




FIG 11-11 Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*, c. 1482.

Tempera on a gesso ground on poplar panel, 80 x 123 1/4 in. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

Scala / Art Resource, NY.

 View a Closer Look on *Primavera* on [myartslab.com](https://myartslab.com)

 Watch artist Julie Green demonstrate the egg tempera process on [myartslab.com](https://myartslab.com)

Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (FIG 11-11), painted for a chamber next to the bedroom of his patron Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, is one of the greatest tempera paintings ever made. As a result of its restoration in 1978, we know a good deal about how it was painted. The support consists of eight poplar panels, arranged vertically and fastened by two horizontal strips of spruce. This support is covered with a gesso ground that hid the seams between the panels. Botticelli next outlined the trees and his human figures on the gesso and then painted the sky, laying blue tempera directly on the ground. The figures and trees were painted on an undercoat—white for the figures, black for the trees. The transparency of the drapery was achieved by layering thin yellow washes of transparent medium over the white undercoat. As many as 30 coats of color, transparent or opaque depending on the relative light or shadow of the area being painted, were required to create each figure.

Julie Green takes full advantage of the possibility of creating transparent washes of color with egg tempera in her painting *Don't Name Fish After Friends* (FIG 11-12), a painting she worked on for over a decade. It began as a portrait of a Hasidic Jewish man whose well-made and somewhat flamboyant clothing attracted Green's interest. Traces of herringbone can still be seen at the water's edge. The painting then underwent a dozen transformations, including a depiction of an armadillo crossing the basketball court across from Green's house in Norman, Oklahoma. It is as if, looking into the water, traces of these earlier paintings shimmer beneath the surface, all scraped away but leaving some mark behind.

The final painting memorializes the fate of the koi living in the pond behind her house—named after two close friends, Roger and Janet. Green dreamed one night that her one-eyed cat Rio had eaten Janet. When she awoke, the pond was in a shambles, its water lilies knocked over, and Janet was missing. Janet II was purchased, but the new Janet and Roger did not seem to get



along. A wire cover was put over the pond, and a year passed without incident, but when Green returned from a brief vacation, Janet II was discovered belly-up, probably succumbing to overfeeding by a neighbor. “With plans to paint a *memento mori*,” Green says, “I set departed Janet II on top of the compost pile and went off for paint supplies. Twenty minutes later I returned to find a lovely white fish bone, nothing else.” Today, Janet III swims happily beside the original Roger in the pond. The painting, of course, stands on its own even if the viewer lacks knowledge of its history, but its surface, and the layers of paint half visible beneath it, suggest precisely such a story.

## Oil Painting

Even as Botticelli was creating stunning effects by layering transparent washes of tempera on his canvases, painters in northern Europe were coming to the realization that similar effects could be both more readily and more effectively achieved in **oil paint**. Oil paint is a far more versatile medium than tempera. It can be blended on the painting surface to create a continuous scale of tones and hues, many of which, especially darker shades, were not possible before oil paint’s invention. As a result, the painter who uses oils can render the most subtle changes in light and achieve the most realistic three-dimensional effects, rivaling sculpture in this regard. Thinned with turpentine, oil paint can become almost transparent. Used directly from the tube, with no thinner at all, it can be molded and shaped to create three-dimensional surfaces, a technique referred to as *impasto*. Perhaps most important, because its binder is linseed oil, oil painting is slow to dry. Whereas with other painting media artists had to work quickly, with oil they could rework their images almost endlessly.


The ability to create such a sense of reality is a virtue of oil painting that makes the medium particularly suitable to the celebration of material things. By glazing the surface of the painting with thin films of transparent color, the artist creates a sense of luminous materiality. Light penetrates this glaze, bounces off the opaque underpainting beneath, and is reflected back up through the glaze (FIG 11-13). Painted objects thus seem to reflect light as if they were real, and the play of light through the painted surfaces gives them a sense of tangible presence.



FIG 11-12 Julie Green, *Don't Name Fish after Friends*, 1999–2009.

Egg tempera on panel, 24 x 18 in.

Courtesy of the artist.

 Watch a video about the process of grinding and making oil paint on [myartslab.com](http://myartslab.com)

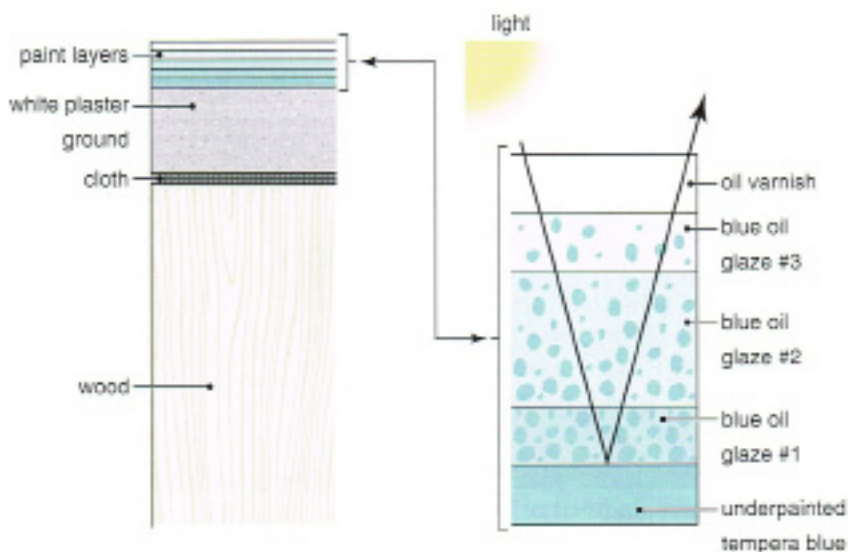


FIG 11-13 Diagram of a section of a fifteenth-century oil painting demonstrating the luminosity of the medium.