

## MEMBRANE TECHNIQUE – Faces

September 2014

NB These notes are supplementary to the guidance in Aidan's book 'Techniques of Icon and Wall Painting'.

First step is to paint the monochrome image or drawing on to the prepared gesso. If the surface has all been sanded for water gilding, remember to sand the surface for painting using 600 grade sandpaper. Egg tempera needs some tooth to adhere.

Using 80gsm photocopy paper, rub half a teaspoon of Armenian bole or a deep red pigment well into the surface of one side of the paper with cotton wool.

Photocopy your monochrome or drawing cutting two or three v-slots in the photocopy, to locate the drawing correctly on your icon board.

Then using the red bole paper to transfer your image, trace your drawing with only the minimum of lines on to the gesso. Keep lines sharp and clear.

*Tip: always use a best quality colour reproduction icon print on photo paper to refer back to. Don't skimp on print cartridges, use the proper Canon ink.*

### Underpainting the face of the Mandilion

Using 80% terre verte and 20% yellow ochre (Maimeri light), paint the modelling of the image building up evenly and ensuring that line weights vary in the appropriate places. For example, brows are thicker, eye socket line is light, the upper lid dense and the lower lid light. The underpainting should be clear and well shaded enough to withstand several membrane layers.



Terre Verte and Yellow Ochre



Building up the modelling

When you have finished modelling the underpainting, areas of unpainted gesso should be lightly washed with dilute pigment mix to avoid patchy areas when you apply the membrane. It is best to wait until it is dry and apply a fine even layer over the whole lot.

*Tip: Remember to paint with Distinction and Unity.*

You can use other pigments for underpainting the face such as Avana. Add more red pigment to the underpainting if the figure is of Middle Eastern origin. If underpainting garments, experiment with different coloured pigments. Cool highlights over warm undergarments work well.

*Tip: If the figure is older, then model the facial wrinkles at this stage.*

## Membrane Layers

These layers give the middle tone.

These are difficult to do well and easy to go wrong. If you smear or smudge, DO NOT FIDDLE with it! Wait till the layer has dried and paint over it.

Using yellow ochre light (maireri) and a little Vermillion or English Red light and a touch of titanium white, mix up a warm golden orange. Go easy with the white as it is a powerful pigment. Mix it up separately then add with tip of your brush until you get the right colour.

With a large squirrel mop held at 45 degrees or less to the board, not upright, sweep a light, even wash of membrane colour over the face and beard but NOT the hair.



*Applying the membrane is tricky! This is not a good example as it's my first attempt*

*Tip: Reminder, when mixing colour, egg first, then add pigment.*

Apply 4 or 5 membranes until you get a rich even golden colour. This is where you see how important it is to have a strong underpainting. If there are area on the membrane which are patchy, apply another layer and puddle in extra pigment where thin.

When the membranes are complete, you can apply a separating glaze of 10% egg, 90% water. Go easy with the egg as too much egg leaves a slippery surface which is hard to paint on. Ensure it is properly dry before you paint over it.

**HAIR** is painted with the Proplasmos technique and the proportion is Avana 86% Ivory Black 7% and English Red 7%. Follow the direction of the form, left to right over the brow, down over the cheeks and round the chin.



*Hair and the proplasmos technique will be continued later*



*Aidan's Mandilion*

If you get a paintbrush hair in the mix, whatever you do, leave it alone until the paint is dry, then brush it off. It is really easy to mess up at this stage and damaging the underpainting. Do not apply paint too wet as this leads to holes in the underpainting.

*Tip: While you are painting, some of your paint mix will dry out in your palette. Keep wiping away the dried paint as this does not stick properly once it has dried out.*

Remove any pigment which has strayed on to the gilding with a dry cotton bud. Do this as soon as possible as clay pigments set hard and will lift off the gold.

#### **To sum up the main points:**

1. Paint a good strong underpainting. Build up dark areas by layering rather than applying thick pigment.
2. Go carefully with membrane layer, if any patches or hairs occur, leave paint to dry, do not fiddle!
3. Wipe palette from time to time.
4. Avoid over-wet brushes.

