Underpaintings A forum posted by Matthew D. Innis which celebrates excellence in Representational Art - past, present, and future.

The Academic Ébauche

Unfinished panel showing Gérôme's preparatory phase of painting.
Nineteenth century students of the French Academy were taught that the ébauche, or lay-in, was an essential, if not the most important step, in the development of a painted picture.¹ Rather than making judgements against the glare of a white canvas, the addition of the ébauche enabled the pupil to approximate the qualities of color and value in their true relationships, and thereby built up the student’s confidence and skills at effective comparison. It helped them to work more quickly from the live model, and also aided them in the building of a painting which would retain its color brilliance longer, even when upper layers of paint became transparent with age.² Over the course of the century, the importance of the lay-in, and the amount of which this underpainting was permitted to show in the finished work, increased, eventually culminating in Impressionist works, in which the more expressive ébauche became the final goal of the paintings.
After the middle of the nineteenth century, the actual application of the *ébauche* varied slightly from teacher to teacher, which has led to some disagreement among contemporary artists as to the proper execution of this initial painting step. There is, however, a general consensus today as to the proper colors employed in these Academic *ébauches*, which is, namely, a palette weighted heavily toward earth colors.

In 1827, Swiss painter P.L. Bouvier published his highly influential book, *Manuel des jeunes artistes et amateurs en peinture*, in which he provided vital information on the artistic practices and materials used in early nineteenth century France³, including those colors best suited for painting flesh in the *ébauche*. The nine colors Bouvier recommended were *blanc*, *jaune de Naples*, *ocre jaune*, *ocre de rue*, *ocre rouge-clair*, *ocre rouge-brun ou brun-rouge foncé*, *cinabre de Hollande*, *noir de bouchons*, and *bleu de Prusse anglais*.⁴

American poet, Laughton Osborn, published in 1849 his translation of Bouvier’s seminal work, converting the colors of the *ébauche* into the following list:⁵

- Silver White
- Naples Yellow
- Yellow Ochre
- Roman Ochre
- Light Red
- Deep Brown-Red, or Red-Brown Ochre
- Vermilion
- Some good blue-black
- English prussian-blue

Silver white is a “nonstandard term that has been used for both flake white (PW1) and zinc white (PW4),” but in this case it is certainly referring to *blanc d’argent*, by which the French always meant flake white.⁷ Roman ochre is a variety of natural ochre (PY43).⁸ Deep brown-red or red-brown ochre were each just a calcined form of Roman Ochre or brown ochre.⁹ Light red is natural red iron oxide (PR102). The vermilion mentioned would be cinnabar (PR106), which is native vermilion, and not manufactured.¹⁰ Blue-black in this case is cork black (*noir de bouchons*) which is also known as vine black (PBk6), made from calcined wood.¹¹ Naples yellow (PY41), yellow ochre (PY43), and Prussian blue (PB27), are all self-explanatory.
Osborn’s translation of *ocre de rue* as Roman ochre (PY43) is probably accurate. According to chemist and paint-maker, George O’Hanlon of Natural Pigments, *ocre de rue* is a “dark colored ochre, typically a yellow brown hue,” which would seem to match Ralph Mayer’s description of Roman ochre in *The Artist’s Handbook of Materials and Technique*. Tubed brown ochre might make a suitable replacement, and in fact, Sennelier paints markets a brown ochre (PY42/PW6/PR101/PG7) whose French name is listed as “*ochre de ru*”, though this color more closely resembles an acidic earth green than a yellow-brown.

Toward the end of the century, when a more transparent underpainting became desirable, the ochres in the *ébauche* were replaced with bitumen, a blackish brown solution of asphalt in oil or turpentine¹², and burnt sienna (PBr7).¹³
The ébauche stage of a painting demonstration given by Jacob Collins at The Grand Central Academy of Art
In this detail of a beautiful painting by Angela Cunningham, the ébauche is still visible in the model's lower body.
The execution of the Academic ébauche followed a deliberate set of organized steps. Using his nine parent colors, the student would typically begin by laying out his palette, which consisted of more than a dozen rows of mixtures arranged into three sections of tone; one for the lights, one for the shadows, and another for the half-tints.¹ He would then trace an earlier-completed preliminary drawing onto his canvas in charcoal, and, when the transfer was finished, would either repeatedly tap the work surface with a mahlstick, or blow upon it, to remove the excess charcoal particles.¹⁵ With the drawing thus ready to accept oil paint, the student would then retrace the drawing’s outline, and establish his principal dark masses using a mixture called the “sauce.”¹⁶
This unfinished painting by Bouguereau shows where the artist stopped working after only completing part of the finishing stage. Bouguereau was known to have worked quickly, often painting on top of the ébauche while it was still wet. In this painting it can be seen that Bouguereau treated the adolescent's skirt as if it were entirely a shadow, laying in a brown tone, then going over that with a frottis of red-blue.
“Sauce” was a term used throughout 19th century France to refer to a transparent, fluid mixture of red-brown paint, diluted with turpentine and a boiled drying oil like linseed oil. Often, the color used was red ochre, but sometimes bitumen was added, which, unfortunately, was not archivally sound. By the end of the century, detractors of classical art used “sauce” as a derogative term, saying of paintings executed with a brown underpainting that they were painted with “gravy.”

