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**PAUL
BALDASSINI** *Using a Monochrome
Underpainting*

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A Structured Approach

Paul Baldassini discusses his methods to oil painting using a monochrome underpainting

There are a variety of ways to approach creating a realistic oil painting, none of which is better or more correct than any other. Whatever approach you take will, to some extent, be influenced by your painting style and personality. Since I like painting in a structured, organized manner, it was necessary for me to spend time studying the techniques of the Old Masters, rather than say, the techniques of 20th century modern masters. It was in the techniques of the 16th and 17th century Italian and Dutch master painters that I found comfort and relief. After many years of study I realized that the main difference between 16th and 17th century Italian and Dutch and modern painting techniques is that the antique painters broke down their working procedure into a series of distinct passages executed in a predefined order.

The most important of those passages is what is commonly and broadly referred to as the underpainting. Simply put, an underpainting is a monochrome version of the final painting intended to establish the composition, give volume and substance to the forms, and distribute darks and lights in order to create the effect of illumination. Since I am a realist painter concerned with light effects, the underpainting technique greatly facilitates both the realization of a compelling composition and accurate depictions of light and chromatic subtleties.

My technique is very similar to that of the old masters, yet skillfully incorporates a modern feel with a contemporary style. This style developed over many years of trial and error, mostly informed by an assiduous study of Italian and Dutch master painters. This included books and numerous visits to Europe to see the actual artworks as I was determined to understand how they created such luminous paintings. My “aha” moment came when I saw a



Iris Genesis, oil on panel, 24 x 33" (61 x 84 cm)

Wabash Tall Bearded Giant Irises swaying in morning light. I was particularly attracted to the contrast of the partially unfurling iris next to the fully opened iris.

showing of the works of Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese in 1990 at the Musée du Petit Palais in Paris, France and three years later at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels, Belgium in 1993 where examples of lesser known works by Peter Paul Rubens and contemporaries were on display. These included some monumental paintings on stretched and braced linen canvas and small studies. I've always been fascinated by the overwhelming design and craftsmanship of Rubens' art, whose compositions contain a great deal of energy, rhythm and bravura brushwork that surpassed even the most influential artists of his time.

Rubens' works were painted mostly on panels toned with a yellowish color (Raw

Sienna?), applied unevenly in diagonal strokes with a coarse bristle brush allowing some of the white ground to show through. On top there was no drawing that I could notice, and the compositions were sketched and blocked in with thin fluid paint, an umber or warm brown, almost like a watercolor. The painting proceeded from there with soft milky semi-transparent mid-tones, some chromatic body color and then lights built up thickly to cover the ground. The shadows were scumbled thinly over the brownish underpainting which was very visible in much of the completed work. Since I was painting only in watercolor at that time I thought his approach to oil painting was really interesting and very appealing.



Dinnerplate Peony, oil on mounted linen panel, 24 x 34 3/4" (61 x 88 cm)

A huge peony blossom, measuring over 8 inches in diameter. Peonies are great fun to paint, but very challenging as there are many small intricately layered large and small petals.

I thought, “What a great way to craft a painting!” I mean, painting is hard enough and there a lot of problems to solve so why make it harder on yourself by trying to solve every problem all at once. Just think of the problems you have to solve — design and composition, drawing, tonal values, color and color mixing, light effects, and many others

I think it's easier to get the composition, value and tonal considerations out of the way first and then focus almost exclusively on color mixing, temperature, edges and light. Combine that with direct painting, a little glaze and scumble, and voilà! — luminous breathtaking work in a relatively short amount of time. I'm simplifying of course but you get the idea.

Underpainting/overpainting was also a great recipe for atelier style production where various aspects of the painting could be handed off to master-trained assistants. Indeed, Rubens technique was one of the most efficient techniques in the history of art. A prolific artist, Rubens (and his atelier) produced over 1,400 significant works of art during a roughly 30 year period until his death in 1640.

As I studied more art at museums throughout Europe and the United States I discovered that nearly all, if not most, of the master Italian and Dutch painters were using some form of umber or warm brown underpainting and completing their compositions with color overpainting treatments of various techniques. Paolo Veronese, for example, made fully realized tonal underpaintings then modeled the forms using white lead and raw or burnt umber, then glazed on color using paint and medium. Vermeer did the same style underpainting, but then laid in masses of translucent body color, blending with soft brushes then adding thick white lead highlights and darkening shadows as necessary.

