NOTHING CAN PREPARE you for meeting your first elephant; on foot in the hot, dry bush. Moments such as these get your heart racing and your adrenaline pumping. But more importantly for me as an artist, the details and feelings of the moment become ingrained in my subconscious.

I take lots of reference photos when I am in the field, supplemented with sketches and, where possible, colour studies. It’s very rare for an animal to be still long enough to be painted – unless it’s a lion during his daily 20 hours of sleep! But these personal experiences are of great value when I begin a new painting in the studio. They really help me bring the subject to life.

All artists are aware of the moments during a good painting when everything just appears to run on autopilot, and the picture feels like it is painting itself. That’s when I am back with the lions of the Savuti, and the elephants in the lush Okavango Delta… It’s almost as if time stands still as I relive my memories through the painting.

Jason Morgan shows us how to achieve detailed animal portraits – without painting every hair

Furry facts

- Fur is what gives the animal its form
- Study your reference photos and sketches closely – always paint fur in the direction of its growth
- Start dark and then go light
- Start loose then get more detailed

ABOVE African Leopard, oil on canvas, 71x51cm
This really is a mid-texture stage.

Remember: fur is made up of not just hair but also air. There is usually depth to it, so try to imagine what it would feel like as you paint it. This stage helps to create the appearance of depth and thickness to the fur – I frequently do it while Stage 2 is still wet. Use quite loose brushstrokes, especially when painting long fur, and try to detach yourself from thinking about where each stroke is going to go as you paint. If you think about it too much it can look regimented and unrealistic. Always paint in the direction of the fur’s growth.

This is the blocking-in stage. Paint the colour and tone deep down in the fur, the area you can see between all the surface hairs – it’s frequently a dark brown or grey. At this stage, don’t worry about details. Your aim should be to give the animal a solid structure. The details will come soon enough, and you will need something quite dark underneath them.

A FUR TUTORIAL

It might appear that I painstakingly brush in each individual hair. But that type of painting can become very tedious, so I concentrate on just giving the impression of detail such as fur and hair.

I use fast-drying Winsor & Newton Alkyd Oil paints – which consist of pigment in oil-modified alkyd resin – so there is minimum waiting time between drying stages. For more details, see my full palette on the following page.

Whether you paint tigers, gorillas or poodles, the following stages will help you depict realistic fur…

Concentrate on creating an impression of detail. Paint in the direction of fur growth.
Refine the fur, glazing where necessary and adding a touch more detail here and there – in the case of this tiger, whiskers and the white hairs on the surface of the coat.

**My tools and materials**

- **Winsor & Newton Griffin Alkyds Oils**
  - Burnt Sienna
  - Burnt Umber
  - Raw Sienna
  - Yellow Ochre
  - Naples Yellow
  - Ultramarine Blue
  - Lamp Black
  - Cadmium Yellow
  - Alizarin Crimson
- **Occasional colours**
  - Cadmium Orange
  - Cadmium Yellow Deep
  - Cerulean Blue
- **Acrylics (for underpainting)**
  - Burnt Sienna
  - Burnt Umber
- **Brushes**
  - A selection of hog hair brushes in various sizes
  - Synthetic rounds in various sizes
  - Riggers for the final detail work

Refine the fur, glazing where necessary and adding a touch more detail here and there – in the case of this tiger, whiskers and the white hairs on the surface of the coat.

**Jason Morgan** is a completely self-taught professional artist. He has exhibited in the Nature in Art museum, the National Exhibition of Wildlife Art, and also the Marwell International Wildlife Art Society annual exhibition. He is a signature member of Artists for Conservation and works with several conservation foundations.

For his paintings, prints, e-books and CDs, see www.onlineartdemos.co.uk.

**READER OFFER**

Save 25% on Jason’s CD and e-book, *Painting Wildlife in Oils*. Just email jason@onlineartdemos.co.uk and mention this feature in *Artists & Illustrators*. 

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4 Complete this stage after Stage 3 has fully dried (essential if you are going to glaze). Begin by knocking Stage 3 back with a fairly dark glaze (a thin wash of colour). This then automatically becomes mid-depth fur. Then, when it is still wet, add the final details using a rigger brush. It’s surprising how few details need to be applied over the other layers to give the illusion of fur.

5 My tools and materials

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