

HOW TO TONE A CANVAS

by Don Stewart

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Welcome to Your “HOW TO TONE A CANVAS” Video Companion

Watch the Video at: www.ArtistChronicle.com/video/Tone



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To tone or not to tone...

...that is the question. That really is the question a lot of beginner oil painters ask. And, I'll tell you how I answer that question later, so stay tuned for that.

But first, today I show you exactly *how* to tone a canvas. And what I show you can be done to any support that's been primed. Not just a canvas.

I'll show you how to apply a transparent tone, called an *imprimatura*, to a white ground. And, I'll briefly explain how to create an opaque toned ground too and tell you why opaque isn't my favorite way to tone.

MATERIALS



Palette

First of all you're going to need a palette. I prefer a wooden palette. But paper, glass, whatever you like to use is fine. In fact the paint is going to be thinned down quite a bit, so a bowl of some sort will work too.



EARTH TONES

- Burnt Sienna
- Burnt Umber
- Raw Umber
- Raw Sienna
- Venetian Red

Oil Paint

On the palette you'll mix your oil paint. And the color you tone with can either be harmonious with or compliment the colors that will be in your final painting. That's up to you.

But, as a general rule tone with colors that have less oil content like the earth tones. Because of less oil content they dry quicker.

I also like earth tones because they're neutral and unobtrusive colors.

Today I'm toning with burnt sienna. But other earth tones include burnt umber, raw umber, raw sienna, venetian red, colors like that.

If you want a cooler gray tone you can take ultramarine blue, which has a relatively low oil content when compared to other blues, and combine it with burnt umber or raw umber.

One thing you don't want to use for any of this is white paint. I've seen students make this mistake before. If you add white paint the toned ground takes longer to dry and it won't be transparent. More about being transparent in a minute.

The number one mistake students make? I'll tell you after this next item on the materials list.



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Solvent

You also need a solvent to thin your paint with. The traditional solvent for oil paint is gum turpentine. But, I prefer using artist quality odorless mineral spirits. It's less of a health hazard and what most artists use these days.

Sometimes I mix a fast drying medium with the solvent. For example, 50 percent of an alkyd medium with 50 percent odorless mineral spirits. But, that kind of complicates things. Solvent by itself is all you really need.



Now that you know about solvent, back to the number one mistake? These tiny seeds are the culprit — linseeds. Pressed to make linseed oil. Students have mistakenly used it to tone with *instead* of solvent. Don't do it. Linseed oil by itself takes forever to dry.



Cotton Rag or Paper Towel

You also want a cotton rag of some sort. You can go to a home improvement store. They have bags of cotton wiping cloths. Or, go to a grocery store and get a good quality paper towel. And, by good quality, I mean the kind that have the same look and feel as those blue shop towels that you can get at auto supply stores. Or, just get those.



Do yourself a favor and do *not* get a cheap paper towel. They leave behind tiny, little specks of paper lint. Not a good thing.





Brush

You also need a decent sized brush. A stiff bristle brush is perfect.

Palette Knife

As an option you could get a palette knife. You may use this or not.



Primed Canvas

Lastly, you need a primed canvas to tone. Like I said this will work with any type of primed support.

And if you don't know, a primer (also called a ground) seals the support and protects it from the paint. It's the actual background surface that you paint on.

What I have here is an acrylic gesso primed canvas (canvas is the support) and you can pick one of these up at any art supply store. If you prefer an oil primed canvas, use one of those.



TRANSPARENT vs OPAQUE

And, that's pretty much all you need. But, back to my point that if you use white paint the toned ground won't be transparent.

Well, you have two choices when it comes to toning a canvas. A toned ground can either be transparent or opaque.

So, let's say you want to create an opaque toned ground for this canvas.

Because it's already primed with acrylic gesso, one method would be to get some more acrylic gesso, mix in a little acrylic paint and brush that mixture right onto the canvas.

That would dry opaquely. But I don't prefer that. What we're going to do, instead, is tone with a transparent ground. Also called an *imprimatura*.

Why? Because a transparent ground will allow light to pass through it to the white canvas and then reflect back up through the colors of the paint. And, that will help give a luminosity to the finished painting.



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HOW TO TONE



1: Add solvent to paint

Okay, we have our materials ready to go. Let's do this.

First, add solvent to your paint. I already have burnt sienna on the palette. So, to that I mix in some odorless mineral spirits.

This is where a palette knife can come in handy. Or, just use your brush.

Now, you want this to be pretty thin. It reminds me of a heavy (dairy) cream consistency.

If it's not thin enough it will be too dark on the canvas and lose that luminous quality we're looking for.

2: Brush paint onto canvas

Next, apply the paint that you just thinned to the canvas with a brush.

