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The Application of Henri Fantin-Latour's Painting Techniques in Still Life Painting

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Abstract

This study examines the application of traditional oil painting techniques derived from the still life works of *Henri Fantin-Latour* within contemporary studio-based art education. The research aims to (1) study the key painting techniques evident in Fantin-Latour's still life works and (2) apply these techniques to the practice of still life painting in an instructional context. Grounded in a qualitative, practice-based research framework, the study was conducted in the *Painting 3* course at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The participants consisted of 28 second-year undergraduate painting students. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of student portfolios. The findings indicate that Fantin-Latour's still life paintings are characterized by a disciplined indirect oil painting process, including tonal underpainting (grisaille), transparent layering and glazing, selective use of opaque paint, and refined surface treatment. These techniques emphasize tonal control, spatial depth, and material sensitivity rather than dramatic visual effects. The application phase translated these technical principles into a structured five-stage studio process, guiding students from preparatory drawing and tonal establishment to the integration of transparent and opaque layers and final surface refinement. The results demonstrate that this systematic approach supports the development of technical proficiency, tonal coherence, and visual unity in students' still life paintings. The study highlights the pedagogical value of integrating art historical techniques into contemporary painting instruction and affirms the relevance of traditional oil painting methods within higher education in fine arts.

Keywords: still life painting; oil painting techniques; indirect oil painting; practice-based research; art education

1. Introduction

Studio-based painting education places strong emphasis on the development of both perceptual sensitivity and technical control. In oil painting practice, students are required not only to understand visual elements such as form, colour, and spatial relationships, but also to master the material behaviour of paint itself. Achieving this balance between perception and technique remains a persistent challenge in higher education in fine arts, particularly at the intermediate level of instruction where students begin to translate foundational skills into more complex pictorial structures (Jirajarupat, Wanta, Vasinarom, & Phetruchee, 2022). Within academic painting curricula, still life painting has traditionally functioned as a primary pedagogical platform for cultivating essential oil painting competencies. The controlled arrangement of inanimate objects allows students to focus on observational accuracy, tonal

relationships, surface texture, and compositional order without the variability introduced by movement or narrative content. As a result, still life painting provides a structured yet flexible context in which students can systematically explore the interaction between visual perception and painterly execution. For this reason, still life practice continues to play a central role in studio instruction concerned with realist representation and material-based learning.

One pedagogical approach widely employed in studio education is the analytical study of master artists' techniques through imitation and guided experimentation (Wanta, 2025). Rather than serving as an act of replication for its own sake, this approach enables students to examine how established artists resolved technical and visual problems within their own practice (Sukarin, & Kannok, 2025). By reconstructing selected methods—such as paint layering, tonal modulation, and surface handling—students gain insight into the decision-making processes embedded within completed artworks. However, contemporary art education increasingly recognises that imitation alone is insufficient; it must be integrated with opportunities for interpretation and adaptation in order to support the development of independent artistic judgement.

Among artists whose works offer valuable technical insights for still life painting, *Henri Fantin-Latour* occupies a significant position within the Western painting tradition. His still life paintings demonstrate a disciplined approach to oil painting grounded in classical practice, particularly through the use of indirect painting methods and carefully controlled tonal structures. Fantin-Latour's technique reflects a sophisticated understanding of oil paint as a medium, employing layered applications of transparent and opaque pigments to construct depth, atmosphere, and surface richness. At the same time, his work reveals a restrained compositional sensibility in which visual balance and material presence are carefully orchestrated. While Fantin-Latour's still life paintings have been widely discussed in art historical contexts, their potential application within contemporary studio-based art education has received comparatively limited attention. In particular, there remains a need to examine how his painting techniques may be translated into pedagogical practice, especially in courses designed to strengthen students' technical foundations in oil painting. Addressing this gap, the present study situates Fantin-Latour's techniques within the context of intermediate-level painting instruction, focusing on still life painting as a practical and educational framework.

By analysing selected technical aspects of Fantin-Latour's still life works and applying these methods within studio practice, this research seeks to connect art historical knowledge with contemporary painting pedagogy. Through this practice-based inquiry, the study aims to demonstrate how the systematic application of traditional oil painting techniques can support the development of technical proficiency while simultaneously encouraging informed artistic exploration in still life painting.

1.1 Research Objective

1. To study the key painting techniques of Henri Fantin-Latour as reflected in his still life works.
2. To apply painting techniques derived from Henri Fantin-Latour's works to the creation of still life paintings.

