

Course sample

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Open College of the Arts

0800 731 2116

enquiries@oca-uk.com



Painting 1

The Practice of Painting



Frederic Bazille at his Easel Pierre Auguste Renoir oil on canvas

Level HE4 – 40 CATS

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Additional illustrations by OCA tutors

Open College of the Arts
Redbrook Business Park
Wilthorpe Road
Barnsley S75 1JN

Telephone: 01226 730 495

Email: enquiries@oca-uk.com

www.oca-uk.com

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Times suggested here are only a guideline: you may want to spend a lot more. Research and writing time, time for reflecting and logging your learning are included.

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Before you start

Welcome to *Painting 1: The Practice of Painting*. Your OCA **Student Handbook** should be able to answer most questions about the basics of this course and all other OCA courses so keep this to hand.

Course aims

People paint for many different reasons, but common to most artists or amateur painters is a goal of self-expression. This idea is a relatively new one, as painters were formerly regarded as artisans who perfected their practical skills in applying paint much as other highly skilled craftsmen did. Innovators often emerged as assistants to lesser artists, breaking new ground in the possibilities of style, content and new forms of technical application. Artists had to learn the rules of technical mastery before they could break them.

In the twenty-first century, 'painting' encompasses a much wider range of activities and the notion of painting as a craft is not central to the aims of many fine artists today. Today's painters have the benefit – and the burden – of the history of western art that allows us to find out a great deal about painting media, application, style, content and countless ways of making images. It can be hard to strike a balance between learning what we can from the great artists of the past and succumbing to the modern compulsion to always seek uniqueness and innovation.

Painting is, in essence, a practical activity that involves materials, tools and the acquisition of skills and techniques. At the same time, though, the motivation to paint and draw is based on individual and personal impulses. Only you know why you want to paint and only you look at your world in the way that you do. This course aims to help you analyse and select from the visual world the things that seem to be important and discover ways of translating this visual experience into painting.

On successful completion of the course, you'll be able to:

- use drawing and painting for investigation, generating ideas, and recording and selecting visual information
- make skilful use of a range of media
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the work of some important artists and movements in painting
- reflect perceptively upon your own learning experience.

The Practice of Painting

Part one

What paint can do



Still life with flowers in a vase Rowley Leggett oil on canvas

Introduction

Whether you choose to work in oil or acrylic paint, it's important to gain some practice in handling your chosen medium and to learn some basic techniques. The projects and exercises in this course can be undertaken using either medium. If you have both kinds of paint available, read through the exercises in each project and decide which kind of paint you'll use for each of them.

The possibilities of what can be done with any kind of paint are almost endless and you'll need to find out for yourself which techniques best meet your particular creative needs. In this first part of the course, you'll be exploring a variety of ways of applying paint and developing your confidence in handling paint. You'll gain a sense of the possibilities that you can explore later, when you undertake the subject-based projects in later parts of the course. You'll return to the topic of technique in Part Five when you'll experiment with some more innovative ways of applying paint and using artists' materials.

As you work through the various exercises, make notes in your learning log about how your chosen paint and colours behave. From the outset, you should be developing ideas for further projects of your own.



Still Life with Fruit Pierre Bonnard oil on canvas

Project Basic paint application

Before the Impressionists changed the face of painting, oil paint had traditionally been applied fairly evenly and built up slowly in layers. Brushwork was sometimes discernible, but was descriptive rather than expressive, and did not play a major role in the composition. But for the Impressionists, especially Monet, the painting surface was as important as the subject, sometimes almost more so, and his brushwork, which varied from painting to painting through his long career, was highly inventive. Start your work on this course by exploring what your brushes can do.

