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Transcript

INTRODUCTION:

It was 8:52 in the morning. The glass painter had nearly finished his first piece of the day. Just two more layers of paint and it would be ready for the kiln. Of course he'd read the books which told him not to try this. But he'd done his tests - he knew he was only doing what the ancients used to do. So it was time for oil now - oil on top of all those many layers of unfired paint which he'd applied this morning. Never mind the warnings in all the books. It was time to prepare the oil ...

So on this particular morning the glass painter had finished this particular face with OIL.

Before the oil, there had been shadows and highlights on the BACK of the glass.

Before this labour on the back, SOFT highlights on the FRONT of the glass.

And bold highlights beneath them.

Earlier still, there had been the lines - strong lines in dark paint.

And these strong dark lines all took their shape from the gentle trace lines beneath them.

And before all that, before all else - the undercoat.

From faint trace lines and bold shadows through to highlights (front and back) and finally the oil on top, this undercoat had provided the foundation to ALL his work that first hour that day.

THE UNDERCOAT:

Some 52 minutes earlier, the day's work had begun the same way it always did: with yesterday's half-dried out lump of glass paint made with water and gum Arabic, whose resuscitation had been the day's first task.

The glass painter had followed his usual sequence. First he had used his hake brush to moisten the entire surface of the palette.

Next he'd used his knife for heavy-duty work.

He knew that, without this grinding, his glass paint would be useless.

At 8:02 the glass painter took up his brush again. He started to shape and load it with the paint he needed - a more time-consuming task than the amateur can imagine.

Now was also the time for last-minute changes to the density and colour.

And finally the test.

After 3 full minutes' grinding, mixing, loading, shaping and testing, the glass painter could begin.

And it was to be THIS undercoat which gave him the foundations he needed for his first hour's work that day: to trace, and strengthen, to highlight, and soften, and paint behind, then work with oil in front: this undercoat ...

TRACING:

Now paint that's good for undercoating is different from the kind of paint you need to trace.

At 8.05 the glass painter's next task, therefore, was to work his palette and its paint until he had the consistency and colour that he needed.

That morning, as every morning, and every time he made changes to his paint - a test ...

Watch carefully these three things. One, the constant mixing and re-mixing of the paint each time he loads his brush. He must do this because the water in the paint is slowly drying out, and he must always stir his mixture all around in order to preserve its balance. Two, his frequent tests. These tests don't just serve to verify the colour and consistency of the paint; they also agitate the paint and get it flowing down the brush before he even starts his line. Three, the position of the bridge - how he holds and moves it. It is rarely the case that he rests heavily on it; more often, it just gently guides his hand and gives him comfort by its presence.

The trace lines duly go exactly where he wants them to.

The hair and beard are stylised and may look simple. All the same, this face contains some 158 lines, and it is not surprising to the glass painter it should take him 9 minutes to trace them all. Even before he started, he had correctly estimated the time which they required: therefore it never occurred to him to work faster than the paint allowed. So he never rushed but simply painted calmly on, one stroke following another, until the end.

Just as the undercoat was their foundation, so these faint trace lines will now provide the structure upon and around which the glass painter will now build his subsequent work.

STRENGTHENING:

Though it was still early in the day, the morning air and the heat from the light-box had dried the palette.

So now a sequence that will become familiar to you as you watch him while he works this early morning.

First of all he used the hake to apply a skin of water across the palette.

And then he used the knife to grind and mix the paint.

He had a lot of work to do that morning, but it would have been the greatest folly to rush on without making time like this to re-work the paint and re-organize the palette in preparation for the next stage where the delicate traced lines will be shaped and thickened.

Here it was important to prepare enough paint for the whole stage which lay ahead - it would not be amusing if his supply ran out half-way - like setting off on an adventure with insufficient resources to last the course.

The knife does a good job scraping and grinding, but it is too coarse a tool to spread paint evenly across the palette, so finally the brush ...

Now to test the paint.

It doesn't flow well - so the glass painter must continue with his mixing ...

So a patient two minutes to mix and test the paint, and now it flows.

Notice again how he mixes and swirls his paint each time he fills his brush.

Often he also tests it.

It was a good choice to start with the eyes because with the eyes, the face takes shape. A character emerges - each time slightly different, whatever one's level of accuracy, for painting is not at all the same as printing.

Just as the sculptor builds his statue around a supporting armature, so the glass painter rests his solid lines and shadows upon the sketch-marks which he has traced.

There's a strange feature of this paint he uses to trace and also strengthen: namely, it is altogether drier than people think.

Indeed, the beginner believes the paint must flow, which means he often makes it far too runny.

But the glass painter knows it is he who applies the paint, compelling it to go only where he wants it to, and also at the speed he chooses (for he will not be rushed by his paint into working faster than the hairs on the brush will permit).

