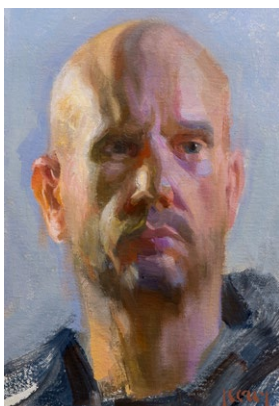


Alex Kelly Art

Alla prima oil painting inside and out

Setup for  
alla prima  
painting



I am an alla prima oil painter living in the UK. I work mostly from direct life study. I have worked in artistic roles for nearly 30 years including being a ceramicist, art teacher and graphic designer.

This guide will take you through my current equipment and setup for alla prima in oil.

**There is also a supplementary video to accompany this guide.**

If you have any comments, questions, or feedback, please feel free to send me an email [hello@alexkellyart.co.uk](mailto:hello@alexkellyart.co.uk)

# Setup for alla prima painting

This guide covers materials, equipment and my setup for alla prima painting in oil. This is my current setup but like all things will probably change over time.



*“No small dabs of colour -  
you want plenty of paint to  
paint with.”*

John Singer Sargent

# Paint

Oil paints are my preferred medium for alla prima.

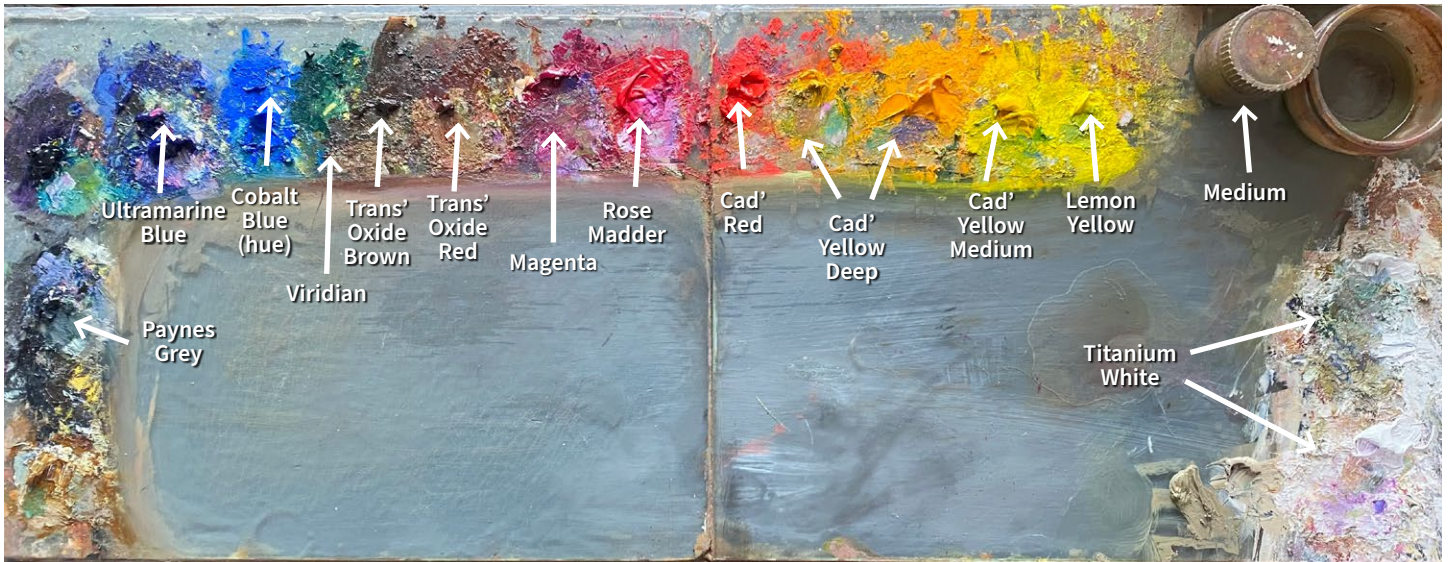
This is because of a mixture of qualities they possess. This includes: staying wet for a long time, ability to be used thickly (impasto) and thinly (glazes), they can also be both transparent and opaque. Other mediums have some of these qualities too but it is the long period of being open or wet which makes oil paint superior for alla prima.

