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Studio Craft: Toned Grounds



Not every painting has to start with a stark white ground. A toned ground helps unify color relationships, and creates chromatic contrast with the first few strokes of paint. A toned ground can emphasize brightness of color by reducing differences in light and dark, which allows subtle relationships of color to reach the viewer's attention.



Utrecht Acrylic Gesso can be tinted with acrylic colors for a practically unlimited range of hues. When tinting with tube colors, to achieve a homogeneous mixture without streaks, dilute paint to a fluid consistency before adding to gesso, or select Fluid Acrylics.



Tinted gesso can be used for normal priming of raw fabric, or applied over the factory-applied ground on pre-primed canvas.



Make sure to mix enough of the desired shade to achieve full coverage- it's almost impossible to exactly match the same shade twice in separate batches.



Utrecht Oil Priming White can also be tinted with tube oil colors, though the range of possible shades is a bit more limited with an oil ground, compared to acrylic. To support proper drying, select leaner (less oil-rich) colors. A toned oil ground can be applied over supports that have been sized with acrylic or PVA sizing, or on top of a completely dry acrylic gesso ground. Thin tinted Oil Priming White with Odorless Mineral Spirits to achieve a uniform application.



Oil-based toned canvas is sometimes referred to as a "faster" ground than acrylic priming, which means it allows paint to move fluidly on the canvas. This is largely because a dry oil paint surface is less absorbent and has less texture than an acrylic ground.



Tube oil colors alone can be used to tone an acrylic or oil ground, provided the application is very thin. A thin tinted layer dries more rapidly than a thick one and helps support proper adhesion and curing of subsequent layers. For faster drying, include Alkyd Medium in the toning mixture.



Raw and Burnt Umber are traditional favorites for toning canvas. The Umbers are referred to as strong "through-driers", which means they support rapid internal curing of the paint film. This is because these pigments contain small amounts of metallic salts which speed up the rate at which drying oils take up oxygen and form solids.



Mix earth colors with Odorless Mineral Spirits for a variegated, matte-finish toned layer, or mix with Alkyd Medium for a more uniform, transparent imprimatura.



Raw and Burnt Umber can be brushed on quickly for subtle background texture. For subtler texture, continue brushing in the long dimension of the canvas until uniform coverage is achieved.

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