Thus the constant mixing and swirling - you will see this every time you watch him work - it is the only way to keep paint no more fluid than it must be in order that it be workable with a brush.

These faint first trace lines: they are already mostly hidden.

They were the structure around - and on top of which - this subsequent work was done.

CLEAN THE PALETTE:

Which leaves everything clean and ready for when the glass painter will return to his palette AFTER he has made his highlights on the front.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Another benefit of the undercoat: it is a surface he can cut through to reveal the glass beneath and allow the light to shine.

To soften highlights, a hand is often better than a brush because you feel the paint you're bruising.

BEHIND:

Even when they're softened, highlights tend to look raw and flat.

The glass painter therefore often paints behind his glass as well.

This creates a subtler range from light to dark, and also gives depth to one-dimensional glass.

Now behind the glass, it would be possible to work with line and shadow as much as he had worked the front. But for this particular image, he knew that simplicity was important. So he chose just to paint a gentle wash, then, once dry, to highlight it with scrubs.

Now for some simple highlights to reinforce the lights and shadows which are already on the front. Nothing too much is needed here - the point is simply to smooth away the rawness.

Again, the hand to blend and soften, because that way you can really feel what you are doing.

OIL:

It is now time to apply the oil, a rarely used technique these days - people are so ... nervous: a wash of oil - remove the excess - blend - then more oil, this time as shadows - and blend a final time.

All done in just three brief minutes' work ... all finished by 8:55 a.m.

But that is not everything.

No. There is another face - another face he must complete that morning before he can allow himself to stop - and rest ...

And yes, beneath it all, the undercoat again ...

THE UNDERCOAT:

The test patch - always the test patch, which the glass painter keeps - AND uses - right until the very end of his work.

TRACE:

So the hake to wet the palette and cover it with a skin of water.

The knife to grind and mix the paint.

The brush to mix paint finely and spread it evenly over a large area of the palette

The test - because even with many years' experience, he cannot know what's on his brush nor how the paint will flow ...

Three whole minutes to prepare and test the tracing paint - as you will see, a little less to do the work itself.

LINES INTO SHADOWS:

And so at 9:17, everything was for the beast as it had been for the master just 40 minutes earlier: undercoat, trace and strengthen.

But now the glass painter took a very different path indeed ... one which will shock the gentle-hearted: he took his hake and blender - and turned lines into gentle shadows.

Thus the test, and now for the beast itself ... Hey, c'mon guys - there's nothing to be scared off now ...

DETAILS:

Now with this technique, of turning lines into shadows, the glass painter chooses very carefully which lines to paint first - and soften - and which lines to paint only afterwards, so leaving them crisp and firm.

It was to these definite lines which at 9:20 the glass painter now turned.

As always, the test ... And then - action!

LINES AROUND SHADOWS:

At 9:25, the glass painter was in full flow, now preparing a darker, thicker mix of tracing paint, because his next plan was to add bold lines around the shadows he had created earlier.

The point is, to make a boundary for the shadows: a fence around them, a definite outline which helps the eye as you will see.

STRENGTHENED DETAILS:

At 9:33 it was then just a matter of moving straight on and using the same paint to strengthen the details within the beast's face.

THE DARKEST, THICKEST PAINT OF ALL:

It was 9:38 and the paint he was about to mix can sometimes crack and blister in the kiln - it is so thick, its coverage so complete, the fire of the kiln will sometimes pull it apart and make it bubble, with disastrous effect. To avoid this result, these three things are always needed.

First of all, not too much gum Arabic in the paint. An excess of gum will always lead to blistering, whatever the skill with which the paint is used.

Second, a thorough mixing at the start, and constant mixing every time the painter loads his brush. This good balance of gum, paint and water will make it less likely the kiln's heat will cause cracking.

Third, he must have paint which he can spread: it's far thicker than ordinary tracing paint, but still it flows.

See here how spreadable it is.

And that is just the point: to stop the paint from blistering in the kiln, the glass painter himself must do no more than spread the paint, and the paint itself must be runny enough to find its own level.

PROPYLENE GLYCOL:

The ancients used various different oils but that is not a reason to avoid careful tests with other media.

Today at 10:03 the glass painter chose PROPYLENE GLYCOL which he now diluted from a batch he'd made the night before.

The particular thing he liked about this medium was how it would allow him to do not only shadows but also detailed lines which (unlike oil) will not bleed.

All this paint will keep for another day or week or month - for whenever he next wants it.

CONCLUSION:

Which brings the early morning's work to a close with both faces finished in a single firing.

And while each one of them might equally succeed with a very different sequence of techniques, let us now bid them both farewell while looking back on the steps the glass painter actually used.

THE END









