

An Underpainting Creates Depth

—Toni James, CPSA (AZ)



Figure 1.

An underpainting in traditional artistic terms is simply an initial layer of paint applied to a chosen support. This serves as a base for subsequent layers of paint. Yes, I said paint, did you catch that? How in the world does this apply to colored pencil applications you ask?

Let's try this again; this time as it applies to colored pencil. An underpainting is the first step, the initial foundation layer of colored pencil that is meant to be colored over by glazing subsequent lightly applied layers of color. The result is a colored pencil work that has a unified palette with richness and depth of color.

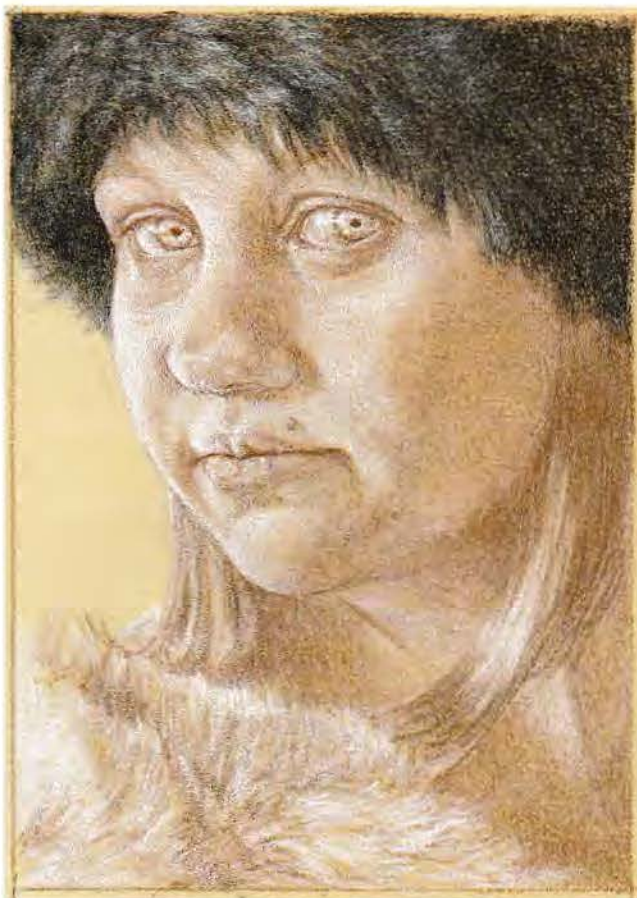


Figure 2.

Traditional underpainting is often monochromatic and helps to map the initial layout while defining color values as the work begins. There are different types of underpainting such as 1) verdaccio which is mixed, resulting in a soft greenish brown; 2) grisaille which is traditionally executed in a monochromatic palette (usually in shades of gray); and 3) brunaille which is underpainting done entirely in shades of brown. To create this traditional underpainting technique in our non-traditional medium, I use what I refer to as my "basic palette" which is Prismacolor light umber, dark umber, beige, cream, white and black. Using these few pencils gives me the same foundation as the old masters had in their paintings.

The sanded surface I prefer is Uart sanded pastel paper in either the 500 or 600 grit. "Vintage Beauty" is created on 600 grit. The work looks really rough at the beginning, but as you add layers to your underpainting, it smoothes out. The work in progress reflects using Uart.

After establishing my line drawing, I begin my underpainting by reserving the bright white areas so I don't lose them later. Then, taking my light umber pencil, I begin to create my underpainting. Working from a grayscale resource image, I look for large blocks of value and shape, squinting and stepping back often to see if what I'm doing is correct. Skin areas require a unified smooth circular/cross hatching application—hair and fur are stroked in the direction they lie. Areas that get too dark can be lifted with a kneaded eraser. I began with dark umber for the hat in "Vintage Beauty." (Fig. 1)

NOTE: Your initial layer will be dusty and loose for the most part. This is normal. Do **not** blow, tap or brush it yet!

The dead layer. After applying the first layer of underpainting, it's important to go back and "set" your pencil into the tooth of the Uart. This will solidify the loose layer of pencil you've just created and change your work surface texture at the same time. It's going to look really creepy! I used white for this layer in "Vintage Beauty" (Fig. 2) Skin gets a smooth application, while fur and hair get strokes that follow the form they will need in the end. After this step, you can blow, brush or tap as you usually do.

Underpainting..., continued



Figure 3.

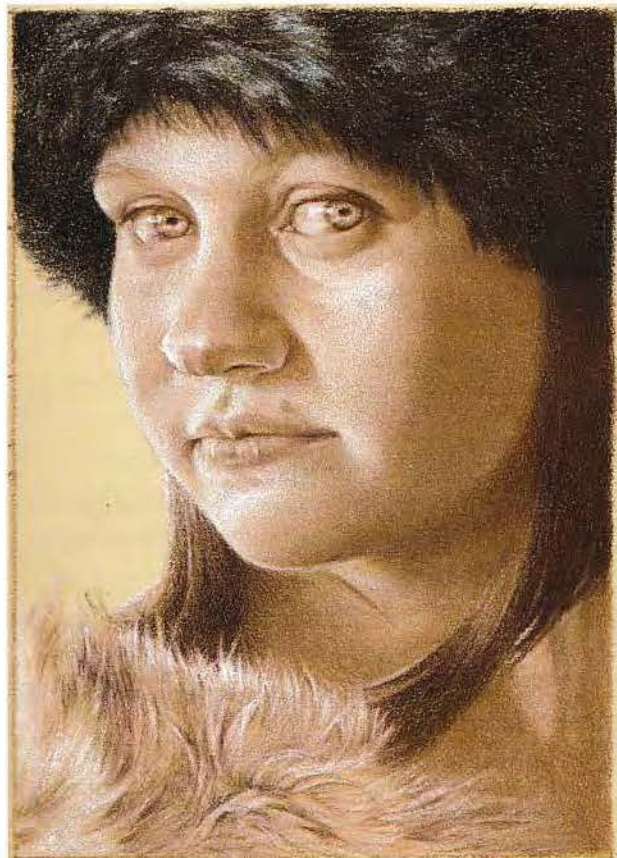


Figure 4

The next few layers are simply re-establishing our original value map. (Fig. 3-4) Going back in with the light umber, dark umber, beige and white, working to rebuild your underpainting. (Fig. 5)

Addition of cream, along with the light umber, dark umber, beige, white and black. After the completion of the underpainting, it's simply a matter of glazing color layers over your underpainting to complete the portrait. (Fig. 6)

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Figure 5, "Vintage Beauty" (4 x 6") Prismacolor Premier pencils on Uart 600