

Grisaille Vessels

A Classroom-Friendly Still Life in Oil

Giorgio Morandi was an Italian painter and printmaker who worked primarily in still life. His paintings depict bottles, jars, cups, and vases lined up in a simple monotone linear composition, making him a perfect example for beginning students to emulate in a grisaille painting. His simple, yet poetic paintings focus on describing shape and light, the building blocks to all descriptive art.

Shading is a basic technique used to give images created on a two-dimensional surface a three-dimensional appearance.

Grisaille, which comes from the French word “gris” for grey, describes the grey tones used to create an underpainting. Traditionally, a painting is first structured in monotone to work out the shading and tonal shifts in the composition. Grisaille paintings can also be monochromatic finished works. The full coloring of a painting is

demanding, and an artist might choose to work in grisaille because it is faster and less expensive to produce.

The same benefits apply to classroom painting. Grisaille is an effective way to teach the importance of mastering tone and only requires the use of two colors: white and black! A beginning painter’s arrangement of found and repurposed vessels, simple in shape and painted in whites and greys, is the subject for this lesson. Classroom-friendly Safflower Oil and Masters Brush Cleaner and Preserver is all that is needed for color changes and clean up—no harsh solvents necessary!

GRADES 9-12

Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.



Classroom Friendly Oil Painting Tips: Did you know you can paint in oils without using solvents in either the painting or clean-up process? Safflower oil is thin enough to use as a brush cleaner between colors and won't gum the bristles. As always, adequate ventilation and proper disposal of oily waste materials are crucial to safely painting in oils.

Preparation

1. Discuss tone in painting and show examples of grisaille painting.
2. Show images of Morandi's still life paintings. The artist uses simple objects, like bottles, jars and cups, set up in straightforward arrangements, making his work the perfect example of modern grisaille painting.
3. Compose a still life set up, with Morandi in mind, using found and repurposed, simple vessels, primed with gesso and painted in shades of white and grey acrylic. Recyclable items, such as milk jugs and water bottles, work well when coated in paint. For quick adhesion, use a coat of white gesso. If possible, place spot lights on the arrangement and dim overhead lighting to accentuate tonal shifts. This effect can also be achieved by painting in shades of white and grey directly on the objects where shadows would possibly be. To create a challenge, paint the objects in contradictory patterns.
4. Prepare a Silicoil brush cleaner jar by filling with Utrecht safflower oil or Utrecht NOOD Odorless Paint Thinner, about 1 1/2 deep, stopping just below the top of the coil.



Step 1: Create preliminary sketches of the composition.



Step 2: Apply a light wash of grey acrylic paint to the canvas.



Step 3: Prepare five distinct greyscale mixes.



Step 4: Begin painting, using an all over technique, starting with the lightest tone.

Materials (required)

[Utrecht Studio Series Oil Paints](#), Ivory Black, 200 ml (02121-2255); share two across class

[Utrecht Studio Series Oil Paints](#), Titanium White, 200 ml (02121-1015); share two across class

[Utrecht Studio Series Acrylic Paints](#), Ivory Black, 237 ml (01655-2108); share one across class

[Utrecht Studio Series Acrylic Paints](#), Titanium White, 237 ml (01655-1028); share one across class

[Blick Scholastic White Bristle Brushes and Sets](#), Assorted Shapes, Canister of 72 (06056-7209); share one set across class

[Richeson Plastic Painting Knives](#), Canister of 60 (03105-1009); share one set across class

[Blick Studio Disposable Palette Pads](#), 50 Sheets, 9" x 12" (03063-2023); share one across class

[Blick Economy Cotton Canvas Panel Classroom Packs](#), Pkg of 24, 9" x 12" (07015-1006); share one across class

[Blick White Sulphite Drawing Paper](#), 500 sheets, 60lb (10209-1023); share one ream across class

[Blick Studio Willow Charcoal](#), box of 12, soft (21962-2131); share two boxes across class

