

Iconographer's Manual

Purpose: Powerful image

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1.PREPARATION

Whether the image is planned for a commission or not, it is necessary to define its main character and main means of artistic expression. The best way to this goal is to see different (related and not related) images and make sketches. By sketches, we mostly mean little and quick paintings, done with egg tempera on watercolor paper, but simple doodling with a pen or pencil can help, too.

If the work is done for a commission, it is necessary to take

into account the client's requirements and to think of how the image is going to be connected to its future environment. It is desirable to discuss requirements with a client and write them down, possibly shaping this in a form of a contract BEFORE beginning the work.

As a main means of artistic expression can be anything, make sure it does not confuse or tempt the beholder. It can be a composition solution, particular scale of tonal values or combination of colors. It can be, for example, an expressive gesture or the position or proportions of a figure. The idea may even be entirely generated from scratch by the artist, but in this case it is very important to evaluate it and make sure that it is not entirely speculative, rather than visual.

After defining the main means of artistic expression, it is necessary to find out exactly how they will be realized and how it will work for the chosen subject (to comply with the requirements of the client and the context).

It is important to remember that the image has to have a solution not just in colors, but also in tonal values. The easiest way to check this is by taking a photograph with a cell phone and transforming it into black and white. Some parts of the image have to be far darker than others.

2.DRAWING

To start drawing on the board it is recommended to use a large bristle brush and yellow ocher mixed only with water, with no binder. The bristle allows you to concentrate on the larger masses, instead of drawing perfect lines. Yellow ocher does not allow you to visually “cut” the surface, but maintains the unity of the painting surface. It is recommended to apply paint with a dry brush and in a thin way, half-transparent, delicately modeling. The forms should first be shaped by “directions” - straight lines, “chopping” and building the image, trying to reveal its essential structure.

Starting from a very thin and diluted, almost transparent, paint, it is advisable to continue in stages with progressively thicker paint, adding more and more pigment. Gradually, from step by step, increase the density of the paint and brushstroke to make up to five “approaches” with water and ocher alone, and with no binder. When it becomes apparent that drawing with ocher and water is not improving the image, or making it more precise, give it a light sand with sand paper #100 - #400. Then, mix the ocher with egg emulsion (water plus egg in 1:1 proportion plus a little vinegar) make one more approach.

After this first stage, it is necessary to check if all parts of the image, size, position and proportions, are good enough. Then, continue to add more black to the ocher as it is necessary to start modeling the volume and relief of the image with shadows. This second stage of drawing can also be realized in several approaches, gradually increasing the contrast by adding more black. The drawing can be considered finished when all major and intermediate forms are clarified and modeled, and the contrast is strong enough to allow you to see the drawing after you have applied the necessary density of glazes.

If you plan large-scale gilding, such as background and/or halo, it is performed when the drawing is finished, after you have defined the contours of the main shapes.

3.COLOR

When the drawing is finished, apply the main colors, carefully following the decisions made in the sketch.

Start with the most important parts; in a half-figure or head with shoulders image this is usually the face. Then move on to the less important, but largest parts, followed by the parts of less importance. Paint application should be

calculated to reach final density in two or three layers.

4. HIGHLIGHTING AND SHADING

Highlighting and shading can be applied on top of the main colors when the image has no more blank (uncovered) areas and all colors are defined. Highlights and shading should be first done on the most important parts of the image, then on those of secondary and lesser importance. Avoid shifting from highlighting to shading (and back) and aiming toward the fastest completion of one figure. This is important because finishing, or almost finishing, a single figure or a detail will almost certainly cause lack of integrity. A finished part(s) will look different, detached from the rest of the image, thus harming your ability to produce an integrated image. And vice versa, when building an image, constantly coordinating all constructed parts with the whole and with each other gives you a much better chance of maintaining its integrity.

Assist gilding (made with “ray-like” looking highlights) is first made with yellow ocher and water, as it looks similar in color and tone, and if necessary it can easily be removed.

When working on highlights and shadows it is important that every detail has to have its own character (except for

identical objects). Consequently, if the upper clothes are made using a lot of highlighting, you can model the tunic just using shading. If certain detail is worked with very contrasted highlighting, other areas can be developed with highlights of similar tonal value, and so forth.

Bear in mind that no single object in an image should be described with highlights and shadows in an equally elaborate manner. Better to choose either one or the other and use it creatively and poetically.

If you are wondering whether to develop faces with highlights or shadows, I recommend using highlights, because trusting light to build the form will give overall a more luminous result. This can be applied elsewhere, too. If you begin with shadows, you will be tempted to trust them to do most of the work. As a result, the image will be all shaded, since “lights” will not have enough opportunity to bring the image to life. Often it is better to glaze all the face, and possibly other parts, before applying the shadows. It helps integrating and makes it deeper. Once glazed, some highlights may need to be repeated, but greater care is needed for this stage.