Some other mediums have qualities which are unique to them but also can be used in a way similar to oil to a certain degree. These include: water soluble oil paint, acrylic, pastel, tempera, and gouache. Some adaptation of technique would be needed to get a wet painting effect but it would not be the quite the same as oil paint. Whatever painting medium you use it should be capable of creating a wide value range (darks and lights) and be workable enough to create a range of soft and hard edges for the alla prima method.



*“Be flexible - the order in which you introduce the elements of a painting should not be a rigid system. What worked last time may not work this time.”*

Richard Schmid



### Basic palette of colours

You may not need even all the basic palette as it depends on the subject, but this will give enough flexibility to tackle most situations.

- Titanium White
- Cadmium Yellow Medium (or other cool or primary yellow)
- Cadmium Yellow Deep (or other warm yellow or Cadmium Orange)
- Cadmium Red (or other warm or primary red)
- Magenta (or Alizarin Crimson or another cool red)
- Transparent Oxide Red or Brown (or Burnt Sienna or other dark transparent brown)
- Cobalt Blue (hue)
- Ultramarine Blue
- Paynes Grey or Ivory Black

### Additional colours

These are not strictly necessary as they can be mixed from the basic colours but can be useful sometimes.

- Lemon Yellow
- Rose Madder (quinacridone)
- Yellow Ochre
- Viridian or phthalo green
- Raw Umber

### Layout of colours on the palette

The layout of colour is personal preference. In my case I like warm colours on the right and cooler on the left. The colours also go from light to dark values. I adopted this layout early on as it seemed logical to me. Whatever way you decide to layout the colours on the palette I recommend to keep it consistent. Not having a consistent layout will likely be disruptive to the painting process.

# Brushes

I use mainly long flat brushes. Filberts can also work but rounds are not so useful. With a flat you can create broad strokes as well as thin marks.

The requirement for a 'good' brush is that it should hold its shape (not splay), have enough stiffness to pick up and place paint whilst not lifting paint that has already been applied to the painting (so not too soft or too hard). This is a generalisation as there are occasions where a splayed brush is useful (creating broken textured marks) or a very soft brush is needed (softening edges of already applied).

I currently use **Rosemary & Co, Evergreen or Ivories, Extra Long Flats** with long handles. Ivories are slightly stiffer than Evergreens but both are very good. I use **size 4 and 6** brushes for much of the painting. This about a 10mm brush width. I also have larger brushes for blocking in and smaller ones for details if needed. But find I can use size 4 most of the time for paintings that are from 8x10" to 12x16" in size. (link: <https://www.rosemaryandco.com/oil-brushes/evergreen-oils/evergreen-extra-long-flats>).

I use additional brushes for softening edges. For this I use **Rosemary & Co, Evergreen, Master Series or Eclipse Extra Long Combers** with long handle, **size 1/2"** (link: <https://www.rosemaryandco.com/oil-brushes/eclipse-oils/eclipse-extra-long-comber>).

One other essential tool which I use extensively for mixing but for painting is a **palette knife**. My preferred shape and size of the blade section is about **2.5 inches long by 0.5 inch wide**.



## Medium and Solvent

In general, I use medium more in the beginning and middle stages of a painting. I do not have a strong preference for a particular brand or type. Any medium that allows the paint to flow more easily and help retain glossiness is desirable. Some mediums I use include Gamblin Neo Meglip, W&N Liquin, or I make up a mixture of Stand Oil and Turpentine or OMS (odourless mineral spirits like Gamsol etc) in about a 1:4 ratio.

For solvent I don't have a particular brand preference, I use whatever is available. An important consideration though is toxicity of the fumes.