#### **Highlights**

Aim to apply 3 but no more than 4 layers of highlights, using a light yellow which brightens gradually by approx. 20% with each layer. Mix yellow ochre light (Maimeri) and a touch of Titanium White.

Leave the eyes till a later stage, but include the flesh around them.

Include a brush of highlight over the lower lip.

Russian icons have less highlights. You can leave a highlight layer off or tone them down with warm washes.

#### **First layer of face highlights:**

Start by mixing plenty of the golden yellow (you don't want to run out as it is very hard to remix the same shade). Paint sample swatches to see the contrasts as you want to avoid a big change such as 50%.

Mix the white separately.

You can't tell if it is the right colour until you have applied a thin layer and let it dry. Start very lightly on the ear. Wait till it dries before you proceed with the colour. You are aiming for 20% lighter than the membrane layer.

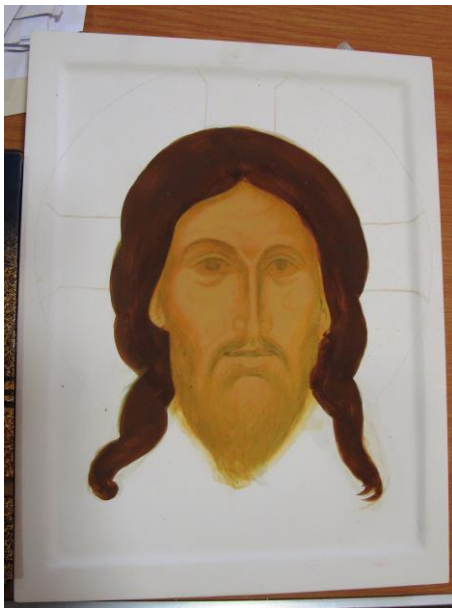
Paint with accuracy. Look carefully 2 or 3 times before you begin. Use this opportunity to correct your underpainting.

With a size 3 brush, (maybe size 2), apply the paint thinly over the higher parts of the face, and feather out with dry brush technique. Use a watered down mix of your colour to feather out edges, but brush out most of the paint on your testing paper first. Build up layers thinly! Do Not Puddle!

*Tip: Look for curves and equally, don't round up sharp corners.*

Leave space around the highlights so the mid tone underpainting remains. Wait till it dries then apply another layer of the same mix as it will dry close to the colour of the membrane. Don't cover all of the membrane.

Make sure the brow bone is deep. Keep the angles of the brow. Mind the direction of your brush strokes and spread the brush to feather out.



*First layer of highlights (Aidan's Mandilion)*



*Second layer of highlights (Aidan's Mandilion)*

### **Second layer:**

Make sure first layer has properly dried. Look closely at the original and identify the high points of the eyebrows, forehead, nose, cheeks, chin, ears. Note the direction of the face. Make sure you highlight the upper cheekbone to keep the width of the cheekbone next to the eye.

Add a little more white to your mix and test.

*Tip: if you go too light too soon, add a thin layer of Italian Warm ochre (French Havanna is very similar) which will warm it up. It also acts a harmonising layer when all the highlights (except the 'snow') have been applied.*

**No confusion, no division.** Remember the movement of sheep between the fields and paddocks.



*Tip: avoid sudden changes of depth or contrast. Shading should all be gradual.*

### **Brows, Beard and Moustache**

These should grow subtly out of the skin. Build up very thinly.

For a younger person, use Avana, with a little English Red Light and Ivory Black but for an older man use Raw Umber and white.

The cheek profile is very important to get right. Use the beard mix to get this right but hopefully your underpainting will have the defining areas to work with. Add darkness gradually to the lower parts of the beard. You can dense up existing lines by over-painting. Use lines which start thin, thicken and end thin.

Note how the moustache is lighter above where it grows out of the skin and darker below. Note where the lips push out the moustache and make a defined change in direction. Look at the convex and concave curves. Moustache has two or three calligraphic lines which get shorter on top. There are usually a few curved lines below the lip.

Build up the brows thinly. Look carefully where it is the thickest and where it melts to nothing. When you build up to the upper lines these should be fine and calligraphic. Avoid wiry or straight lines.