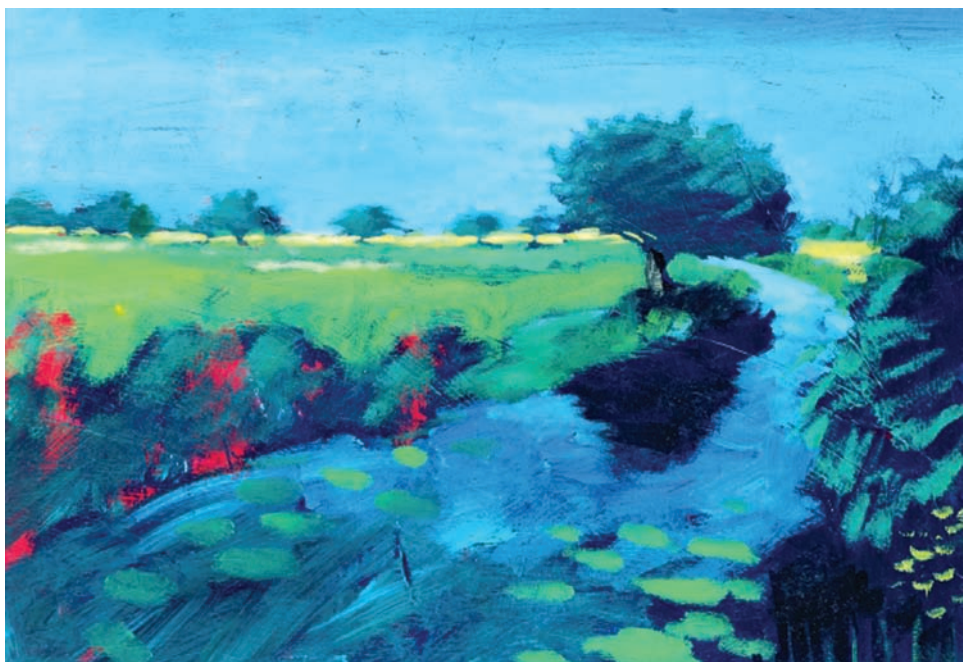
Exercise: Getting to know your brushes

Start by exploring the range of marks and shapes that can be made with your brushes. Make marks with brushes of different sizes, using flats, rounds and filberts.

Then, from memory, paint a small and simple landscape (about A4). Use large brushes so you won't be distracted by the urge to include detail; instead, concentrate on the possibilities and patterns made by the brush marks.

Experiment with using the side of the brush as well as the flat and the tip. You'll find that you can make surprisingly fine lines with the side of a brush. You can also use colour shapers, which are an excellent alternative to brushes.

Once you've experimented, paint a piece of fruit using these techniques, taking care to set the fruit in direct light to help define the form.



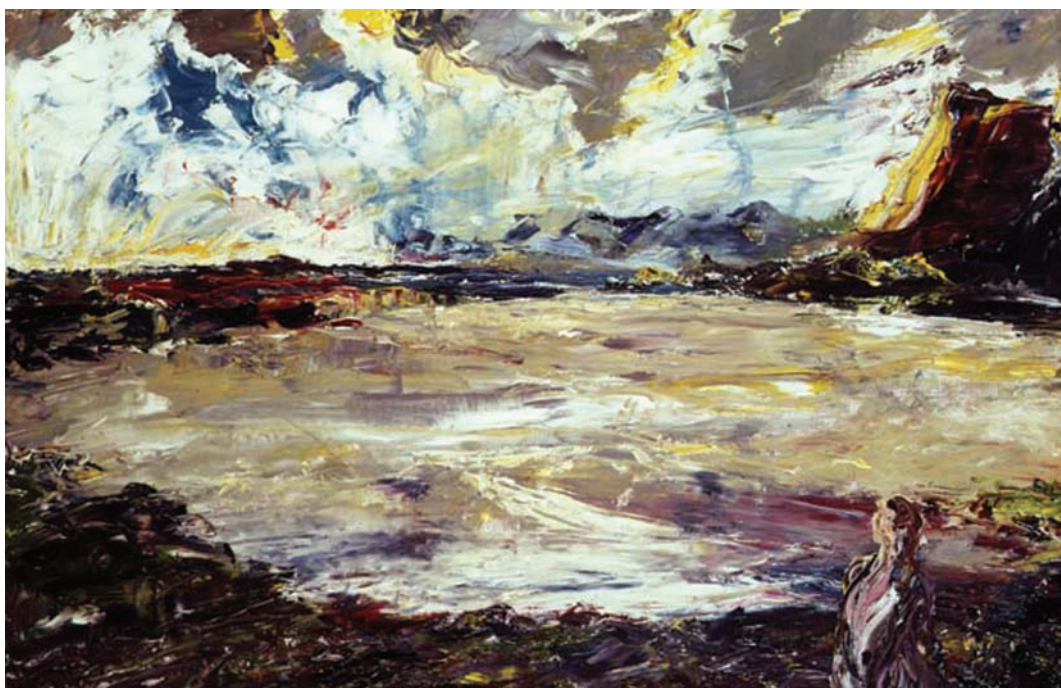
River Paul Powis *acrylic on card*

Exercise: Applying paint without brushes

Painting knives have been used for many centuries, usually in conjunction with brushes, but you can also complete whole paintings with just knives, which are sold in many sizes and shapes. If you don't have one, use an ordinary palette knife well loaded with paint for your initial experiments.