After the outline was established and the shadows were loosely yet accurately blocked in using the “sauce,” the painting was ready for “first-painting” or “dead-colouring.” This was often begun while the “sauce” was still wet. First the highlights were rendered in pigment mixed abundantly with white, using a thick impasto for the most “impressive light areas.” This paint was to be laid in “spontaneously and freely to lend interest and brilliance to the pictorial arrangement.” Next, the half-tints were painted, moving from the highlights to the shadows using no fewer than six separate tones. Finally, the deepest tones were applied to the shadows, allowing the student to work over the thinly-painted, initial red-brown lay-in, and thereby establish an overall basic effect of the finished picture.

Contemporary realist Anthony Ryder lays in his underpainting with an open palette, though his results are very similar to the 19th century ébauche.
In these early stages of the *ébauche*, the varying tones were not to be blended together, rather, they were to be laid next to each other so as to form a mosaic. Only after the tones were laid accurately, and the dimension and relief of the subject could be read from across the room, were the individual value patches to be linked. This was accomplished using a clean brush for each separate juncture, or by using a brush lightly loaded with pigment of the correct value, and teasing the line between divisions of tone by dragging the brush across the painting in the manner of mimicking the form of the model. In this way, the patchwork of tones in the painting would be quickly melted into each other, leaving a smooth gradation throughout.

Many painted *academiés* from the nineteenth century leave areas of exposed *ébauche*. Though today this may be a stylistic choice, in the past it was often because the students ran out of time when trying to complete their finish—students usually had only a week to work from a single pose. In this painting by Will St. John, the *ébauche* can be seen in the lower part of the painting. St. John teaches a class on the *ébauche* for The Grand Central Academy School of Art.
To complete the ébauche, all that was left to do was apply several “inspired brush-strokes” in both the light and dark areas as to enliven the surface and retain the original feeling of immediacy in the underpainting. The greatest freedom was permitted in executing these last touches.

A picture properly laid-in, or dead-coloured, should present in general a quiet atmospheric effect, with silvery gray, and transparent neutral brown tints predominating among the other colours.

Jacques-Louis David, Portrait of Madame Adélaïde Pastoret, 1791-1792. A very fine example of the antique ébauche.
Before the “second-painting” was begun, the *ébauche* was set aside to thoroughly dry. It was then scraped, and oiled-out with linseed or nut oil which was applied with a brush, then wiped down with a silk rag. The same procedure as was used for the *ébauche* was used again to work toward the finish, though the lights were rendered more brilliantly and colors of greater chroma were introduced in the later stages.

Later in the 19th century, artists began incorporating the spontaneous look of the *ébauche* in their finished works, as in this painting by Naturalist Émile Friant.
In his book *The Mastery of Oil Painting*, Frederic Taubes offered a similar underpainting palette to that of the Academy, consisting of lead white, ochre, umber, Prussian blue, and Venetian red. Taubes proposed that colors like umber and Prussian blue were especially desirable in the first-painting because of their exceptional siccative qualities. He also suggested specifically adding Copal Varnish to the stiff white lead used in the underpainting. Not only would this additive make the paint be more pliable, it would also make the initial layer thinner and more absorbent; since the liquid part of the varnish is volatile, as it dries, the only deposit left in the paint would be the resin which would impart this quality to the paint. As white predominates the color mixtures, there would be no need to add the varnish to the other colors on the palette.
Paintings by JoshuaLa Rock

It is likely that when artists in the nineteenth century Academy were choosing the colors for their ébauche, their decisions were based not only on availability, but also on the speed of drying time. As this was also the time period in which artists like Bouguereau and Vibert were known to
experiment with creating absorbent canvases, it is also likely that other artists receiving training at the École des Beaux-Arts were searching for a similar property in their ground layers. This combination of fast-drying pigments and an absorbent surface would have sped up the ébauche process, allowing students more time to work on their finish, when they often only had a single week per pose to complete all stages of their painting.

Joshua LaRock, Nina
By the end of the century, progressive artists like the Impressionists, were eschewing the dark *ébauche* in favor of beginning their paintings with the bright hues related to the local colors of their subject.³⁴ These artists preferred the spontaneity and freedom of the *ébauche* stage to the look of the highly rendered finish, and therefore concerned themselves with vibrant brushstrokes and the juxtaposition of unblended tones and colors. To the artists who worked in the full Academic method, the art of the Impressionists looked incomplete, and earned the progressives the criticism that their work would be improved had they finished their educations. Though animosity was suffered between these divergent schools of Impressionism and classicism, it was their common education in the application of the *ébauche* which enabled them both to create the works of art that defined their individual genres.

Contemporary painter, [Morgan Weistling](http://www.morganweistling.com), uses a technique which resembles the *ébauche*. Weistling's colors are low in chroma, and are placed on the canvas as if he were laying individual tiles of tone.