*Tip: it is better to be too light with your painting as you can darken later, but you can't lighten without losing the translucency through to the gesso.*

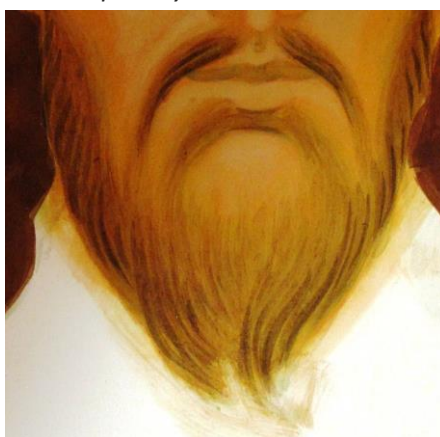
After completion of the facial hair, continue with the highlights on the flesh.

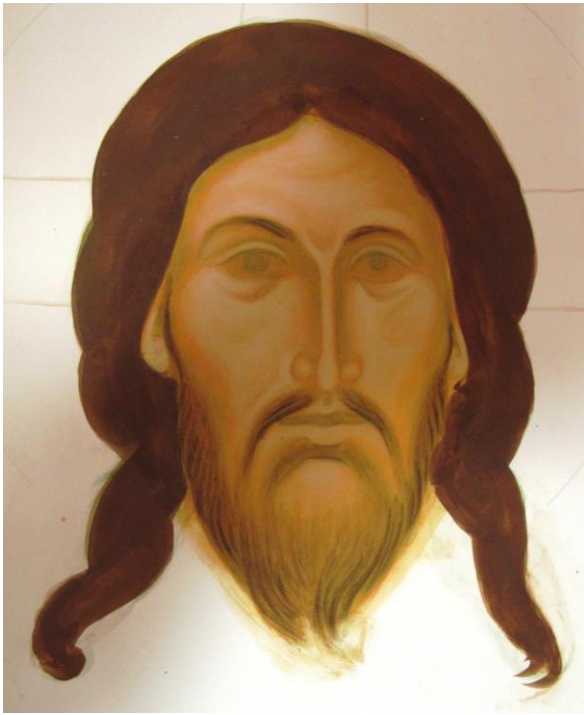
### **Third layer of highlights**

Repeat the process over a smaller area. Be careful to look closely at the high points. The paint has more white and is more opaque. Again, be careful to apply thinly, not too much water, feather out edges and build up in layers. If it looks too white, a glaze of French Havana or Italian Warm Ochre will warm it up.

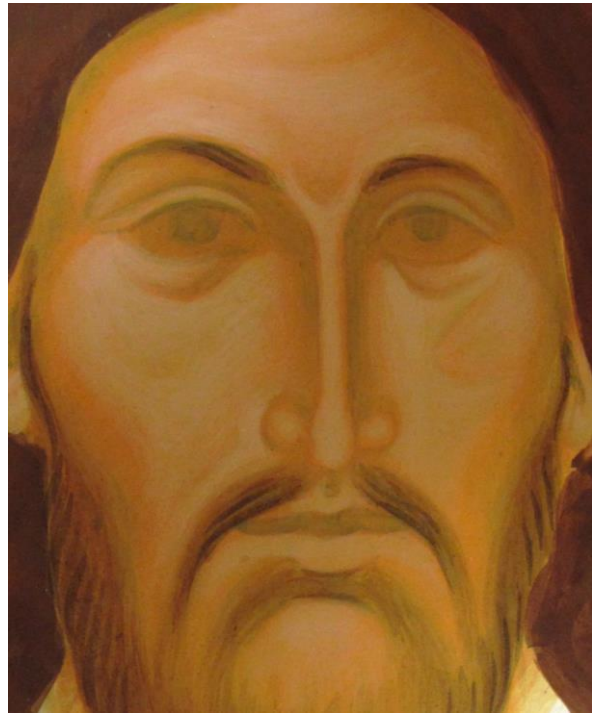


*Details showing highlights built up in layers*





Third stage of flesh highlights



Detail

### Rose tints and highlights

Hints of rose are applied to the lips (just the middle fuller part – leave shadows in the corners), cheeks, side and lower tip of the nose, crease of the upper eye, the lower part of chin and a triangular shape in the corner of the eye. Take care to apply in a thin wash blending with great care. Avoid thick layers and blend.

