



Irises, oil on linen over panel, 25x14 1/2 in (63.5x36cm)



Reviving a tradition

James Gillick spent years learning traditional oil painting techniques in order to become a successful painter. Here he provides a background to the processes involved

Make no mistake about it, the figurative oil painter in the modern art market is something of an outsider. Any art that is not chiefly conceptual is considered to be unintelligent and safe. Brush, ephemeral graphic images have been fashionable in the arts for a long time, but a renewed search for deep quality in painting has grown in recent decades. Good oil painting is the means of making and decorating an object that can last for a thousand years. Surely, sound oil painting technique needs another look?

Most satisfyingly I am not alone in my thinking. Increasingly, young artists wishing to learn traditional oil painting techniques are contacting me. In response to this I have now opened my studio in Lincolnshire as an atelier and offer year-long internships to 18–21 year olds.

The road to knowledge

When I set out as a full time painter at the age of 21 there was a huge chasm between the deep oil painting knowledge

evidenced in old books or paintings and the absence of it in the contemporary commercial gallery scene. I discovered just how insubstantial modern knowledge of the subject is, how few painters practised soundly, how few teachers taught oil painting and how much information had been lost in the last 100 years. It took two experimental years, alone in a room in my parents' house, followed by 17 years of continual learning to grasp the basics of the subject. I have since become a successful painter, and a bit of a monomaniacal oil painting specialist!

The techniques that I employ, and continue to develop through research and experimentation with materials, are an integral and somewhat secret facet of my paintings. I have more to offer on the subject of oil painting than I can include here, but I can give you some broad pointers. Painting is never merely a technical enterprise and my aim is to get you aligned correctly if you plan to try painting in a more traditional way.

Working environment

It is important to understand the different colours that the left and right eyes perceive, and the wholly different function of each eye. One eye sees more golden hues than the other. The left eye sees broad forms in a wide angle while the right eye gathers detail. This affects the way one sets up the easel to work, choosing to look out of the left or right eye, and the carriage of one's body.

Consider the layout of your workspace very carefully: the placement of the easel, painting station and light sources. It has to be an environment in which the eye can see clearly for long periods without tiring, ie much darker than many modern studios and with the light on the subject exactly equal with that on the painting surface, so that the pupil of the eye does not have to repeatedly expand and contract. It is good to remember that subjects lit from high up give the viewer of the finished picture an automatic midday high, whilst those lit from low down exude a quieter feel.

theartist Practical



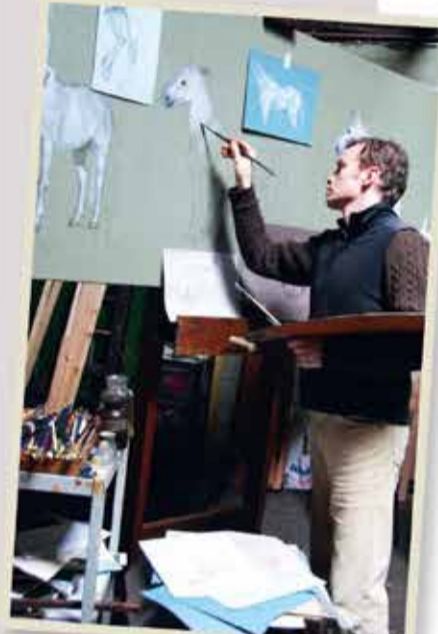
Canvas making



Grinding pigment with a muller on a marble slab



Applying coloured gesso to panels



Drawing on to the canvas

Supports

I make all my gessos, stretchers and canvases, which I gesso and then prime, usually with a grey-toned primer. Have a ready supply of smooth, semi-smooth and rough supports to hand. Not only does the roughness of the canvas determine the amount of detail possible, but a quickly fading subject (such as fish or cloudscape) that needs to be painted directly is best done *alla prima* on a rougher support that takes the paint from the brush readily. A very skilful painter will demonstrate his art by the smoothness of the support used for his *alla-prima* work.

Killacorran Blue (Toddy), oil on canvas, 30x72in (76x183cm)



Making paint for priming canvases

Materials

Limit your palette to a narrow colour range that best suits your personality. You will be drawn to certain colours, so take hints from the habitual colours of your clothes or home furnishings. The fewer colours that you employ the more luminous an oil painting becomes as it ages. For all my work I use: iron oxide yellow, cadmium red, raw sienna, burnt sienna, burnt umber and French ultramarine, plus ivory black and flake white (and very occasional blobs of alizarin crimson and viridian). This limitation gives my paintings their unique 'look'.

