

Grisaille Painting: Overview and Technique

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Monochrome paintings, those done in shades of a single color, sometimes are found in illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages. Instead of being drab or simple substitutes for patrons on a tight budget, monochrome paintings can showcase the finest skills of the illuminator, sometimes depicting three-dimensional bas relief images that appear carved from marble in a way that is more realistic than a full-color painting could ever convey.

Monochrome paintings are termed *grisaille*, from the French *gris*, gray. *Camaïeu* refers to monochrome paintings done in colors other than gray, for example, a painting done in shades of blue. There are also miniatures that combine brightly colored backgrounds with foreground figures executed in *grisaille*; those are termed *semi-grisaille*.

Brief Historical Overview

Although simple ink drawing were used in manuscripts from very early in Society period, semi-grisaille painting became the pinnacle of fashion in France and surrounding areas, beginning in the early 1300s and lasting through the late 1400s, particularly during the reign of King Charles V. A French illuminator named Jean Pucelle was one of the earliest illuminators associated with this movement. Kathleen Morand (1961) claims that Pucelle apparently invented it; while that claim is dubious, Pucelle certainly popularized it in his best-known work, *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, c. 1325, a gift probably commissioned by King Charles IV for his wife, Jeanne. Pucelle's follower Jean le Noir continued the style in manuscripts such as the *Psalter of Bonne of Luxembourg*, c. 1348, and one volume of the *Grandes Chroniques de France* has stunning semi-grisaille work: particularly gorgeous is the image of Charles VI's coronation (done after 1380).

One illuminator in particular stands out in the mid-fifteenth century: Jean le Tavernier, who was active in Burgundy around 1450. He is best known for the masterful miniatures he and an assistant produced for the *Book of Hours of Philip the Good*, 166 of which now remain. Tavernier worked closely with Jean le Miélot, secretary to Duke Philip; they collaborated on the *Miracles de Notre-Dame* as well as other works.

Most of the French and Burgundian works appear done on undyed parchment, but there was another movement around the turn of the fifteenth century to a technique used a tinted size on either parchment or paper, followed by metalpoint drawing, ink washes, and painted highlights and backgrounds, which spread beyond the Alps and thus is occasionally referred to as the "trans-Alpine" style.

Materials We Will Use in Class

- Vine black pigment, stored in a vial with distilled water
- Titanium white pigment (substitute for toxic lead white), stored in a vial with distilled water
- Glair, a binder made from beaten egg whites

Preparation of these materials is a bit outside the scope of the class today, but here are the quick and dirty basics: you can purchase dry pigments from naturalpigments.com or another art supplier online. Mix the dry pigments with distilled water to make a paste and grind them with a glass muller on a glass plate. Store them in vials covered with water. If they dry out, it's best to mull them with water again before using them, or they will be grainy. Glair, our binder, is pretty easy to make: take two egg whites (discard the yolks), and beat them to stiff peaks with an electric mixer. Let them stand in the refrigerator overnight, then scoop off the foam. The liquid that remains is the glair; store it in a covered glass jar in the fridge. (Some people say not to refrigerate glair, but the only batch I've ever had go moldy is the one batch I did not refrigerate.) Glair should last a few months or more in the fridge.

Technique

In manuscript illumination, grisaille can be done using one of two sets of materials:

- 1) diluted ink, usually painted onto a colored or tinted support
- 2) pigments, probably bound with glair, although in some instances gum arabic may have been used

Method 1: Diluted Ink

In "Il Libro dell' Arte," a 15th-century Italian painting treatise, Cennino D'Andrea Cennini describes a method of "drawing" using diluted ink washes on a colored or tinted surface support (either parchment or paper). This painting method was used to create the grisaille illuminations in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Cennini's treatise (and Daniel Thompson's translation) is apparently in the public domain and available online, so I am including the text of the appropriate sections in this handout.

How You Should Advance to Drawing on Tinted Paper

Chapter XV

To approach the glory [of the profession] [9] step by step, to start trying to discover the entrance and gateway to painting, you should take up a system of drawing different from the one which we have been discussing up to now. And this is known as drawing on tinted paper; either paper, that is, or parchment. Let them be tinted; for one is tinted in the same way as the other, and with the same tempera. And you may make your tints inclined toward pink, or violet, or green; or bluish, or greenish gray, that is, drab colors; or flesh colored, or any way you please; for they all take the same temperas, the same time for grinding the colors; and you may draw on them all by the same method. It is true that most people generally use the green tint, and it is most usual, both for shading down and for putting lights on. Although I am going to describe later on the grinding of all the

colors, and their characters, and their temperas, I will give you briefly a short method now, to get you started on your drawing and your tinting of the papers. [p. 9]

How the Green Tint Is Made on Paper for Drawing; and the Way To Temper It.