There were many more master painters utilizing the same basic underpainting technique and then creating overpaintings to suit their own palettes and painting styles — Leonardo, Pontormo, Bronzino, Titian, Caravaggio, Velazquez, Rembrandt, Ingres, Janssens, Spranger, Hals, Gainsborough, Zurburan, the list goes on and on. Thus began a 25 year investigation of the materials and methods used by the old master painters that has not quite yet ended.

Underpainting colors

There are many colors that can be used for a successful underpainting. It's up to the individual painting style. After years of experimentation I now use only two underpainting colors: raw umber and quinacridone magenta. Both are lightfast, transparent, fast driers and offer a complete tonal range from very pale to rich and deep. Which color I use to create my underpainting is usually, but not always, determined by the subject matter.

For example, a landscape that has dominant greens would always utilize a quinacridone magenta underpainting. A variety of thin translucent milky green glazes or “velaturas” applied over a quinacridone magenta underpainting makes the greens in a landscape really vibrate as the magenta peeks through here and there. A floral composition with dominant pink, red or purplish blossoms can be completed effectively and convincingly with the same kind of thin and thicker paint application and brushwork to model the petals which lets some of the magenta underpainting peek through. Where white or yellow blossoms dominate I would use



White and Yellow Roses, raw umber underpainting



White and Yellow Roses, oil on panel, 24 x 33" (61 x 84 cm)

raw umber and overpaint accordingly, the brown underpainting seiting an overall warmish tone and serving to facilitate and enhance shadow treatments. The luminous optical effect of the light entering the paint film, reaching the white ground and bouncing back through the translucent layers to your eyes is sublime.

There are added bonuses: the underpainting unifies the colors, most of which can be applied very thinly, especially in the shadows, with only the more opaque highlights applied thicker. Classic fat over lean painting theory. And, it doesn't take much material to create a painting in this manner, so there are economical benefits also: since less paint is used to create a work the savings can be used to purchase paint manufactured from higher quality and/or more desirable pigments.

Composition development and painting process

A significant amount of time is spent on developing the composition using digital image editing software. After review and selection of photographic source material, a composite master image file is created using multiple images from a specific day's shoot. After cropping the image to a pleasing composition, the image is color balanced, and edited as necessary. Two working prints are made, a color reference image and a grayscale image printed full size that will be used to transfer the composition to a prepared panel. I do not make oil color studies, notan sketches, or small layouts of any kind, and find them completely unnecessary to my working style. Once I've arrived at my composition there is no need to go back and make adjustments.



The Hay Tedder, oil on mounted linen panel, 24 x 26" (61 x 69 cm)

For several years I painted only tractors and farmers creating a "Landscape Series". This was my favorite composition of the works that included figures, capturing my neighbor, a local farmer, wearing his white shirt and straw hat tedding hay in late morning light.

panel for the underpainting. When the underpainting is dry I begin the overpainting. It proceeds in the exact same way only now I'm using a full-color palette.

I use Old Masters Flemish Maroger painting medium. I can't imagine oil painting without it and its handling properties and set up time. Three large pickle jars of solvent (OMS) sit on a glass-topped work table to the right of my palette. One for constant dipping into, one for cleaning, and one for pouring off OMS too contaminated to reuse anymore.

Before I start the overpainting I usually mix some puddles of dominant colors that I'll be using for the days session. For example, if I'm working on pink blossoms I'll quinacridone magenta and ultramarine blue deep to make a purple. Then I'll add some white and smear a trail which gives me a range of tones to grab and mix from. I'll do the same with ultramarine blue deep and white and quinacridone magenta and



Three red-speckled White and Yellow Roses, oil on mounted linen panel, 24 x 26" (61 x 69 cm)

I really like roses and enjoying photographing and painting them. This group, like most of my reference images of roses, came from the rose gardens of the Elizabeth Park Conservancy in Hartford, CT. I photographed them in golden late afternoon light, reaching up to kiss the sky, capturing the moment's light in oil paint.