For cleaning brushes during the painting process OMS works well (it does though tend to shorten brush life) but if the fumes are a consideration then walnut oil could be used instead. It is actually an excellent solvent for oil paints but the drawback is that the paint tends to stay in suspension in the oil which would soon to turn to mud in the brush cleaning pot. My work around for this problem is to use a small dish to work the oil into the brush then wipe the brush on a paper towel. The small quantity of oil can then be discarded. A word of caution: drying oils, like walnut, generate heat as they dry by oxidation so ensure any rags or waste are carefully disposed of (I put mine in a metal bin with a lid) as they can be a fire risk otherwise.



*“I could not paint at all if I had to paint slowly. Every effect is so transient, it must be rapidly painted.”*

Joaquín Sorolla

# Painting Support

I use either an oil primed or acrylic gesso primed support. Both have their advantages. Oil primed is much less absorbent which is great for paint manipulation on the support. Acrylic primed is much quicker to prepare and building up thicker paint is easier. I generally make my own panels as I like some random brush texture in the surface which you don't get with off-the-shelf products.

There are many options including:

- hardboard
- HDF
- MDF
- Masonite
- wooden panels
- canvas (cotton, linen, polycotton)
- aluminium composite
- copper sheet
- heavy weight papers

Some supports (such as canvas and paper) should be 'sized' to protect them from the oil primed layer which cause them to rot over time. A traditional size is rabbit skin glue or more usually a PVA primer (ph neutral) can also be used.

I like the surface to be quite smooth usually so avoid coarse weaves. Shop bought acrylic primed canvas can also be oil primed. I for oil primed I use Jackson's Alkyd Oil Primer (only available in the UK I think) but other companies sell oil primer too, such as Gamblin and Winsor & Newton.

Mostly I use 3mm HDF (high density fibreboard) panels which can be oil primed directly with a couple of thin coats of oil primer. Oil primer usually takes about a week to dry properly so bear this in mind if you are preparing them for use on a specific date.



Painting onto a white primed surface can be problematic as it is close to the lightest value which can make it difficult to judge value relationships initially. Because of this I sometimes tint the surface with a thin layer of a grey or earth colour. To do this I sometimes use Burnt Umber or some other grey colour, thinned with some medium / solvent. I allow this to dry for use later but it is also possible to work into the wet tint layer as long as it is thin. On the otherhand a white surface gives a better chroma response especially for florals.

## Palette and Easel

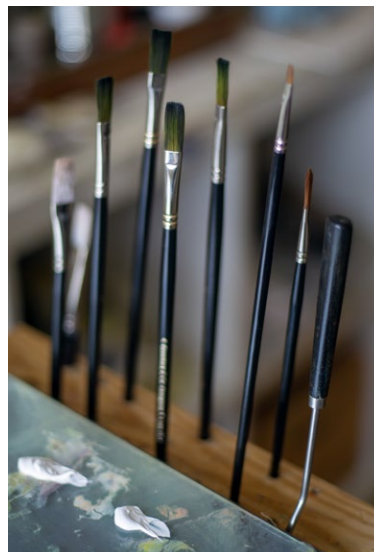
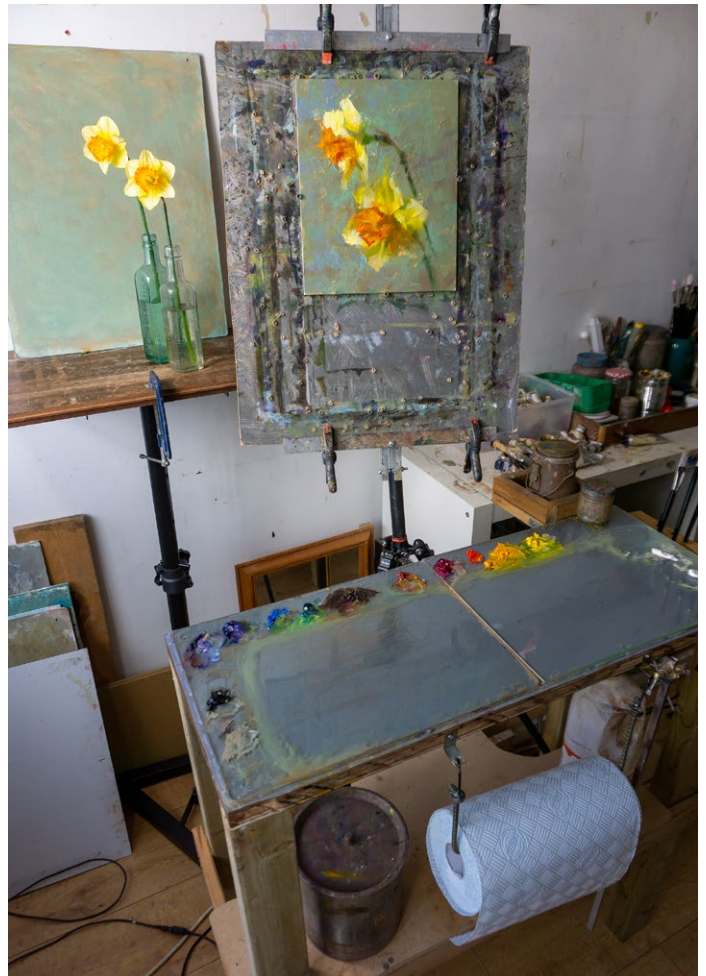
I prefer a glass palette which has a mid tone grey underneath. Use whatever palette you are comfortable with, however, avoid a mixing area that is white, strongly coloured or too dark in tone as this makes it hard to estimate colour relationships.