After working on the highlights of the face, reinstate some of the shadows. Work first with the green, and then with brown, composed of red (15%) and green (85%). The last

two tasks are to add some diluted black shadows and a much diluted blush color to the face. This helps to bring more life to the face and remedies the most harsh contrast transitions.

When the face is complete, add shading to the rest of the image, remembering that each part requires a unique approach, respecting its individual character.

These are the last steps of the painting process. They need to be finished before you shift to the last step, graphics.

5. GRAPHICS

Graphics refers to the line on the edge of the border, the halo(s) and the lettering. The task of these elements is to connect the whole image we painted with the background surface and the architecture of the board. The width of the lines has to be adjusted according to the proportions of the whole image; they should not be too large (requiring too much attention) or too narrow and hardly readable.

6. ASSIST

The assist gilding, prepared by yellow ochre in step #4, has

to be performed at the very end, to avoid damage by a touch or scratch. Draw the “base” with thick garlic juice, wait for about 30 minutes and apply the gold with the freshest available rye bread in town.

7. VARNISHING

Before sealing the icon with varnish or boiled linseed oil, cover the assist with shellac for better protection from occasional damage. Any final varnishing or other sealing is best performed after at least several days or one week. In a few days after varnishing you may discover the varnish has been absorbed, especially if it was applied in a thin layer. The process can be repeated for a second or third time, preferably with a gap of five days or a week between layers.

8. EGG TEMPERA

What is the Egg Tempera?

The word tempera comes from the Latin verb «temperare»

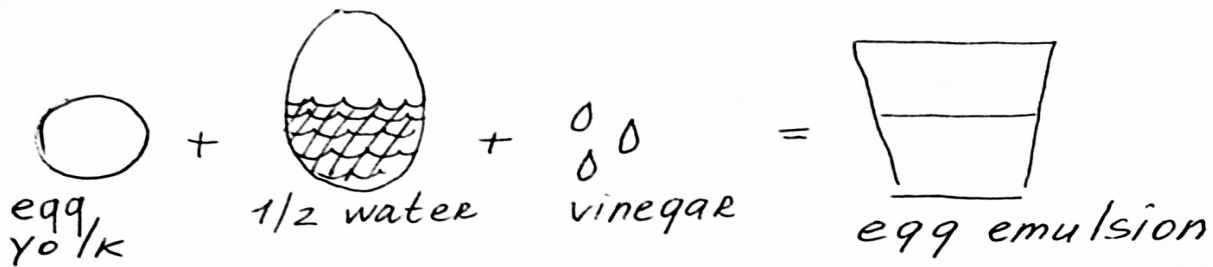
- *to mix*

together. Tempera paint consists of two parts; the water-soluble binder medium - an emulsion of natural or artificial provenance - and dry pigment powder. The binder gives the name to the type of the tempera; most common is egg tempera, typically using the yolk. Other types of egg

tempera may be made with egg-white, whole-egg, egg and oil, casein (a fast-drying, water-soluble medium used by artists as a form of tempera paint since ancient Egyptian times) and other types of tempera.

Once it is thoroughly mixed with the ground pigment, egg tempera is applied in thin, semi-opaque or transparent layers. The main characteristic of egg tempera is the overlapping layers of transparent color. The best base for tempera is a gessoed wooden board.

How to prepare the egg emulsion



How to prepare the colors

Dry pigments are ground with the binder using a mortar and pestle to crush the particles of pigment. A brush is too soft to grind pigment and binder.

How to mix the colors

If you want to make a complex color, begin with the basic color, then add another color in very small quantities,

carefully grinding them together. When the mixture becomes quite smooth, try a small amount of paint on your image. If you are not happy with the result, add little more of the second color, grind carefully, and test it by painting it on your image.

What is a glaze?

A glaze is a thin layer of color, comprised primarily of emulsion and a very small amount of pigment.

How to use the mixture. Four rules for the successful work

- I. Natural pigments have different weights, and when mixing a complex color, the heavier pigments will sink to the bottom, while the ones that weigh less will remain suspended in the emulsion. Therefore, each time you load the brush, first mix the paint by gently stirring it.
- II. The egg-tempera painting process may have different layers - thin or thick, using the same color in different density. When you add a small amount of emulsion, the paint gets thicker and it creates a thick layer. Adding more emulsion will create a thinner, more transparent layer of paint.
- III. DRY THE BRUSH WELL!!! Whatever the consistency of your paint, dry the brush well before using it for painting.

IV. Let every layer of your paint dry completely before applying the next one.

Footnotes:

- A video on covering the icon with copal varnish may be found at our YouTube channel (see website bottom links)
- We will continue to work on this manual. If you feel it is missing an essential part(s), let us know and we will consider adding it.
- If you want to receive our news, please share your email address. You will receive our Newsletter about once every three months.

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