Fractal Roses, oil on panel, 24 x 38" (61 x 97 cm)

One of my favorite paintings, I caught these little beauties in various stages of opening and shot over 70 images in late morning light. After reviewing the images I chose the best five blossoms to composite this explosive, dynamic composition.

white. There are two indispensable "mother" colors in my palette: warm gray and cool gray. One of these two colors is mixed into just about every color puddle at some point to neutralize the mixtures. During the session the puddles grow and mingle and merge offering a useful array of chromatic and grayed-down hues to dip in to. I use these color mixtures to modulate the warm and cool hues necessary to develop the forms. Paint is applied thinly using the jelly medium which remains workable for blending effects as necessary and eventually gets tacky allowing for application of thicker and/or more opaque mixtures. The mother colors insure color harmony as some of almost every mixture contains one or the other. The use of this technique produces subtle grays which act as counterpoint to higher chroma colors. Since most of the colors are grayed down, the careful application of high or full chroma colors create a jewel-like effect and luminosity is achieved.

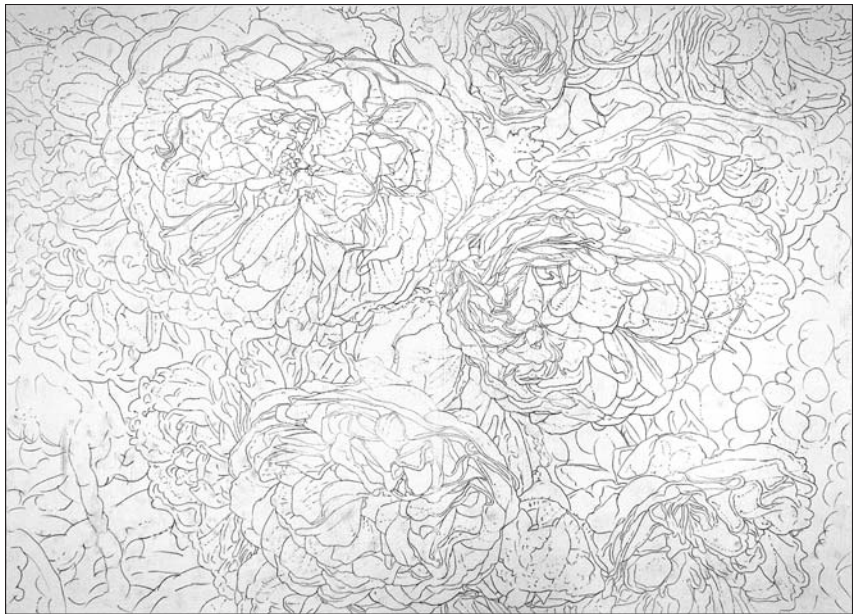
Darks are applied very thinly varying the amount of medium as necessary to achieve the desired effect. The lightest lights and highlights are applied last using much more white in the mixtures and not quite as much medium. Finally, opaque highlights and some lights are applied thickly with very little medium. Once again, its important to observe the fat over lean rule.

The use of Maroger Medium facilitates drying of the paint layer — the painting is completely dry the next day ready to start the process all over again on the next section. I try and direct paint each section to completion during one painting session. Sometimes however, it might be necessary to adjust some values so I will apply some medium only to an area, mix my colors and apply as a glaze or scumble and refine as necessary.

Maroger Medium reduces overall drying time — three to four weeks at most depending on how thick the final light or white highlights were applied. When fully dry, a final varnish is applied using three coats Old Masters Mastic Varnish. The first two coats are usually cut 50/50 with pure distilled turpentine, the third coat is applied uncut. Drying time between coats is at least one week, two days if baked in the sun. After that the painting is off to be framed and I'm onto the next work. 

Continued ▶

My Art in the Making Petite Climbing Roses



STAGE 1 DRAWING TRANSFER

The image is transferred to the panel by sandwiching a large sheet of graphite transfer paper between the full-size grayscale print and the panel. This part of the process is critical and time consuming, often taking several hours. Using medium pressure, I use a fine-tip red ink pen (so I can see the marks I'm making on the grayscale print) to trace the necessary information to the panel. The completed outline tracing resembles a large complicated contour drawing. No fixative is necessary as the graphite transfer is quite stable.

