

How to Paint with Oil Paints

(As a student at JMU who isn't majoring in art)

Here you are, a JMU student thinking about taking up oil painting as a hobby. Maybe you took art classes in middle school or high school but haven't picked up a paintbrush since. Maybe someone in your family is a painter and you think you'd enjoy it, too. Or maybe you have no experience with art whatsoever but always thought painting would be fun. Regardless, if you're here and reading this, odds are you don't have much experience with oil painting, and I know how daunting it can seem to get started, but let me be the first to tell you that there's nothing to be worried about.

Art is fun. It can be relaxing and get your creating juices flowing while helping you appreciate the beauty in the world around you at the same time. The most difficult part of becoming an oil painter—or any type of artist—is getting started, so this short guide will take you through the basics of oil painting so you can push off onto your on artistic journey.

What you'll need:

- Paints
- Paint brushes
- Canvas
- Palette
- Paint thinner
- Two cups
- Paper towels/dirty rags
- Pencils
- Sketch paper
- Eraser
- Easel (optional)

Prep

Choose a subject. It's up to you whether you paint it live, take a photo of it, find a photo online, or just paint from your imagination! It's fun if you can find something you find visually interesting.

Gather supplies. You can find most of the art supplies you'll need at Larkin Arts downtown, right on Court Square. You could also go to Michael's, which is by the Wal-Mart on Burgess Road, but I prefer Larkin Arts because, in my experience, the prices are more reasonable and the materials are higher quality.

First off, since you're getting into oil painting, you'll need **oil paints**. The paints at Larkin Arts and at Michael's are well labeled and organized, so you shouldn't have trouble finding the right paints, but if you do, don't hesitate to ask store employees for help!

Once you find the oil paints, then comes the task of deciding what colors to get. The sheer variety of colors available can seem overwhelming to a new artist, but don't panic! You don't need to buy the exact colors that you'll use in your painting. All you really need is black, white, primary (red, blue, and yellow) and secondary (orange, green, and purple) colors. Every other color you'll need can be created by mixing these together in various ways! In fact, if you're on a tight budget, you can even cut out the secondary colors, as they themselves are mixtures of primary colors.

Now that you've got your paints, you'll need **brushes**. What brushes you should buy depends heavily on the type of painting you're doing; since you're painting with oils, you'll want to find brushes with firm, coarse bristles. Brushes are usually well labeled according to their intended uses—oil paints, acrylics, watercolor, etc.—but as with the paints, if you're not sure, don't hesitate to ask employees for help!

Next on your list is the **canvas**. The subject you choose may affect what size and shape canvas you want. If you paint a vast landscape, you may want a large, rectangular canvas, whereas if you paint a single flower, you may find that a small, square canvas suits your needs.

You'll also need a **palette** on which to mix your paints. I recommend a flat, wooden palette simply because it's much easier to clean.

Speaking of cleaning, when you're working with oil-based paints, water won't do you any good, so you need to buy special **paint thinner** to clean your brushes and palette. Some people use turpentine for this, but most art stores (Larkin Arts and Michael's among them) also sell odorless substitutes, which I recommend because they're much more pleasant to work with and safer to use indoors.

Along with the paint thinner, you'll want to have **two cups** that you don't drink out of and plenty **paper towels** or some dirty rags you don't use. You'll fill the cups with paint thinner and use them to clean your brushes, and then dry the brushes on the paper towels or rags.

I also recommend you have a **pencil**, some **sketch paper**, and an **eraser** handy for preliminary sketch work.

Lastly, you can also get an **easel** to place your canvas on while you paint, but it's not entirely necessary.

Sketch

Draw up a few rough sketches of your subject. They don't have to be heavy on detail; the purpose is simply to give you a sense of how it will look on the canvas. You want to get a feel for creating the shapes. It's also a good idea to delineate significant changes in color or darkness—i.e., if there's a dark shadow or two contrasting colors next to each other, sketch out their rough shapes.

Sketch lightly onto the canvas. Don't press too hard with the pencil, or you run the risk of damaging the canvas or creating lines that will show through the paint. As with the early sketches, you don't need to focus heavily on detail. All you're doing here is creating the rough shapes of the object you're going to paint.

Paint

Set aside two cups of paint thinner. One will be your “dirty” cup and the other will be your “clean” cup. Each time you need to get a new color of paint on the brush, you need to clean the brush first by stirring it in the dirty cup, patting it dry with paper towels/rags, stirring it in the clean cup, and patting it dry again. If you forget to clean your brushes, you’ll end up with colors you don’t want!

Begin painting! It can seem daunting, but once you put the brush to the canvas, it’s easy to get lost in the creative process. Don’t worry if it doesn’t look exactly the way you want it to right off the bat. You’ll likely find that it looks better and better as you go along and the pictures comes together.

As for the actual techniques you use to paint, there’s really no absolute, set way of doing things, but here’s the method I’ve found most effective:

1. Find the object in your painting-to-be that appears farthest from the viewer—this may be the sky, trees, grass, or any number of things depending on what you paint
2. Add paint to your palette and mix with your brush to create the approximate color of that object
3. Fill in the appropriate area on the canvas with the color you’ve created
4. Clean your brush with the stir, pat, stir, pat technique listed above
5. Repeat these four steps, moving each time to the next farthest point in the image—for example, if I were painting a landscape, I would begin with the sky, then move to the mountains, then move to trees, then to grass in front of the trees, etc.

Of course, most objects will involve more than one color. When this happens, I find it most helpful to start with the color that takes up the most space then add the smaller, finer details afterward.

Clean Up

Clean your palette and brushes. It is important to clean your materials soon after using them, because while oil paints dry slowly, they are difficult to remove from palettes and brushes once they've dried.

For brushes: stir them thoroughly in the dirty cup, pat them dry, and stir them in the clean cup, just as you did while painting. But once you've done this, pour out both cups, fill one with fresh paint thinner, and stir the brushes one final time in this cup then wipe them as clean and dry as possible with paper towels or your rag.

For palettes: wipe off as much paint as you can with dry paper towels, then scrub the palette with a few paper towels soaked in paint thinner. Repeat until the palette is clean.

Set your painting out to dry. Make sure to set it somewhere such that dust and debris will not fall on it, and keep it out of reach of any pets or curious children. Oil paints take a while to dry, so don't be surprised if it's still wet after a few days. This is quite natural. Once it's dry, what you do with it is up to you! You could hang it as it is, frame it, give it to a friend, or try to sell it!

Reach up and pat yourself on the back. You've become an artist!