I prefer to stand when I paint, and my setup reflects this. Standing makes it easier to step back from the painting to take in the whole work at once and also to compare with the subject if painting from direct observation.

## Other Tools and Sundries

Other items include:

- a hooked stick to steady my painting hand - this is a metre long, aluminium, box section stick which has a bolt through the end - this allows it to be hooked over the back of the easel to steady the painting hand - a walking cane could also be used
- paper towels on a roll - I use this frequently to wipe and dry brushes after cleaning
- a brush holder attached to the side of the table-palette - this is a piece of wood attached to the side of the palette table with holes for the brushes to stand upright
- I also use jars for holding solvents and medium
- a viewfinder (two pieces of L-shaped card suffice)
- metal waste bin for soiled paper towels (its important to dispose of rags and paper towels carefully as heat is generated as the paint dries in a bundle could ignite).



## Subject Setup

I use a height adjustable table (this is a speaker stand with a wooden top clamped to it) to set up my subject on.

Depending on whether you are standing or sitting to paint you can improvise with a table to get close enough to the subject so the easel and table can be practically side-by-side. This way when you stand back the painting and subject can be seen at the same time.

For the subject backdrop I sometimes just use a white wall behind. I also have a range boards, that I have prepared, which are painted with various colours and textures. Pieces of cloth can also be used. As this is really a compositional decision it's not possible to be very prescriptive about this aspect.



*“... I think that nothing is more difficult for a true painter than to paint a rose, since before he can do so, he has first to forget all the roses that were ever painted.”*

Henri Matisse

# Lighting

Lighting is a crucial aspect to painting, without good light it impossible to paint well. There are two aspects to lighting to consider: the light falling on the subject and the light on the painting support.

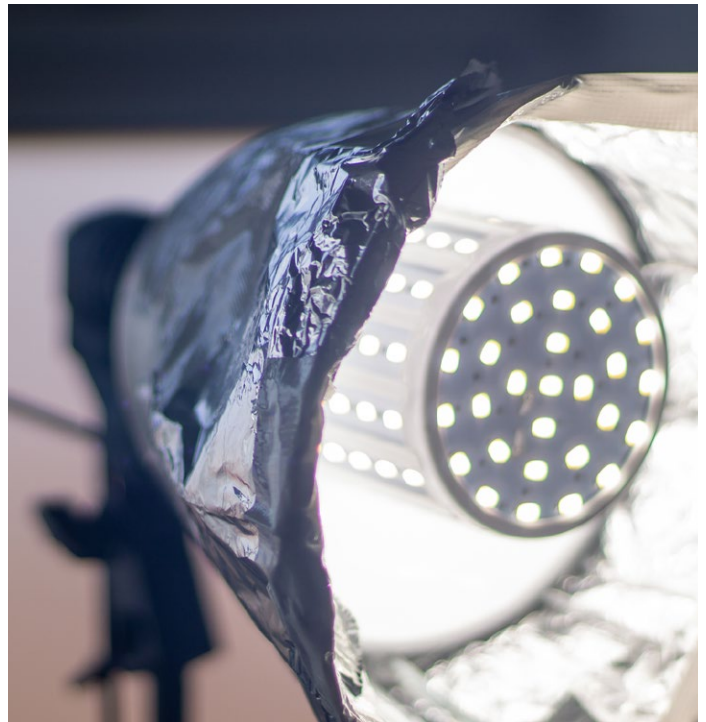
North light is considered to be the best as it is the most pleasing in terms of naturalism. Even so, you may need to supplement it with artificial light unless you have big windows as it may not be strong enough to paint by.