WHAT THE ARTIST USED



Artist's Oil Colors from left to right

- » Cadmium Yellow Lemon
- » Cadmium Yellow Medium
- » Cadmium Yellow Deep
- » Raw Sienna
- » Chinese Orange
- » Fanchon (Napthol) Red
- » Quinacridone Magenta
- » Perylene Crimson
- » Burnt Sienna Deep
- » Viridian
- » Ultramarine Blue Deep
- » Indigo
- » Warm Gray
- » Cool Gray
- » Titanium Zinc White
- » Raw Umber is used only for the underpainting

Medium and varnish

- » Old Masters Flemish Maroger Painting Medium
- » Mastic Varnish

Misc. Supplies

- » Weber Odorless Turpenoid for general painting
- » Pure Distilled Turpentine for thinning
- » Small palette knives for mixing initial paint puddles
- » Cotton rags
- » Paper towels

Supports

- » 1/2-inch thick MDF primed with two coats of white latex house paint and three coats oil painting ground

- » Mounted linen panels are attached to the same MDF panels with medium weave Belgian linen using neutral pH bookbinders adhesive then primed with three coats of oil painting ground

Brushes

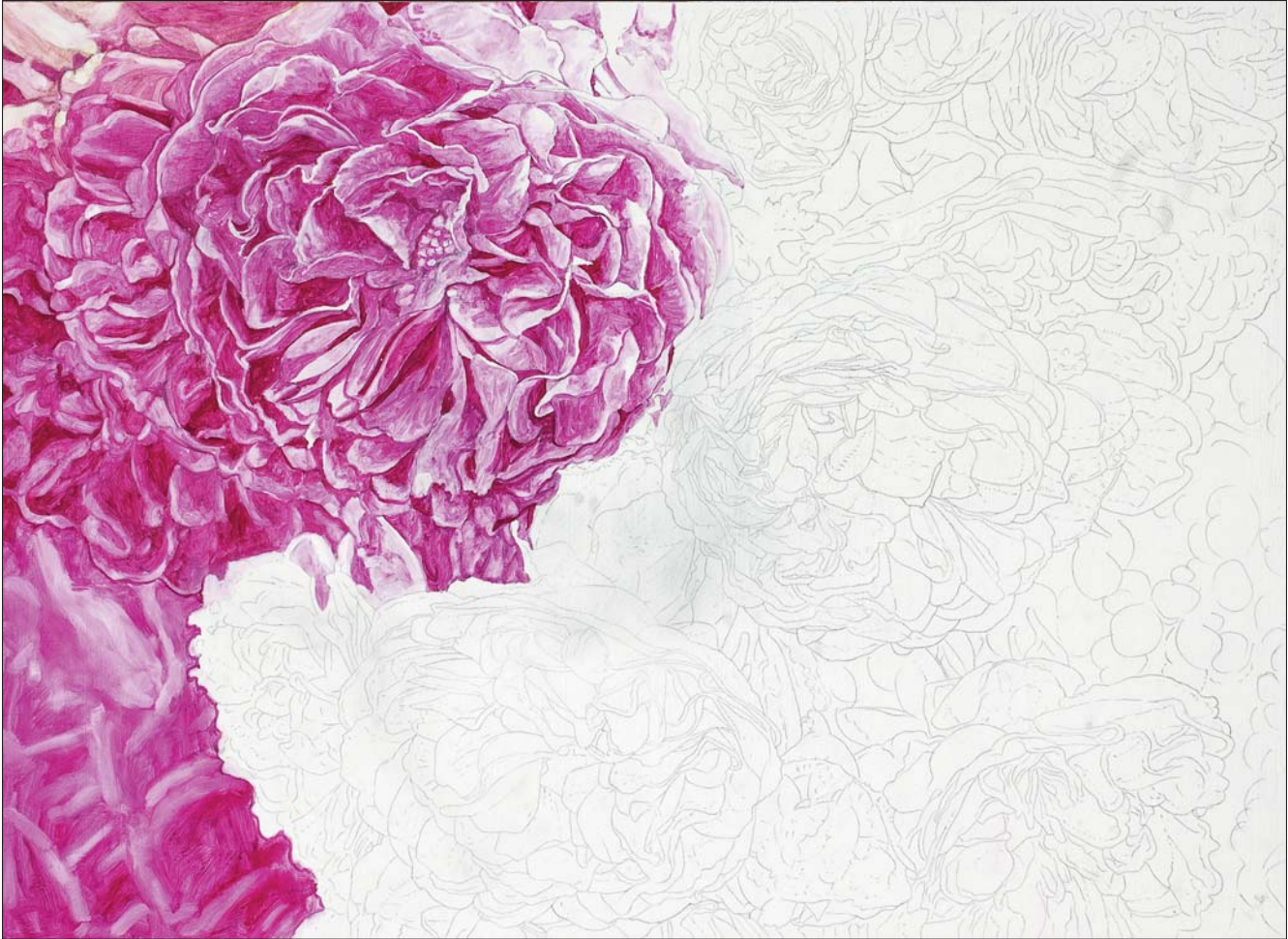
- » Filberts and flats, Nos. 0 – 12.