Some artists forgo the use of a brush and use the rag or paper towel instead. But, I like using a brush.



3: Let sit for a minute or two

Now, that just needs to sit for a minute or two.



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4: Wipe off excess paint

Then, take a clean dry rag or paper towel. Fold it somewhat neatly and wipe off the excess paint you just applied.

Keep smoothing and rubbing until it's a nice middle value. You can either leave the tone uneven like this, which adds movement and energy to the canvas.

Or, you can even out the tone completely. It just depends on the look you're going for.

You can see that beautiful luminous quality already.

Too Dark or Too Light?

But, what do you do if you realize you got too dark with it? Well, that's an easy fix. Simply apply solvent directly onto the canvas using the rag or brush and rub until it's the nice, mid-value you're looking for.



Conversely if it's too light simply apply a second layer of paint. With less solvent this time.



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Dry 24 Hours

Once you get the value you want you need to let this dry at least 24 hours. That gives it enough time to dry thoroughly. And, then you'll be able to draw, paint and even erase without inadvertently removing tone from the canvas.

"But," you may say, "twenty four hours? Can't I just start painting right away?"

Well, yes you can and I do it all the time. You can wait about 20 minutes or so for the toned ground to dry to the touch and start painting.

Just be aware that it won't be easy to erase mistakes without erasing tone, too.

Toning with Acrylic Paint

Now, another thing you can do if you want to start painting right away is tone with acrylic paint. Because it dries, you know, immediately. But, that can also pose a problem. Because, if your canvas is really big your only option is to leave the tone uneven. You don't have time to even the tone out before it dries. So, I prefer to tone with oil paint, but acrylic paint is certainly an option — but, only if your support is primed with acrylic gesso.



TO TONE OR NOT TO TONE ?

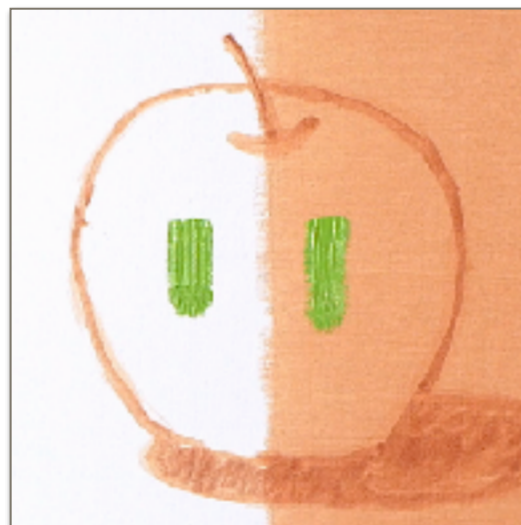
Now, do you remember the question we started with? Well, I like to oil paint on a toned ground instead of a white ground and there are three reasons why.

1: Accurate value and color

First, because on a toned canvas it's easier to get an accurate reading of value and color.

Because of something called *simultaneous contrast* colors appear darker on a white surface.

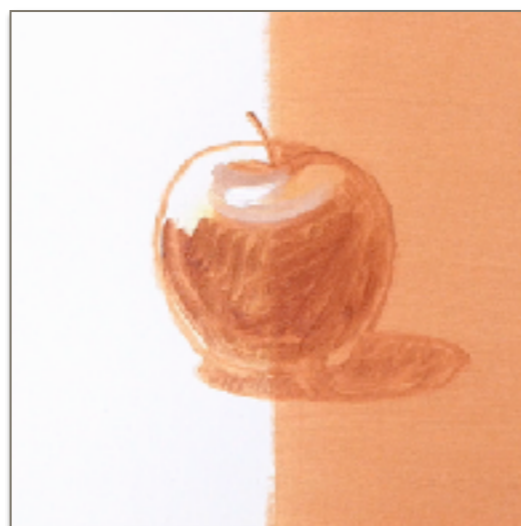
For example, see how dark this color looks against the white? Now look at the toned side. It's really not that dark. And, even the color itself looks a little different.



2: Speeds up the process

The second reason I like a toned ground is that it can speed up the painting process.

Depending on the way you work and the colors you use, you can leave the toned ground as a middle value. And so, only paint dark and light values. Rembrandt, for example, is said to have worked this way.



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3: Gives unity to a painting

The third reason I like a toned ground is that I don't always paint over every square inch of the canvas. So, a little tone will show through here and there. And that helps give unity to a painting. The toned canvas acts as a harmonizing element which ties together the colors that are painted over it.



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A Little Known Fact About Shakespeare :)

Not only was Shakespeare a prolific playwright, he also tried pencil drawing once. Of course, during this drawing session he had to make the decision — 2B or not 2B.



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