Artificial light, while not as pleasing as natural light gives you more options. It is stable and unchanging. You may be able to change the colour temperature of the light. You can make it soft or hard (here I am talking about the kind of shadows it creates).

I use LED lights that have a good CRI colour index - ideally over 90 and as close to 100 as you can get. This means that they have an even spectrum of colour in the light which is close to natural light. LEDs are also available in different colour temperatures, called Kelvin (K).

A daylight bulb of about 5000 K is close to the colour of midday sunlight. It needs to be bright enough to light the subject without the lamp needing to be right next to the subject as this will cause a spotlight effect which may not be desirable.

If you can set up the light so that the canvas and subject are lit by same lamp this is ideal. However, this is not always possible so then a second lamp might be needed to light the canvas. The important thing here is that the light falling on the canvas should have the same colour temperature as the light on the subject.



Beyond the practical and technical aspects of lighting, how you light the subject is a compositional choice which should be explored if you are working from direct observation of the subject.

# Equipment Checklist

## Paints

The below list is paints I regularly use but it really depends on the subject. I sometimes use a limited range from this selection.

- Titanium White
- Buff titanium
- Lemon Yellow
- Cadmium yellow medium or primary yellow
- Cadmium Yellow Deep or warm yellow
- Cadmium Red or warm midtone red
- Rose Madder (quinacridone)
- Magenta (quinacridone) or cool dark tone red, such as Alizarin Crimson (permanent is best)
- Transparent Oxide Red or Brown or Burnt Sienna
- Cobalt blue (hue) or pthalo blue or Prussian blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Paynes Grey or Ivory black
- Raw Umber
- Viridian or pthalo green

## Brushes (in a range of sizes)

- Rosemary & Co, Evergreen or Ivories, Extra Long Flats
- Rosemary & Co, Evergreen or Ivories, Extra Long Flats
- Rosemary & Co, Evergreen, Eclipse Extra Long Comber
- Rosemary & Co, Master Series, long flats
- palette knives, triangular blades mostly

## Medium and Solvent

Gamblin Neo Meglip or W&N Liquin or mixture of Stand Oil and Turpentine in around a 1:4 ratio

Odourless mineral spirits / walnut oil

## Painting Supports

- oil primed or acrylic primed surfaces: hardboard, HDF, MDF, Masonite, wooden panels, canvas (cotton, linen, polycotton), aluminium composite, copper, heavy weight papers

## Palette and Easel

- glass, acrylic, wooden, plastic palette - should be grey midtone for mixing
- easel which can be setup next to and same height as subject
- table for subject - ideally height adjustable
- coloured background panels or cloth

## Lighting

Daylight lamps x2 - LED lamps are good with high CRI over 90 - around 5000-6000k

## Miscellaneous

- hooked stick to steady painting hand
- paper towels
- solvent pot with lid
- brush holder
- view finder made from 2 pieces of L shaped card
- callipers for measuring
- waste bin

## Thanks for reading!

I hope you found this guide useful.

If you have any comments, questions, or feedback, please feel free to send me an email ([hello@alexkellyart.co.uk](mailto:hello@alexkellyart.co.uk)).

Please check my website for future workshops and demonstrations.

## Keeping in touch

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