Do your research to find chemically compatible pigments for your range of paints. Never mix alizarin crimson with burnt umber, for example, as it fissures on



TRADITIONAL OIL-PAINTING TECHNIQUES



Applying varnish to a finished painting

Silver Jug, Pen & Book, oil on linen over panel, 9x5 1/2 in (63.5x15cm)

drying; and pay attention to your choices of blacks and whites – their underlying hues may vary greatly and will either kick against or work with your colour range. Lead white is weaker but warmer than titanium or zinc. Arrange your paints on the palette methodically from light to dark and always in the same placement, which allows you to work fluidly.

I make most of my own paints, varnishes and mediums as I need them. It's quick and economical and results in a fresher, higher quality product. One of the reasons I do this is that all shop-bought tubes of paint contain filler and are generally oily and 'overground'; I like mine to be thick, almost gritty and concentrated.

My mediums are a mix of oil and varnish in varying quantities for each layer of the painting. I use the essential fat-over-lean method so that the final layer of paint doesn't dry faster and crack. I buy fresh,

cold-pressed, organic linseed oil and refine it myself to remove the omega 3 fatty acids, which cause linseed to yellow over time.

Technique

The foundation stone of successful oil painting has to be learning to look for longer at the subject than at the canvas. Foremost among the skills is speed and accuracy of drawing from life with a brush. This in turn requires a rigorous painting method that is consistent and simple. Remember that painting is not meant to be an exciting activity in itself. The pinnacle in technique is when the hands move unconsciously because it means that the eyes, brain and the mind are free. I follow the same efficient method every time I produce a painting. I begin by drawing in paint directly on to the panel or canvas and ensure that the drawing is

James Gillick

is from a long line of artists and artisans and lives and works in Lincolnshire. He has exhibited in London since 1995 and exhibits annually at the Chelsea Flower Show, the CLA Game Fair and Burghley Horse Trials. James is represented by Jonathan Cooper Park Walk Gallery, London, 0207 351 0410, www.jonathancooper.co.uk; his next solo exhibition to the gallery will be from June 5 to 22, 2013.

In addition to still lifes, James works on a variety of commissioned projects including portraiture, horse paintings and historic restoration. James is offering year-long internships to 18–21 year olds at his studio in Lincolnshire. For more information contact James at: 3 Spaw Lane, Louth, Lincolnshire LN11 0EJ; telephone 01507 600269; james@gillick-artist.com; www.gillick-artist.com.

technically sound before embarking on a thin colour underpainting. In the final layer I consider full colour, lighting, form, texture and so on, ending with impasto highlights. It is often not until I apply these final, joyful brushstrokes that the painting really comes together. Lastly, I never send a painting out into the world without a thin coat of dammar varnish to protect it from environmental pollution. ☒

Suppliers

Linen and canvas: Russell and Chapple, telephone 020 7836 7521, www.russellandchapple.co.uk. Also try Wolfen Textiles, unit 4, Phoenix Works, Cornwall Road, Pinner HAS 4UH, 020 8427 7429; www.wolfen-textiles.co.uk; and Waleys (Bradford) Ltd, 01274 576718, www.waleys-bradford.ltd.uk.

Priming paints: Michael Harding for big old tubes of stiff fresh lead white; good paint maker across the spectrum: 01633 484700; www.michaelharding.co.uk.

Pigments, oils and the like: Cornellissen's, 0207 636 1045, www.cornellissen.com; or Stevenson's are great. If you want fiery, rich earth pigments try Liberon pigments and surprise yourself: 01797 367555, www.liberon.co.uk.

Brushes: Rosemary & Co for the fullest, finest sable brushes available, at a brilliant price. Her synthetic 'Ivory' range is super for drawing with: 01535 600090, www.rosemaryandco.com.

Cold-pressed, organic linseed oil: Flax Farm Oil, 01403 268844, www.flaxfarm.co.uk.



Brass Pan & Blue Eggs, oil on linen over panel, 7 1/2 x 13 1/2 in (19 x 35cm)