Chapter XVI

When you want to tint a kid parchment, or a sheet of paper, take as much as half a nut of terre-verte; a little ocher, half as much as that; and solid white lead to the amount of half the ocher; and as much as a bean of bone dust, using the bone which I described to you above for drawing; and as much as half a bean of vermilion. And grind all these things up well on the porphyry slab with well or spring or river water; and grind them as much as ever you can stand grinding them, [p. 9] For they can never be done too much; because the more you grind them, the more perfect tint it becomes. Then temper the aforesaid substances with size of the following quality and strength: get a leaf of druggists' glue [hide glue], not fish glue, and put it into a pipkin to soak, for the space of six hours, in as much clear, clean water as two common goblets will hold. Then put this pipkin on the fire to temper it; and skim it when it boils. When it has boiled a little, so that you see that the glue is all dissolved, strain it twice. Then take a large paint pot, big enough for these ground colours, and put in enough of this size to make it flow freely from the brush. And choose a good-sized soft bristle brush. Then take that paper of yours which you wish to tint; lay some of this tint evenly over the ground of your paper, running your hand lightly, with the brush about half dry, first in one direction and then in the other. And put on three or four coats of it in this way or five, until you see that the paper is tinted evenly. And wait long enough between one coat and the next for each coat to dry. And if you see that it gets shriveled from your tinting, or horny from the tinting mixture, it is a sign that the tempera is too strong; and so, while you are laying the first coat, remedy this. How? --Put in some clear warm water. When it is dry and done, take a penknife, and rub lightly over the tinted sheet with the blade, so as to remove any little roughness that there may be on it.

How You Should Draw and Shade with Washes on Tinted Paper, and Then Put Lights on with White Lead.

Chapter XXXI

When you have mastered the shading, take a rather blunt brush; and with a wash of ink in a little dish proceed to mark out the course of the dominant folds with this brush; and then proceed to blend the dark part of the fold, following its course. And this wash ought to be [p. 17] practically like water, just a little tinted, and the brush ought to be almost always practically dry. Without trying to hurry, go on shading little by little, always going back with this brush into the darkest areas. Do you know what will come of it? --If this water is just a little tinted, and you shade with enjoyment, and without hurrying, you will get your shadows well blended, just like smoke. Remember always to work with the flat of the brush. When you have gone as far as you can with this shading, take a drop or two of ink and put it into this wash, and mix it up well with this brush. And then in the same way pick out the very bottoms of those folds with this brush, picking out their foundations carefully; always remembering your shading, that is, to divide into three sections: one section, shadow; the next, the color of your ground; the next, with lights put on it. When you have got this done, take a little white lead well worked up with gum

Arabic. [I will explain this to you later on, how this gum is to be dissolved and melted: and I will explain about all the temperas.] Ever so little white lead in the little dish, especially if this is dried up. Then dress it on the back of your hand or your thumb, shaping and squeezing out this brush, and getting it empty, practically draining it. And begin rubbing the brush flat over and into the areas where the high light and relief are to come; and proceed to go over them many times with your brush, and handle it judiciously. Then, for the accents of the reliefs, in the greatest prominence, take a pointed brush, and touch in with white lead with the tip of this brush, and crisp up the tops of these high lights. Then proceed to crisp up with a small brush, with straight ink, marking out the folds, the outlines, noses, eyes, and the divisions in the hairs and beards.

How You May Put on Lights with Washes of White Lead Just as You Shade with Washes of Ink.

Chapter XXXII

I advise you, furthermore, when you get to be more experienced, to try to put on lights perfectly with a wash, just as you do the wash of [p. 18] ink. Take white lead ground with water, and temper it with yolk of egg; and it blends like an ink wash, but it is harder for you to handle, and more experience is needed. All this is known as drawing on tinted paper, and it is the path to lead you to the profession of painting.

Method 2: Pigments Bound with Glair

We are on our own, without historical guidance, for using a tempera (egg-based) technique. Several museums identify their grisaille miniatures as tempera, however, so the technique must have been used. What follows is a description of my technique; you may find a different working order suits you better.

First, carefully examine your source and mentally group the colors into bare surface support, painted shadows, and painted highlights. Determine if there are any areas that are an opaque gray, rather than a translucent gray: these would have been painted with black and white mixed together, rather than black alone. Save those areas for last. Target a discrete area of your miniature to paint in one session: a garment, some furniture, the floor. I find I can do 1 to 2 square inches within a few hours.

Tackle the shadows before anything else: mix up a little black with a lot of glair so the mixture is just barely gray. Within your target area, paint everything in the shadows (everything that appears even a little bit darker than the color of the surface support). Do this with a moderately wet wash, and work quickly so that the color is applied evenly. Wait a few minutes for this to dry. Then mix up about half black and half glair: this will be the blackest paint you will use. Apply it with a dry brush (just a little paint on it) to the darkest shadows. Then, start adding a little more glair to the mixture and slowly work your way from the darkest shadows to the just-barely-there shadows, using very small strokes and small amounts of pigments.

For the highlights, mix half white with half glair and apply with a dry brush in small strokes to the highlights. Go back over this area with more white in the very brightest highlights.

For areas that are an opaque gray, mix the white and black pigments together first before painting. These areas will have a distinctive appearance and are more generally used in the backgrounds.

Further Reading

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