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A. *Harmony in Pink and Green*, oil on canvas, 48 x 72in (122 x 183cm)

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Transparency, refraction and reflections

Painting glass and anything transparent doesn't need to be as intimidating as it may first appear – **Maddine Insalaco** demonstrates her layered approach in oils



▲ *Harmony in Pink and Green*, oil on canvas, 48×72in (122×183cm)

Transparency, refraction and reflections

Painting glass and anything transparent doesn't need to be as intimidating as it may first appear – **Maddine Insalaco** demonstrates her layered approach in oils

My technique for painting glass involves layers of wet on dry paint to make convincing forms emerge from a base of flat abstract shapes. I use a traditional mix of linseed oil and rectified turpentine which means the layers are slow to dry, so I typically set up a complex still life with multiple objects and light sources from which I can compose a number of paintings. This way I always have a dry surface to work on.

There are three characteristics of glass to consider when painting: transparency, refraction, and reflection. All these characteristics affect how we

see glass, and each can be viewed in terms of a spatial expression.

Space and perception

I look carefully at my arrangement of objects and analyse the space they occupy. I extend this analysis to individual transparent objects, making it a point to distinguish the far side and to the location of the various reflections. Understanding this is fundamental because the layers of paint will be applied in this order, like a traditional landscape in oil.

When I understand what's where, I observe what the still life looks like and

how objects behind and inside any transparent container are affected by it – most obviously the shapes of objects within glass containers are distorted by refraction. The edges of anything seen through glass automatically appear as softer and a bit more obscure. Finally the colour of the glass, even if it appears clear, influences the colour we perceive the contents within to be. All these observations determine the sequence of paint application, edge manipulation and colour choices.

Painting method

All my still-life paintings are executed in six steps:

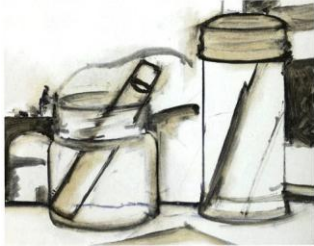
Compose Choosing and organising a still life can sometimes take as long as painting it! In my recent work containing glass and reflective objects I have inserted my own small landscapes or reproductions of old master landscapes to create a more complex spatial structure and colour arrangement. I move all the objects around, changing their relationship to each other and the position of the light sources until I find a composition that is balanced in terms of colour and weight of elements, and is visually engaging. I think about the relationship of positive and negative spaces, the distribution of vertical and horizontal lines, and the colour, light and shape of objects distorted by glass. I often use a

viewfinder as strategic cropping can make anything look more compelling. **Draw** I usually sketch in the composition with a brush and paint thinned with turpentine. I make sure the proportions of all objects are correct – it is so easy to lose time later adjusting drawing and proportion issues. As the drawing will be painted over when blocking it is unnecessary to include details. The glass objects will also be painted out, so only their position and general proportions matter at this stage. However, I try to note the linear effects of objects distorted by glass in the drawing and selectively smear the edges of refracted forms to remind myself later to paint these differently from objects

or parts of objects unaffected by

refraction.

Block The blocked-in layer should cover the surface with flat shapes of thin, opaque, smooth and evenly applied opaque paint. The colours I choose depend on what I see of refracted forms both behind and inside the individual glasses – they are the base from which the illusion of form projects, usually the colour of the shadows or dark tones within individual forms. We usually see the colours on the outside of observed forms first, so it is worth looking more carefully at the colour inside the objects to find the best mixture for blocking. Mimicking the spatial arrangement, these shapes are painted in from back to front, which



DEMONSTRATION *Lighter and Toothpicks with Italian Landscape*

◀ STAGE ONE

The preliminary drawing was sketched in, making sure I got the proportions of the jar and toothpick holder correct. At this stage it is important to present the refracted shapes of the green lighter and the toothpicks inside the glass. The sketch should contain all elements in their exact locations, particularly when working on smooth panel surfaces as any major changes in the design show through on subsequent layers of paint



Block in the distorted shape behind the glass

▲ STAGE TWO

Working from back to front I underpainted the background sky and landscape, completely ignoring the glass containers. For the jar with the lighter I mixed the darkest green tones that I saw in the lighter: permanent green light, alizarin crimson, ultramarine, and white, and painted it in as one flat distorted shape. I did the same for the refracted toothpicks with a mauve brown tone: alizarin, raw umber, blue and white, as a base on which to suggest details of individual toothpicks. I made the edges of distorted forms softer than others

MATERIALS

- **Surface:** Smooth wood panels for maximum luminosity. I use Ampersand cradled Gessoboard. For very large works I use canvas or linen.
- **Pigments:** Ivory black, ultramarine blue; raw umber, permanent green light, chrome green, alizarin crimson, burnt sienna, cadmium red deep, cadmium red light, yellow ochre, cadmium yellow light, titanium or mixed white (Cambian, Munsin, Lefranc & Bourgeois, Rembrandt, Winsor & Newton).
- **Linseed oil** cut with pure rectified turpentine. OR, if time is a factor and just trying the technique for the first time I recommend using Winsor & Newton Liquin, which dries the paint overnight and is perfectly suitable for glazing.
- **Brushes:** Among my favourites are Rosemary & Co sables, Series 66; Royal & Langnickel, Bordeaux and Vienna series; Silver Brush, Britton range; Winsor & Newton Monarch series. If it's a smooth surface I use sable and synthetic brushes. With toothy surfaces like canvas and linen I use synthetics and bristles alone.
- **T-square** and/or triangles for drawing straight lines.
- **Mahl stick** – for small works this steadies my hand when I need more control over the brushstrokes.
- **Cotton rag** – soft cotton will not wear on the brushes like paper towels do.



basically means working from top to bottom. At this stage the drawings of the transparent objects will mostly disappear. This makes sense because it is important to paint what is either behind or inside them first and to paint the distorted shapes of anything reflected by the transparent containers and soften their edges more than undistorted objects. The distortion of form creates the perception that something lies behind glass in a still life.