[Blick Studio Table Easel by Jullian](#) (50577-1001); need one per student

Safety Disposal and Cleaning:

[Utrecht Safflower Oil](#), 16 oz (01765-1166); share four across class

[Silcoil Brush Cleaning Tank](#), (06909-1005); need one per student

[Justrite Oily Materials Waste Cans](#), 6 Gallon (35205-1006); share one across class

[Masters Brush Cleaner and Preserver](#), tub, 24oz (05702-1007); share one across class

Optional Materials

[The Masters Artist's Hand Soap](#), Bar, 4.5 oz (04904-0000)

[Masterson Paint Saver Keys](#), Set of 24 (02978-1009)

[Gill Mechanical Light-Duty Tube-Wringer](#), (04907-1003)

Process

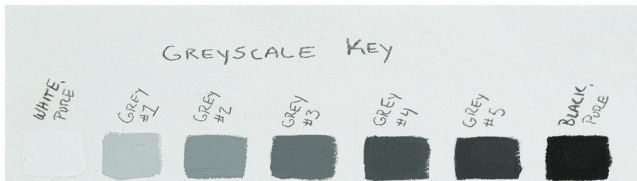
1. Create a few preliminary sketches of the still life from various angles before choosing a composition. Encourage students to change angles and focus.
2. Mix a light grey tone with acrylic paint. Mix the paint with water for a light wash and apply it to the canvas, coating the whole surface.
3. Prepare the oil palette while the wash dries by mixing at least five shades of grey. For the lightest shade, use a palette knife to section off a quarter-sized amount of the white. Pick up the black by lightly touching the paint with the tip of the knife and mix thoroughly. Use the knife to section off about one-third of the mixture. With the remaining two thirds add another touch of black paint. Continue this process until there are at least five distinct shades of grey on the palette paper.
4. Use the planning sketch and the still life set up as references to “sketch” with paint using pure white oil paint thinned with safflower oil. Begin by loading the brush with safflower oil from the Silicoil brush cleaning jar. To do this, push the end of the brush against the coil and wipe back and forth. The brush should be saturated, but not dripping. Use this same process to clean the brush between colors.
5. Begin filling the sketch, starting with the lightest color. Find areas where the same light tone should be used and fill in the shape. This is what is known as an “all over painting” technique. It may seem unsettling at first as there will be large gaps in the image, like a partially complete jigsaw puzzle. As more tones are added, however, the image will fill out. The result is a painting that feels harmonious—all pieces across the composition relate to each other.
6. Work through each tone, progressively filling in darker and darker spaces until all five tones have been utilized.
7. Once the entire painting has been filled in, students can attend to smaller details and sharpen forms. This is best left for a second painting session, allowing the first layer of paint to dry so changes and additions can be made without muddling colors or tones together.

Mixing Tips:

- When mixing colors with a palette knife, use a flipping and wiping motion (similar to buttering toast) not a stirring motion. Quick and thorough, this method also helps save paint.
- Wipe off the palette knife between each color. First wipe paint onto the palette paper, then use a paper towel to save paint!
- Create a paint key with swatches of color to help mix additional paint needed in later painting sessions.

Tips for cleaning brushes with Silicoil Brush Cleaning Jar:

- Clean brushes in-between each color, or change in color shade, to keep all tones looking crisp.
- Fill the Silicoil brush cleaning jar with Utrecht Safflower Oil to clean brushes.
- The coil works like a spring. Push hard to lower the top of the coil surface into the oil, brush back and forth to saturate and remove pigment. Release pressure and continue to wipe the brush back and forth against the coil to remove excess oil.
- Pigment solids are heavier than the liquid, and will sink to the bottom. Avoid stirring them up to the top to always have fresh, clean oil available.
- Always store with the lid on and in an upright position.



National Core Arts Standards - Visual Arts

Creating

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Responding

Anchor Standard 8: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Connecting

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

