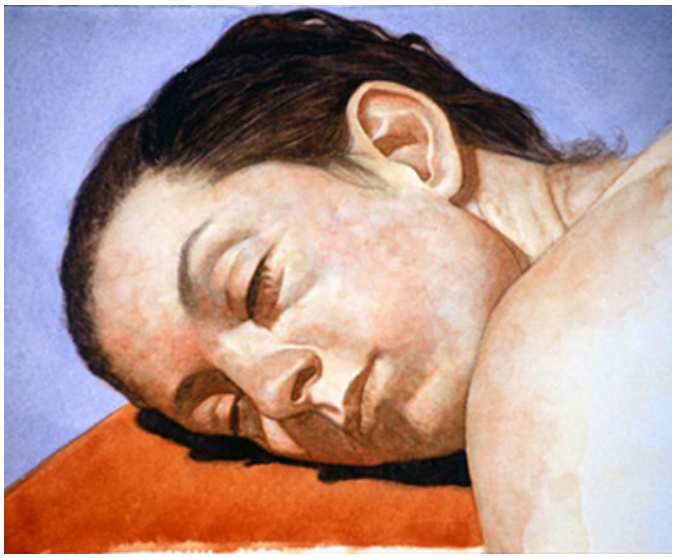
Painter's Tech—Sketches

the practice of glazing



Glazing is a wonderful thing—until it isn't.

Watercolor painting is predicated on glazing techniques. Broad washes of color interplayed with succinct articulations of shape.

However, it demands a strategy of careful balancing of color interactions, otherwise it collapses into a muddy heap.

Alternating warm-over-cool is a good rule of thumb. I begin my watercolor portraits with a cool cobalt blue initiation. From there the game is on! It is a courtship of water and delicate tones. Potter's pink and cerulean blue make for a useful tone. So, too, does emerald green and burnt sienna. Raw umber and terre verte.

Needless to say, drawing skill is paramount in watercolor. If your portrait drawing is not up to snuff, take advantage of my 2-weeks free trial at PORTRAIT-PAINTER TV. Module 1 will save you years of struggle.

Glazing with oil paint requires a sound strategy. And a dose of science.

You DO NOT simply slop medium into your color. That is almost criminal!

First, an overly oiled glaze will take eternities to dry. It risks looking slick and forever tacky. And is highly susceptible to wrinkling, cracking and, horrors!, saporification.

Saporification is a deformation comprised of lumps and protrusions in the paint surface. A medium too heavy with litharge (lead) can lead to blooming.

Sargent's *Madame X* suffers from this in parts of her black dress. A possible result of his cooking up his black oil (boiled linseed oil and 3-5% litharge) a tad too heavy on the lead side. Black oil hastens the drying process by increasing the oxygen uptake

Litharge is a siccative when used discretely results in a uniform drying process producing a good balance of hardness, toughness, flexibility and chemical resistance.

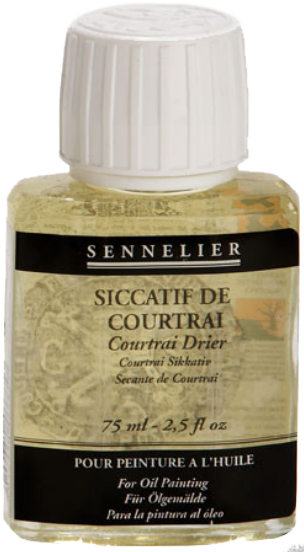
There are three categories of siccatives:

Primary:

1. Manganese is a thorough drier, or curative, of both the surface and subsurface of a glaze.
2. Cobalt readily cures the surface of the glaze but tends to leave the underside (subsurface) soft. Not the best.

Secondary:

1. Zirconium, the modern replacement for litharge (lead). It appears to age well, time will tell.
2. Litharge is the historical and proven. But it is toxic. Don't lick your fingers or brushes.



Auxiliary:

1. Calcite. The most stable polymorph of calcium carbonate. It's cheap and extremely useful in oil painting.
2. Zinc. It improves gloss but is brittle and susceptible to cracking. Think long and hard before using zinc.

Sennelier's *Siccatif de Coutrai* is a good formulation of calcium and zirconium. Use sparingly! A drop or two into your dipper of glazing medium will do the job. Add too much and there will be trouble.

There are also alkyds, but I don't use them and have no authority to impart on their use.

The Determinants of Glazing

Refractive Index (RI)

Light bends as it passes through linseed, walnut or poppy oil. Like a spoon in a glass of water.

The lower the refractive index (RI) the more light passes through unhindered and the cleaner the glaze. Linseed oil has a RI of 1.48. Walnut and poppy oil about the same. Walnut oil is paler than linseed and slower drying. Poppy oil still more so. They all have the same RI.

The higher the RI the less light is admitted, the more it is scattered and the more opaque. Flake white (lead carbonate and zinc oxide) has a RI of >1.70. It's opaque. Attempts to use it as a fog-like glaze always conclude badly.

The closer a pigment is to RI 1.48 the better. Iron oxide pigments are excellent as glazing colors. Natural iron oxides will have variations and impurities. Mars (i.e., Mars black) denotes that the pigment is synthetic.

Particle Size

The coarser the pigment is grinded the greater is its clarity. Today's oil paint is very finely ground resulting in excellent paint coverage but less clarity for glazing.

The solution is to add calcium carbonate to your glaze. It elbows its way between the finely packed pigment particles and allows light to shimmer through. Calcium carbonate also thickens the paint, hence more medium will be required. But only as much medium as necessary. Less is better.

Pigment Volume Concentration

Pigment Volume Concentration (PVC) refers to the volume percentage of pigment in a paint film after the solvent has evaporated. The higher the PVC the more vibrant the color.

$$PVC = \left(\frac{\text{Volume of Pigment}}{\text{Volume of Pigment + Volume of Binder}} \right) \text{x } 100$$

There are times when a particular color (i.e., terre verte, malachite) that has a low PVC is required to deepen a tone that I will use it straight from the tube and rub it in with my fingers. Cold, dry pastry fingers work best.

The Painting Support

Rough textured canvas will absorb and scatter light. Additionally, the pigment in a glaze will tend to gather around the weave's interfaces like moths to a porch light giving it a dirty look. Although discrete, finishing glazing applied onto a thickly applied paint surface can work. If it doesn't wipe it out. Glazing will not save you from a poorly rendered drawing.

My preference is for oak panel. But there is a limit to the size of the painting before it requires cradling. Better to use finely textured linen (i.e., Belgian) for portraits larger than 18" that will incur glazing.

Your choice of prime (gesso) dictates the results of your glazes. Acrylic gesso throws light back quite harshly and can result in garish color effect. Better to half-prime with two thin layers of acrylic gesso allowing the umbrish hue of your panel or canvas to peak through.

Oil prime is much better. It absorbs and gently tosses back light. Williamsburg sells a quite serviceable lead-oil prime.

And, finally, there is true chalk gesso which can only be used on panel and requires some serious attention to detail, i.e., double boilers, careful sifting of the gesso and delicate application. Otherwise you end up with pin holes.

Pin holes are damnation. They cannot be filled in. They cannot be sanded out. That said, however, true gesso is a mighty fine support for oil painting and glazing.