2. Literature review

2.1 Historical Background and Artistic Significance of Henri Fantin-Latour

Henri Fantin-Latour was born in 1836 in Grenoble, France, into an artistic household in which early exposure to drawing and painting formed the foundation of his visual training. Under the guidance of his father, a professional portrait painter, Fantin-Latour developed fundamental skills in craftsmanship before relocating to Paris in 1850. There, he pursued formal studies at the *École de Dessin*—commonly known as the *Petite École*—where he was influenced by pedagogical approaches that emphasized visual memory and disciplined observation. His subsequent engagement with academic training, including a brief period at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, was complemented by sustained independent study through the copying of masterworks at the Louvre (Britanica, 2025). This practice played a crucial role in shaping his technical precision and deep understanding of traditional painting methods.

During his formative years in Paris, Fantin-Latour established close relationships with several leading figures of nineteenth-century French art, including Édouard Manet, James McNeill Whistler, Edgar Degas, and Claude Monet. Despite these associations, he did not align himself fully with the emerging Impressionist movement. Instead, Fantin-Latour maintained a restrained artistic position grounded in classical structure and tonal control, drawing upon Realist principles while preserving a personal commitment to formal discipline (Annex Galleries Fine Art, n.d.). His exposure to Gustave Courbet's studio further reinforced his engagement with realism, though his stylistic approach remained distinct from the broader avant-garde tendencies of his contemporaries.

Fantin-Latour achieved significant recognition through his still life paintings, particularly those depicting flowers and carefully arranged domestic objects. From the 1860s onward, these works became central to his artistic identity and professional success. Executed primarily in oil on canvas, his still lifes demonstrate a refined use of indirect painting techniques, characterized by layered applications of transparent and opaque pigments. Through this method, Fantin-Latour achieved subtle tonal transitions, atmospheric depth, and a heightened sense of material presence. His compositions reflect a balance between structural clarity and painterly sensitivity, aligning his practice with the classical traditions of European still life painting.

Beyond their aesthetic qualities, Fantin-Latour's still life paintings hold particular relevance for the study of oil painting techniques. His disciplined handling of paint, attention to surface texture, and controlled chromatic harmony provide valuable insights into the technical possibilities of the medium. These qualities render his work especially suitable for pedagogical analysis within studio-based art education, where the systematic development of observational accuracy and material control is central to learning outcomes.

Figure 1: Henri Fantin-Latour Self Portrait in 1867, Image credit Manchester Art Gallery



Source: Art UK,

In addition to still life painting, Fantin-Latour produced a number of significant group portraits that documented the intellectual and artistic milieu of nineteenth-century Paris. Works such as *Homage to Delacroix* and *A Studio at Les Batignolles* function not only as portraits but also as visual records of artistic networks and cultural exchange during the period. Later in his career, Fantin-Latour expanded his practice into lithography, producing expressive print works inspired by musical compositions and literary themes, thereby demonstrating the breadth of his artistic interests.

Figure 2: *Homage to Delacroix*, 1864. This painting is a collection of Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Source: Wikimedia Commons, 2012

Figure 3: *A Studio at Les Batignolles*. This painting is a collection of Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Source: Wikimedia Commons, 2012

Fantin-Latour's artistic legacy lies in his synthesis of technical mastery, visual restraint, and poetic sensibility. While his work was widely appreciated by collectors and institutions in England and parts of Northern Europe during his lifetime, broader recognition within France emerged more gradually. Today, his paintings are housed in major international collections, affirming his enduring significance within the history of still life painting and his continued relevance to contemporary studies of traditional oil painting techniques.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach within a studio-based and practice-based framework to examine the application of traditional oil painting techniques in still life painting. The research focuses on learning processes and artistic outcomes rather than quantitative measurement. The participants consist of 28 second-year undergraduate students from the Painting Department, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, who were enrolled in the *Painting 3* course. The selection of participants was purposive, as the course directly addresses oil painting techniques relevant to the objectives of the study. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of student portfolios. Classroom observations documented instructional activities and students' engagement with painting techniques during studio practice. Semi-structured interviews provided insight into students' experiences and perceptions of technique-based learning. Student portfolios, including preparatory studies and completed still life paintings, were analyzed to identify evidence of technical development, such as tonal control, paint layering, and surface treatment. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and visual analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to technical skill development and the application of painting techniques.

4. Results

4.1 The key painting techniques of Henri Fantin-Latour

The findings indicate that Henri Fantin-Latour's still life paintings are distinguished by a highly disciplined technical approach grounded in Realism and informed by the traditions of seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting. His practice demonstrates meticulous attention to

detail, controlled chromatic harmony, and subtle modulation of light, resulting in compositions that emphasize balance, restraint, and visual clarity. Rather than pursuing dramatic effects, Fantin-Latour employed a refined painterly language in which technical control and material sensitivity play a central role. The painting techniques examined in this study reveal that Fantin-Latour's still life works are fundamentally based on the *indirect oil painting* method. This approach involves the systematic construction of an image through multiple superimposed layers of paint, requiring a comprehensive understanding of the physical and optical properties of oil pigments. It emphasises control, depth and refinement through multiple stages as follow.

