

Notes from Max Doerner & Jacques Maroger

Grounding the Canvas Overview

Objective

By the end of this tutorial you will understand the various types of ground, and why all grounds are not the same.

Key points

1. Understanding grounds
2. Permanence of grounds
3. Rules for Permanence
4. Different ground Attributes
5. Influence of grounds
6. Advantages of making your own ground
7. Materials for Grounds

1. Understanding grounds. Unless specially treated, textile fabrics are porous, very absorbent, and swallow up much expensive paint, which sinks into the fabric.

Thus the effect of the picture cannot be calculated, which makes work difficult. In addition, the fibers of a fabric soak up the oil from the paint and soon become brittle.

An attempt is made, therefore, by a special process to make the canvas more impenetrable and less porous and at the same time to heighten the brilliance of the colors by means of a luminous ground.

2. Permanence of Grounds - For finer, permanent work, however, it is a loss of time and a waste of material. The more quickly and directly one can say in painting what one has to say, the better. Therefore the canvas must be so prepared as to permit quick and confident work.

There are many reasons why a painting may not last, choice of linen and properly prepared painting ground, will be the first to fail or cause the painting to last.

There is an endless number of recipes for grounds, and it is sometimes amusing to read of all that is mixed together in the belief that the greater the number of ingredients the more likely is *something good to result! And not only in modern recipes is this the case. Even the oldest Byzantine and many later recipes

3. Rules for Permanence of Grounds. The ground must possess absorbency, porosity, roughness, or a combination of these properties to a definite degree depending on the requirements of the work and sufficient to create the proper mechanical bond between the surface and the coating. The ground must be as white as possible, and if it is home-made, a thin glue size should isolate the oil paint coating from the linen.

4. Different Ground Attributes - Absorbency, brightness and stability are what affects a ground has on a painting.
 - A. *A non absorbent ground is not recommended since there is not enough tooth porosity to create that bond.
 - B. *There are non absorbent grounds, this is an oil Resin mix. Modern House paints use a polyester resin, that they call alkyd. Alkyds are actually resins and can be natural or synthetic. Like Damar or Pine Resin.
 - C. *The semi absorbent ground would be your plain Lead Oil mixture
 - D. *Absorbent grounds would be caseins, gesso's and chinks. They are less flexible and can be prone to crazing and cracking. They need proper time to dry. About 2 weeks!
5. **Influence of Grounds** . Most present-day painters pay entirely too little attention to the importance of grounds; it is quite immaterial to them what they paint on, and not a few work over already painted surfaces in preference to new ground.
 - A. *The ground, however, has an extraordinary influence on the durability of the picture and the action of the colors, as well as on the later preservation and luminosity of the painting.
 - B. *Most painters believe that with oil colors anything is permitted, that one can go on indefinitely covering up one coat of paint with another, and that therefore the ground is very unimportant.
 - C. *But even with the thickest oil colors the ground strikes through, giving either luminosity and clarity, as a clean white ground will, or a dirty, greasy color effect which, upon drying, becomes still more displeasing, and in the course of years allows the underlying coats of paint to strike through. Most assuredly it is not unimportant on what one paints.
6. Advantages of making your own ground. A ground which is prepared by the artist himself is especially advantageous, not merely because of economy but because such individually prepared grounds permit of much more charming effects than are usually possible with purchased, factory-made material with its frequently uninteresting uniform texture.

Making the ground has several advantages in controlling the brightness, absorbency and texture. Adding a body color such as an orange or earth red can have profound effects on a paintings results. With the knowledge that grey assumes the compliment of any color, you can see that William Sergeant Kendall uses an earth orange tone in his ground. Putting a grey dry brush above the tone, he achieved the appearance of a violet hue.

Fechin's Portrait of Willa Cather clearly demonstrates how you can control the texture of the ground to achieve the charm in which Doerner speaks. Notice the effects of dry bush over previous tones. This can only be achieved by controlling ones own grounds.

7. Materials for Grounds. Chalk (marble white, Paris white, whiting) is calcium carbonate. Often these grounds are used in combination with each other for utilizing their individual properties. Please Refer to Max Doerner's Materials of the artist and their use in painting. A full comprehensive list is in the PDF provided in the link for this video.
- a. Body colors. Are filling materials that can be used in the mixture of your personal ground recipes. Gypsum, talc, chalk, kaolin, spar, pumice stone powder. All the materials so far listed have no covering power; they lose their own color when they come in contact with oils and varnishes. Body colors are therefore added to the grounding preparation, and in this way the luminosity and permanency of a painting are increased.
 - b. These basic white grounds are :Zinc white (zinc oxide) is the best covering pigment for grounds. It is a loose powder, and a little of it goes a long way. Used alone, however, as a ground material, it is dangerous because of its brittleness. Not many fabrics would hold more than one coat of it.
 - c. Titanium white, a new pigment, appears to be quite satisfactory in water-color techniques. Its covering power is good, and it is not poisonous; but it has not yet been sufficiently tested.
 - d. Cremnitz white, white lead. Although the white pigment with the greatest covering power, it is not recommended for chalk grounds because it is extremely poisonous. There is always danger that it may be carried into the air in the form of dust. Zinc white in a ground goes much farther. The Flemish painters added one-third white lead to their gypsum grounds to increase their luminosity. They could not very well use zinc white, because in their day it was unknown.
 - e. Grounds made without the addition of body colors obviously not only change considerably when they come in contact with oil, but they also continue to darken afterwards. Where parts of a ground in a painting remain uncovered, to contribute to the artistic effect of the picture, as, for instance, in the sketches of Rubens, some body color in the ground is an absolute requirement.

I will speak later to which white is best for the Velatura.

The early Renaissance painters were now observing perspective. They were becoming observant of drapery and anatomy. Notice the careful transitions of tones especially in the faces. The tones blend softly into one another, this technique is called Sfumato.

More importantly is the brilliance of color that is unmatched even to this day.