

IMPRIMATURA

Imprimatura is the classical term for a GLAZE or wash of transparent color used to create a toned ground for a painting.

An imprimatura serves two purposes: firstly, it softens the stark whiteness of the canvas or paper, making it easier to assess the relative tones of color mixtures as they are applied (most colors look darker on a white surface than they do when surrounded by other colors).

Secondly, if the imprimatura is allowed to show through the overpainting in places, it acts as a harmonizing element, tying together the colors that are laid over it.

The advantage of an imprimatura over an opaque TONED GROUND is that the white canvas or paper glows through the transparent glaze, sustaining the luminosity of the succeeding colors.

The color chosen for an imprimatura will depend on the subject you are painting, but it is normally a neutral tone somewhere between the lightest and the darkest colors in the painting. In portrait and figure painting, for example, a wash of diluted yellow ocher or raw sienna provides a subtle middle tone which ties together the darks and the lights of the skin.

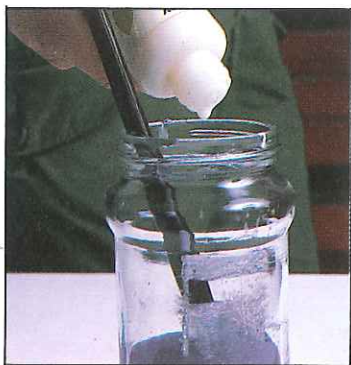
In landscape painting, choose a unifying color which accentuates the atmosphere of your subject. A sunset or an autumn landscape will benefit from a golden-yellow imprimatura, whereas a seascape or a misty mountain scene might require a neutral blue-gray.

The main thing is that the color should be subtle and unobtrusive — one that does not overwhelm the colors that are applied over it. Choose diluted earthy, subdued colors such as raw sienna, red oxide, or ultramarine with a touch

of burnt umber. Avoid “electric” colors such as phthalo blue and cadmium yellow.

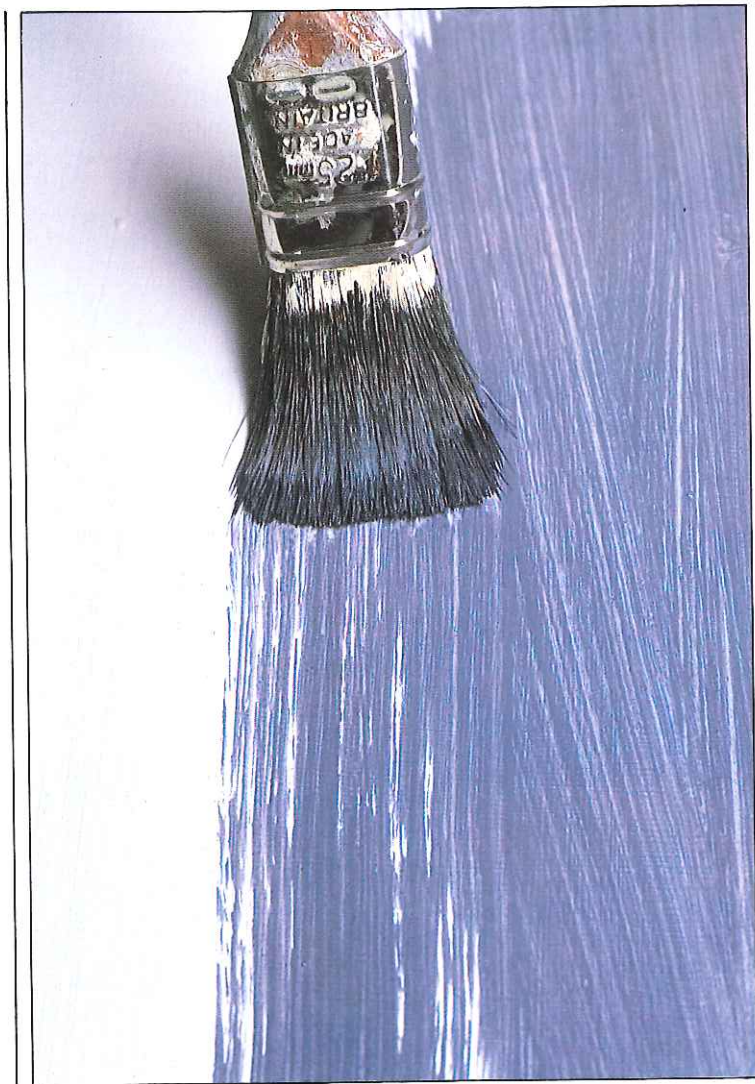
In oil painting, dilute the pigment with turpentine to a very thin consistency. In acrylic painting, use matte medium as a diluent.

The watercolor equivalent of an imprimatura is a FLAT WASH of transparent color applied to the paper and allowed to dry before overpainting it (leave white shapes in the wash for highlights if desired). In painting skies, for example, an underlayer of burnt sienna, diluted to a pale tint, provides a warm color which looks most effective when offset by the cool blues and grays of clouds.



Imprimatura

1 For an imprimatura, the paint should have a runny consistency, almost like a watercolor wash. If you are using oil paint, dilute it with copal varnish. Acrylic paint can be diluted with medium.



2 Use a large, flat brush and apply the paint to the support as thinly as possible so as not to totally obscure the white gesso or canvas. Brush the paint on with long vertical strokes and without attempting to smooth it out. The streakiness will enliven the colors that go over the imprimatura, and it also encourages you to continue with the same freedom of handling in the later stages.