Develop When the blocked-in layer is completely dry I begin to develop the

painting from the back to the front. Applying paint to a dry surface has a major advantage in that you can easily remove a mixture that does not work with a soft cotton rag. Facilitating this, I first apply a layer of clean medium to a dry section of the painting on which I plan to work. It makes the surface slippery and allows the paint to come off easily.

I resolve all background areas and paint details of anything behind or inside a transparent object. When the back layers are dry I paint in the outlines of these objects. I find it

◀ STAGE THREE

Once the blocked-in layer was dry, I worked from back to front, developing the forms of the landscapes in the background, then the lighter and toothpicks. When dry I painted the general shapes of the glass containers, using a triangle to help get the vertical lines straight and clean. These layers need to be accurate and the execution requires a lot of control – it is easy to smear them. A great way to avoid this is to develop the blocked-in painting from left to right if you are right-handed, otherwise right to left. A final step in this pre-glaze phase was to paint all light and colour reflections inside the glass

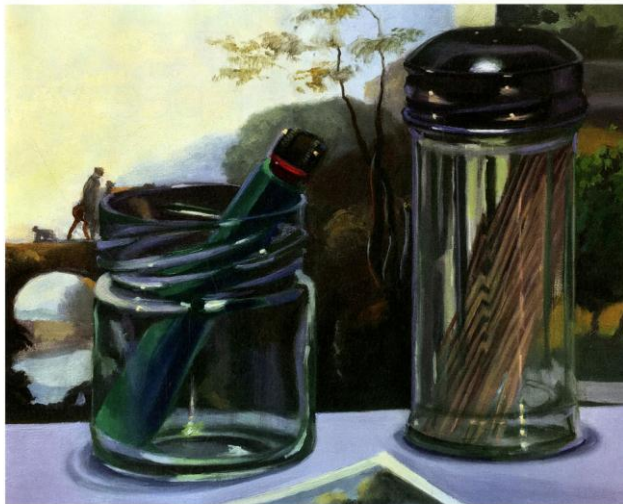


◀ STAGE FOUR

I usually only glaze the transparent objects in my still life compositions. With a soft brush on a completely dry surface I painted a thin cool green glaze over the entire surface of the glass object, making sure it was even. The light within a glass container varies and I selectively wiped out the glaze with a cotton rag in places to make the contents of the glass more visible. If the glaze dulls the subtlety of certain tones and details I paint them back in while the glaze is wet, which has the effect of making them seem inside the glass

helpful to use a T-square or a triangle to guide my hand in painting vertical lines. Any reflections that appear to be inside the objects are also painted at this time.

Glaze I use only local glazes and only for the transparent objects. The glaze will instantly unify the colours of the contents of a container and create an illusion of glass. Any mixture of pigments can be made transparent with the addition of medium. Many glass vessels have a greenish cast and I frequently use a mixture of permanent green light, alizarin crimson and




titanium white mixed with a lot of medium to glaze them.

The layers beneath a glaze must be completely dry to avoid blending or accidental removal when the glaze is selectively wiped out to reveal lighter areas within the transparent container. The glaze should be thin and evenly applied with a soft brush. A residue of the glaze will remain in wiped-out sections, which can be painted back into if anything requires more emphasis. The new paint will retain the colour unity through a slight blending with the wet glaze.

Adjust and finish When the glaze on the glass is dry I paint in the highlights and reflections on the outside. Strong lights are painted opaquely, while the more delicate reflections are applied thinly with more medium and a sable brush. Next I make sure that all relationships between colour values and temperatures are working to reinforce the illusion. At this point it

▲ FINISHED PAINTING

Lighter and Toothpicks with Italian Landscape, oil on panel, 8 x 10in (20.5 x 25.5cm). Lastly I added the reflections and highlights that appeared on the exterior of the glass objects, consistent with what I perceive to be closest to me. It's usually necessary to re-glaze parts of these objects to enhance the three-dimensionality of the form. In an effort to unify the work I often make edits in all areas of the painting at this point. Here I simplified the ground plane by removing the textile design and adjusted the perspective and proportions of the jar with lighter

may be necessary to intervene, even it means additional glazing, anywhere in the painting to bring about a harmonious resolution. I no longer think of physical objects in space but of the abstract reality of paint on a flat surface and how to make that beautiful, which for me is the main concern. 



Maddine Insalaco

(MFA New York Academy of Art) divides her life between New York City and Italy where she has organised plein-air landscape workshops since 1995 (www.landscapepainting.com).

She teaches both still life and landscape classes at the Art Students League of New York. Her work has been shown extensively in Italy and the United States and can be viewed at La Porta Gallery in Buonconvento, Tuscany.

www.maddineinsalaco.com