Lighting

- » Primary lighting is provided by two 48-inch overhead industrial light fixtures fitted with two fluorescent light tubes. Opposite my easel is a large glass sliding patio-style door that provides additional east/southeast light most of the day.

Easel & Palette

- » My easel is an antique French-made upright floor design. It is large and heavy and features a machined steel hand-crank mechanism for effortlessly raising and lowering the transom that holds the work. Under the transom is a built-in storage box on top of which I have added a larger modified transom that measures 12 x 36 inches. On top of that is a piece of 1/4-inch beveled-edge plate glass which serves as my palette. In between the transom and glass is a piece of photo-gray or neutral matte board whose value is similar to an underpainting grisaille.



STAGES 2, 3 and 4 THE UNDERPAINTING

Now I'm ready to begin the underpainting. I'm right-handed so my working sequence is basically top left to the right edge. There is no set pattern — with flowers I usually paint a large blossom or cluster at a time and move to the right and do another, then down and repeat. I squeeze out a small blob of paint and make a puddle. Using a nearby pickle jar half-filled or so with Weber Odorless Turpenoid I thin some of the blob into a puddle of various viscosity and dip and grab some paint depending on the value and apply paint. I use three brushes to complete the underpainting: two No. 0 filberts one brand new for "drawing" and a gently used one to apply toned washes. Most paintings are completed with only a No. 0, 2 and 4 filbert. A soft cotton rag is in my left hand to clean my working brush as necessary. Removing paint is just as important as applying it. The oil painting ground is a wonderful surface to paint on, not absorbent like gesso which I dislike, and the thinned paint behaves exactly like watercolor, blending and lifting as necessary to model the forms. For the flowers, using my reference photo as my guide, this is done one petal at a time, one section at a time in 4 – 5 hour sessions. The white ground is used for the light tones and whites just as in a watercolor. That section is dry by the next day. I continue in this way section by section until the underpainting is completed.



▲ STAGE 5 THE FIRST OVERPAINTING

Chromatic colors are mixed and applied using the direct painting method. "Veils of color" are applied thinly with more jelly medium, then more opaque colors with little or no medium are painted onto those veils. The values of the mixed colors match the values of the underpainting tones.

◀ STAGE 6 THE SECOND OVERPAINTING

Edges where the petals meet the background greens are slightly softened and blended using a small brush with jelly medium and a small amount background color.



STAGE 7 THE COMPLETED PAINTING *Petite Climbing Roses*, oil on panel, 24 1/4 x 33 1/2" (62 x 85 cm)

All edges have been resolved with opaque and semi-opaque light and/or white highlights applied as necessary. Completed painting receives three coats of Old Masters Mastic Varnish.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

A professional fine artist, graphic arts specialist, and designer, Paul Baldassini has been working with graphic images for over 40 years. Having had some traditional training, Baldassini considers himself a self-taught painter due to his total immersion into a highly self-motivated learning process outside the realm of formal instruction. He has a reputation for producing quality products through a combination of materials, technical competence, originality and attention to the nuances and aspects of light, color, design and composition that have earned him showings in both commercial and non-profit settings. A native of Quincy, MA, Baldassini owned and managed Paul Baldassini Graphic Design in Boston's Back Bay. For over 25 years, his creative team provided graphic design and advertising services to a diverse range of clients including corporate, private and non-profit organizations.

His dedicated study of 16th and 17th century master painters, combined with his vast knowledge of modern painting techniques and digital tools results in contemporary realist paintings that appeal to art collectors who appreciate both how

a painting is created and the natural beauty of the subject portrayed in a painting. His work is about movement, pattern and rhythm, and light effects, thoughtfully imbued with a certain energy sensed in all of the subjects he paints. Baldassini attends to details that give his paintings a mannered, but nonetheless, arresting quality. Baldassini has a BFA in Illustration/Graphic Arts from Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, MA and is a Signature Member of the New England Watercolor Society, (NEWS). Baldassini, his wife and daughter reside in Middletown, Connecticut.

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