

Yellow Ochre

Therasia von Tux, Barony 1000 Eyes

Category: Alchemy
specific art form: pigment

Entry contents:

1 small clear plastic bag of yellow ochre pigment

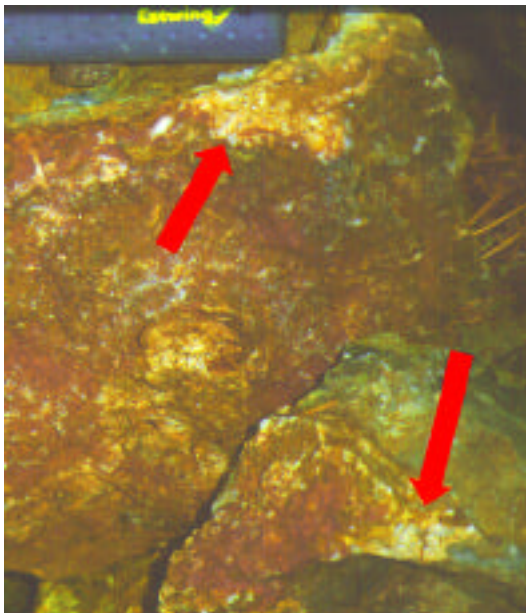
1 exemplar painted with the above yellow ochre

A copy of Cennini can be found with my "St. George" shield, in the Fine Arts category.

Cennini describes yellow ochre as a yellow pigment darker than lead yellow (i.e., gallerino). His instructions are to work it up (i.e., grind it) in water, and then paint with it. He describes at length how his father showed him a seam of ochres of several different hues in the mountains when he was young (pp. 27-28).

Biringuccio describes yellow ochre as being a mineral found around the entrances to mines.¹ In the same breath, he says it's used to flux stubborn ore for smelting. He also states that has little value except maybe to painters.

I was out hiking, which is always a thinly disguised rock hunting trip if you're me, when I stumbled onto some the sort of alteration one finds around hot



springs and fumaroles. Part of this area was a rather sheer cliff face, but a little ways up I could see a vein of iron oxides and oxyhydroxides (i.e., limonites) about a foot thick, with parallel streaks of bright red and yellow ochre, as well as some more brown and dark layers, all parallel to the walls of rock hosting the vein.

Well, you know you've been a scribe too long when you think what I was thinking right then: "wow! That's what Cennini was talking about!" I tried to climb up the face to get to the seam, but there were not enough foot and hand holds.²

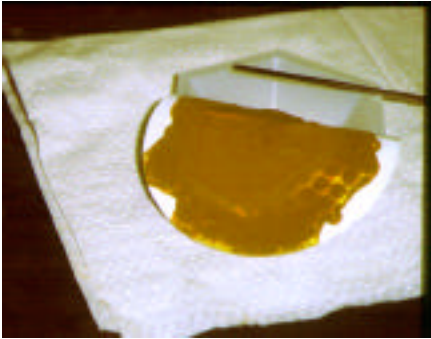
My next strategy was to find rocks and boulders that might have spalled off this cliff face, on the chance that one of them would have some ochre. The above boulder is one of the ones I found that fit the bill. The red ochre you see in the photo is a disappointment: when ground, small specks of black appear in the red. The yellow ochre, on the other hand, grinds

¹ Biringuccio, p. 116.

² I've revisited this location for many years now. Mountain climbers who climb on this mountain tell me that only the insane tackle the cliff face with the iron oxide seam.

up wonderfully. The arrows on the photo are pointing to a yellow ochre layer underneath the red, and this is the ochre you see here in the small plastic bag.. I've used a lot of it already. The ochre in the bag is all I have left (until my next trip to this location).

I grind most of my pigments wet, since this minimizes the rock dust hazard. Since the yellow ochre can stay wet for days, I usually help it along by filtering it.



My yellow ochre is mostly goethite (a mineral form of iron oxyhydroxide). I determined this using x-ray diffraction, which isn't the least bit period.

Included in this entry is a small exemplar of painting with my yellow ochre. The Groucho Marx face in the lower right hand is a fairly good portrait of my advisor at UC Davis.

filter paper with damp yellow ochre

Sources

Biringuccio, V., *The Pirotechnia*, trans. by Smith, C., and Gnudi, M., 1990, Dover Publications, 477 pp., ISBN 0486261344.

Cennini, C., *The Craftsman's Handbook*, trans. by Thompson, D. V., 1933, Yale University Press, 142 pp. (available as a Dover book)

Mayer, R., 1977, *The Artist's Handook (4th Ed.)*, Viking Press, NY.