1. Underpainting (Grisaille): The painting process begins with a monochromatic underpainting, usually in grey or muted earth tones. This stage establishes the basic composition and the relationship between light and shadow, providing a clear tonal structure before colour is applied.

2. Layering and Glazing: Thin, transparent layers of colour are applied over the dry underpainting. These layers allow light to pass through and reflect back from the surface, creating depth, luminosity, and smooth colour transitions while maintaining tonal unity.

3. Use of Opaque Layers: Opaque paint is added selectively to refine forms, emphasize highlights, and clarify details. This step gives solidity and definition to the image, balancing transparency with precision and control.

4. Tonal Harmony, Texture, and Final Refinement: Soft tonal gradations are used to create balance without strong contrast. Subtle adjustments in tone and colour unify the composition, while controlled brushwork differentiates textures such as soft surfaces, glossy forms, and reflective materials, maintaining overall refinement.

Figure 4: Flowers Still Life Painting by Henri Fantin-Latour in 1864, Image credit at Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Source: Art UK,

4.2 Application of Painting Techniques in Still Life Painting Practice

Building upon the key painting techniques identified in Section 4.1, this study applied the principles of indirect oil painting—including tonal underpainting, glazing, selective opacity, and surface refinement—to the practice of still life painting. The application process was structured as a sequence of studio-based steps designed to translate analytical findings into practical painting outcomes.

1. Preparation of the Reference Image and Canvas Format

The application process began with the selection of reference images derived from still life paintings associated with **Henri Fantin-Latour**. These reference images were used to determine appropriate canvas dimensions, ensuring that the proportions of the canvas corresponded closely to the compositional structure of the original works. This preparatory stage emphasized compositional awareness and spatial balance, which were identified as essential characteristics in the analysis of the artist's techniques.

Figure 5: Preparation of the Reference Image and Canvas Format



Source: Art UK

2. Preliminary Drawing and Structural Definition

A detailed preliminary drawing was executed based on close observation of the reference image. Soft graphite pencils with a high tonal value (such as EE pencils) were used to establish clear and confident line work. Emphasis was placed on maintaining strong linear definition so that the drawing would remain visible and stable throughout subsequent painting stages. This step reinforced the importance of structural clarity, as identified in the underpainting and tonal organization discussed in Section 4.1.

Figure 6: Preliminary Drawing and Structural Definition



Source: Photo by Cheerawat Wanta

3. Initial Transparent Ground and Tonal Establishment

The first paint layer consisted of a thin, transparent application of a mid-value colour, primarily *Burnt Sienna*, applied evenly across the entire surface of the canvas. This transparent ground functioned as a tonal base, unifying the surface and preparing it for subsequent layers. At this stage, the emphasis was placed on achieving an overall mid-tone rather than detailed form, corresponding to the initial tonal structure observed in indirect oil painting methods.

Figure 7: Initial Transparent Ground and Tonal Establishment



Source: Photo by Cheerawat Wanta

4. Development of Light Areas through Opaque Paint

After the mid-tone and dark values had been established, opaque paint was selectively applied to areas receiving the strongest light. These opaque layers were used to refine details, emphasize highlights, and enhance the clarity of illuminated forms. Careful attention was given to maintaining tonal and chromatic relationships with the underlying transparent layers, allowing for continuity between early and later stages of the painting.

Figure 8: Development of Light Areas through Opaque Paint



Source: Photo by Cheerawat Wanta,

5. Final Integration and Surface Refinement

In the final stage, subtle adjustments in tone and colour were made to unify the composition as a whole. Controlled brushwork was used to differentiate surface textures—such as soft petals, glossy fruits, reflective glass, and fabric—while maintaining overall restraint. Occasional impasto was applied selectively to introduce tactile variation without disrupting compositional harmony. This final integration ensured visual coherence, depth, and atmospheric unity across the entire painting.

Figure 9: Final Integration and Surface Refinement



Source: Photo by Cheerawat Wanta

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the still life painting techniques associated with Henri Fantin-Latour provide a valuable technical and pedagogical framework for contemporary studio-based art education. The analysis of his works revealed a disciplined indirect oil painting approach characterized by tonal underpainting, transparent layering and glazing, selective opacity, and refined surface treatment. These techniques emphasize control, depth, and visual coherence, offering transferable principles for the study of oil painting. The application of these techniques within the *Painting 3* course confirmed that a structured, stage-based process can effectively support students' technical development. Through the systematic progression from tonal foundation to surface refinement, students demonstrated improved control of light, depth, and material qualities in still life painting. The findings suggest that integrating traditional painting techniques into studio instruction not only strengthens technical proficiency but also encourages informed artistic exploration. Overall, the study bridges art historical knowledge and contemporary painting pedagogy, highlighting the continued relevance of classical oil painting techniques in higher education. The results contribute to practice-based research in fine arts and offer practical insights for instructors seeking to balance technical mastery with creative development in painting education.

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