tells the story of a very enigmatic artist and his most

fascinating painting, and how that painting must have unfolded. It is not a historical film, but they do try to recreate the atmosphere of a traditional artist's studio.



For a long time artists had to work indoors because oils would still need to be mixed fresh, as they were using organic natural pigments. As technology advanced and premixed colours could be stored in tubes, the way artists worked changed again. All of a sudden painting outdoors was possible.

Oil painting has been rediscovered and reinvented many times by artists. There is no one single way of applying the paints. For example, Impressionists reinvented oil application by mixing colour on the canvas and working in only one thick layer; they were also active as colours became available in tubes so they would paint outdoors.



‘Claude Monet Painting by the Edge of a Wood’ 1885 by John Singer Sargent. Oil on canvas. 54.0 × 64.8 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

This is just a very broad introduction to oil painting and the more one studies an artist, the more specific and unique their use of oil appears to be. The history of oil painting is fascinating and even tracing the journey of a pigment becomes a whole history in itself.

All in all, when looking at a painting, there are so many more stories besides the subject narrated by the image that hide behind the brushstrokes, and the more we know the more we can appreciate those little treasures.

Let me know what you think about this week’s newsletter and about oil painting in general. Also write to me if you have any questions!

I am looking forward to seeing you on Monday,

Best wishes,

Ioana