Also try applying paint using old plastic credit cards, set squares or protractors, pieces of cardboard windscreen scrapers and plastic plastering tools. You can apply paint quite thinly with these and lay one colour over another so that the first layer remains visible. Don't worry about creating a painting – just enjoy experimenting.

Now try applying paint with sponges, rags, toothbrushes and your fingers. Sponges and toothbrushes are good for texture effects, and can be built up in layers or laid over flat colour. Rags or fingers are useful for blending one colour into another or wiping paint across the surface. This exercise is best done with oils as they dry slowly, giving you plenty of time to manipulate the paint.



By Streadagh Strand, Sligo Jack Yeats oil

Exercise: Painting with pastels

If you've got some pastels amongst your art materials, try this exercise.

Pastels are both a drawing and a painting medium, and nowadays are used more in the latter category. The application of oil pastel and soft pastel is very different, particularly in relation to painting:

- Oil pastel is usually used with turps and can be used to layer and blend.
- Soft pastel picks up the tooth of the support and can be blended with paint using a damp cloth or brush and water scumbling techniques.

You can cover large areas with the side of a stick, lay one colour over another, and blend colours and tones. Use the points of the sticks for linear details. Practise making marks and blending with pastels; if you have time, use the techniques you've discovered to make a simple picture.



Three dancers Edgar Degas pastel

Project Transparent and opaque

Both oil and acrylic paint can be diluted to make a transparent or semi-transparent layer or glaze. A thin glaze of diluted colour over a reflective white ground can give a painting a luminous quality that's not matched by mixing that same colour with white. The following exercises will help you to explore ways of both applying and mixing paint. Controlling gradual fading or blending of colours is a very important skill in painting and it can be done in a variety of ways.

For oil paint, you'll need a large brush and a pad of treated oil painting paper. You'll also need turps in a small container, a jar of white spirit and a palette or an old saucer.

For acrylics, work on special papers, watercolour paper or stretched cartridge paper. (Stretch a sheet of cartridge paper dampened with a sponge over a board and allow it to dry slowly; this gives a smooth surface to work on.) You'll also find it useful to have some scraps of paper to try out your colour mixes.



Exercise: Tonally graded wash

Set your paper up lengthways. (This is called portrait format, as opposed to landscape.) Look through your colours and choose either a strong red (such as Cadmium Red) or Ultramarine. Put a small amount of pigment on your palette or saucer and work in water or turps until you have a strong but fluid mix of the colour. Load a medium-wide brush and work from the top to the bottom of the sheet with increasingly dilute mixes of the colour until, at the bottom of your sheet, you have a very pale wash, almost faded out to white.

Practise this several times until you have a satisfactory progression from deep tones through to the very palest tones. Try to avoid the paint running by controlling the load on the brush and the flow of paint across the paper. Choose one or two sheets that have the most steadily graded wash and put aside one of these to dry. (You'll be using this in the next exercise.)

Now find another colour that is close to the original in the spectrum. If you chose Cadmium Red you could make this either orange or crimson. If you chose Ultramarine either a violet, turquoise or Viridian will be suitable. Make a dilute mix of the second colour and paint graded washes on at least two more sheets. Again, keep a sheet aside to dry in readiness for the next exercise.

Next, working wet-in-wet, paint a graded wash onto one of the sheets that has the first colour. Keep the intense tone of the new colour at the pale end of the first colour and allow the colours to merge in the centre. Try this out so that you have several sheets of merged washes. It may help you to think of the gradual merging of colours in a sunrise or sunset where the horizon may be a scarlet or crimson red that fades up through purples to blues.