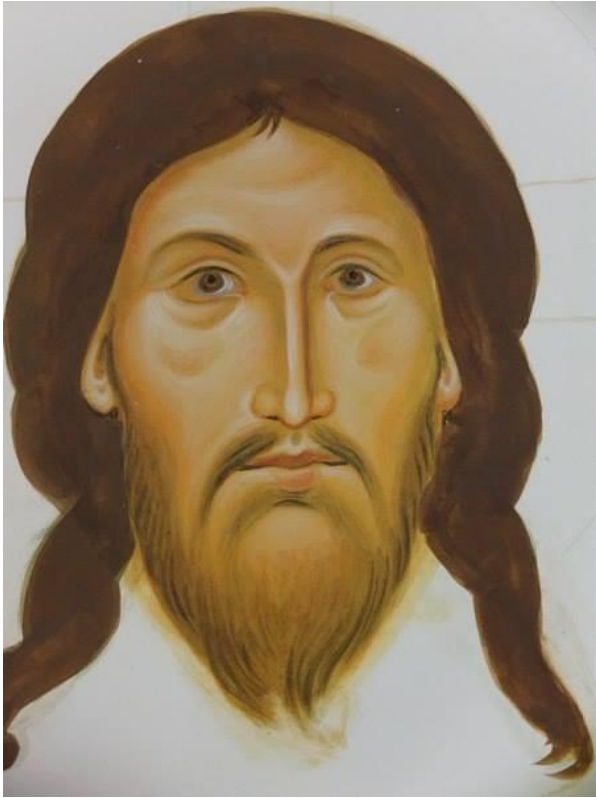
Rose tints can be applied as a wash at the points between shaded areas and highlights.

Options for the red are:

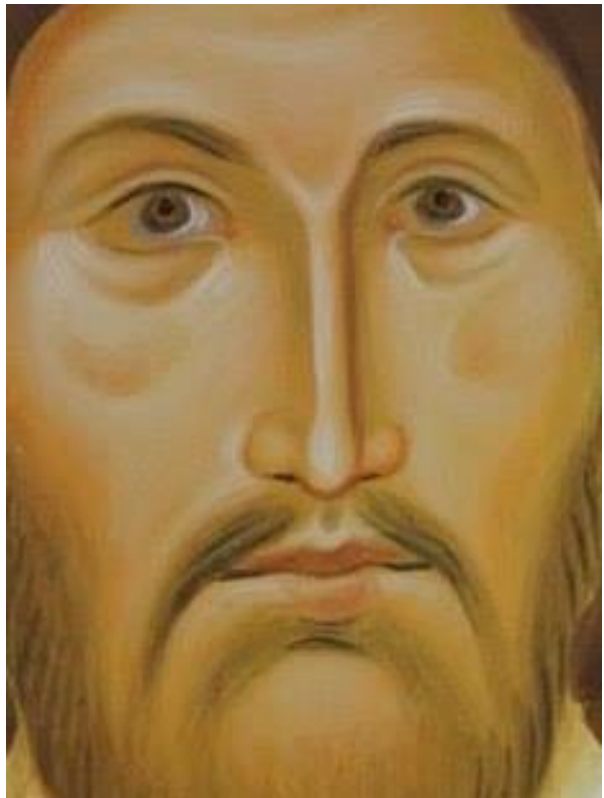
- a. The same mix for the membrane with a pinch of English Red Light
- b. Membrane mix and vermillion
- c. English Red Light with a bright Yellow Ochre.

### Eyes

Most of the eye whites are filled with the shadow tones and painted in two stages. The first is to mix raw umber and white – not using too much white or it becomes stark and opaque. Note the crescent shape of the eye and the grey appears only on one side of the eye – the side opposite the direction that the face is looking. Leave the other side of the eye in the underpainting. Then apply the white crescent highlights around the iris.



Final stage of highlights on face and hair including 'snow'



Detail

Ronnie Cruwys - Notes from Icon Diploma course days 19-21  
8<sup>th</sup> October 2014  
[www.icondiplomastudent.wordpress.com](http://www.icondiplomastudent.wordpress.com)