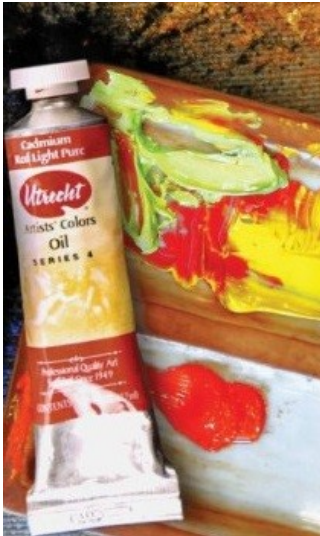


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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Fat Over Lean Without Mediums



Ask the Experts: “If I want to paint in oils without using any medium, just turpentine, how do I handle the fat over lean rule? Is there a way to know what colors can be layered over others?”

A: Yes, relative oil content and drying rate can and should be considered even when paint is not being modified or thinned. Every oil painter should have at least a general awareness of the relative oil content and proportion of solids in each color they use, as well as the typical drying rate. Even so, it's important not to allow any “rule” such as fat-over-lean to restrict creativity, or to limit pictorial objectives.

The Principle of Fat over Lean, in a nutshell:

Some pigments generally require more oil than others to achieve a workable consistency. A paint that has more oil compared to other colors in the palette is referred to as “fat” or “rich”. Paint that has a higher proportion of solids (pigment) is called “lean”.

Paint that is “lean” is less prone to shrinking, and usually dries faster than colors with high oil content. For this reason, it's considered a sound practice to apply lean colors first, and to subsequently layer more oil-rich paints on top. This promotes stable adhesion between layers and gradual, thorough drying without defects.

If lean paint is applied over fat, the initial application stays wet for a long time, while material on top forms a skin which splits or cracks.

While it's not really practical to organize all colors strictly by fatness and leanness, it is a good practice to have general awareness of the vehicle-to-solids ratio, and to let this knowledge inform what you do on the canvas. It's also important to consider the drying rate of colors, because that also affects performance in layers.

As colors are intermixed, the difference between fat and lean passages becomes less distinct, especially when working alla prima (in a single layer). The absorbency of the painting ground can also change the initial oil content, making paint more lean as oil is absorbed.

When paintings are constructed in layers applied in a complex stack, the sequence of application is especially important. The more complex the paint film, the more significant the stresses between layers become. Applying colors according to relative oil content and drying rate helps manage these stresses to promote durability.



Determining oil/solids proportion and drying rate

As a rule of thumb, pigments in the inorganic categories, including ochres and umbers, titanium and lead white, make lean paint, and have a larger amount of solid matter. Raw and Burnt Umber are lean colors which also have trace ingredients which support fast drying.

Synthetic organic colors, made from dye colorants fixed to inert solids, yield a relatively fat paint and have less solid bulk. Colors like Phthalo Blue and Green, Quinacridone Red and Azo Yellow have a high proportion

of oil vehicle, and tend to be “buttery” rather than stiff. Natural organic pigments like Lamp Black and Vandyke Brown are slow drying and fat.

Colors which skin over quickly on the palette are fast driers. Paints that remain wet for a long time on the palette will do likewise on the canvas. Don’t assume, however, that because a color releases oil in the tube that it’s a fat color, or that it’s lean if it looks dry and waxy.

Lean pigments like flake white can shed a lot of oil, even though pigment makes up a large proportion of the paint body. Fat colors may be amended with stabilizers to blot excess oil, but the resulting paint will still have a high oil content. Zinc White can stay wet for a long time, even though solid pigment is present in a relatively high proportion.

Getting On With It

At some point, the artist needs to get on with the task of painting. It’s not possible to make a judgment with each brushstroke whether the color is being layered appropriately according to the “rules”. If the underpainting or initial sketch is lean, and slow drying colors are either mixed heavily with leaner ones or reserved for top layers, it’s likely the painting will dry without defects and achieve a stable, finished state.

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