Clouds Above the Grampians James Morrison oil on canvas

Exercise: Overlaying washes

Once your papers are dry, make up the same colour mixes only this time paint the second colour over the dried wash that you set aside. Notice any differences in the way the paint and colour behaves and make notes in your learning log. For example:

- Does this method give you greater control?
- Have the colours merged in the same way?
- How could you employ these techniques of building coloured glazes?

Now that you've worked on single colour washes, wet-in-wet blended washes and overlaid glazes, practise these different ways of mixing transparent colour using a range of your

pigments and note down the mixes that work well. Are there colours that are hard to blend?

You'll have noticed how a bright blue cloudless sky will appear a deep ultramarine or cobalt blue above your head but fade away in the distance, appearing almost white on the horizon. The mixing and merging of a limited colour range has been explored by many artists and the effect of building layers of transparent and opaque paints can create a sense of different picture planes. Look at the paintings of Mark Rothko, in particular the huge Seagram Building paintings, now in Tate Modern, which form a solemn kind of tone poem all in shades of crimson. Visit www.tate.org.uk for an interactive tour of the Seagram murals.



Lighthouse, Blue Sky Renny Tait oil on canvas

Exercise: Opaque colour mixing

Some pigments have greater opacity than others without the addition of white and some can be laid on thickly to cover layers underneath, but white is essential for building body colour and is the vital ingredient for most opaque painting techniques. In this exercise, you'll paint graded tones by mixing in white.

Look carefully at your tonal mixes and put some white on your palette or saucer.

Choose at least three of the washes you've painted (including the single colour ones) and attempt to recreate exactly the same colour, shade and tone of each of these in turn. This time, though, you'll be mixing colours by adding in white, making the paints opaque.

Over-painting with acrylic works well because it dries so quickly. However, subtle, smooth colour blending is harder to achieve and that is the aim of this exercise. You'll have to work fast at blending the graded tones of each colour by adding more white progressively or you could go from light to dark. Acrylic paints tend to dry darker than when they are applied so this exercise will help you to see how they behave.

If you're working with oil paints, you should be able to blend the colours with ease. One way to blend colours is to lay out broad bands of colours to be mixed and gradually feather the tones across each other so that they blend smoothly and evenly.

When you've completed this exercise, compare the effects of the transparent colour mixes (from previous exercises) and the opaque ones. Think about ways in which both methods could work together. Make notes in your learning log.



Monochrome vessel assemblage Brian Irving oil on board

Exercise: Monochrome studies

In this exercise you'll explore two approaches to the same subject, one in which the transparent qualities of the paint provide the dominant effect and the other which exploits the opacity of the paint.

You could choose a range of subjects for this exercise, but the subject suggested is the outline of a winter tree seen against the sky, as this can be made as simple or complex as you wish and it has positive and negative shapes. If possible, work from an observational drawing but an imaginary tree will do or one loosely copied from a photograph. Draw the main outline of a tree, including the trunk and the main branches, and then roughly sketch in the diminishing outer branches and twigs.

Prepare two sheets of paper (at least A3) or two boards. Prepare one of these with a dark-coloured wash (you could mix this from Prussian Blue or Ultramarine and Payne's Grey, Indigo, a dark earth colour mixed with blue or a dark and dirty green). Prepare another sheet with a light grey ground either mixed opaquely or by using a wash. If you're using oil paints, spread the colour thinly so that it will dry in a day or so.

Now use charcoal to copy the image of your tree on to your two prepared papers or boards. Lightly dust the charcoal off so that a faint image can be seen.

Working on the light ground first, use a fine hair brush to outline the positive shapes of the trunk and branches using the same colour mixture that you used for the dark ground. Fill the trunk and main branches with a dense, solid mix of the dark colour. You could fade this colour out to suggest the finer outer twigs and branches.

Next, start to work on the dark washed ground. This time build up the form and outline of the tree by painting in the negative shapes between the main branches, small branches and twigs. Mix up a light grey and apply this to the shapes formed by branches, trunk and the ground so that you gradually build up the form of the tree. Modulate this grey as you move away from the trunk towards the outer branches. Twigs can appear from the distance in a half tone. (This approach could be useful to you in Part Four when you come to try some landscape painting.)

When you've finished both studies, assess the strengths and limitations of each approach. Note down how you think you could exploit these effects again. Both transparent and opaque methods are often used side by side in the same painting.



Winter Trees Charlotte Verity oil on canvas