

Basics of Oil Painting

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Safety Warnings

CAUTION:

1. Oil paint may contain toxic ingredients such as lead, cadmium, and cobalt. DO NOT ingest. Always wash hands after use.
2. Mediums such as alkyd products may be toxic. Avoid breathing in fumes and work in a well-ventilated area. Always wash hands after use.
3. Solvents such as turpentine and mineral spirits may be toxic. Avoid breathing in fumes and work in a well-ventilated area. Always wash hands after use.
4. Solvents such as turpentine and mineral spirits are extremely flammable. Do not smoke near these solvents. Dispose of used rags or paper towels in a metal can that cannot catch fire.
5. Oil paint may stay wet for up to 3 weeks. Dry your paintings in a safe place to avoid damaging them.
6. Oil paint, mediums, and solvents may stain clothes and skin. Wash immediately with solvent, and wash off the solvent with strong soap.

Introduction and History

Oil paint was first used sometime between the fifth and tenth centuries, but was not common until the fifteenth century. During the Middle Ages, oils became the most popular medium in the Western world. By the height of the Renaissance, oil paints had almost completely replaced egg tempera. Oil paint is so durable that it was used not only for artwork, but also to paint buildings or shields.

Early oil paintings were done on traditional supports such as wood or canvas. These supports

(the material to be painted on) are still the most common choices, but less traditional supports such as metal (for impasto) or beeswax (for glazing) have also become popular.

Oil paint is a medium that many artists enjoy for its flexibility, expressiveness, luminosity, and clarity of color. However, oil paint is different from many other types of paints and requires special training to use. Here are some key differences between oil paint and other paints:

1. Unlike watercolor and tempera paints, oil paint may be applied to the support very thick rather than in a single thin layer.

2. Unlike acrylic, watercolor, and tempera paints, oil paint may take between 3 hours and 3 weeks to dry, depending on the medium used and the thickness of the paint applied.

3. Unlike watercolor and tempera paints, oil paint dries with a natural sheen.

4. Unlike acrylic, watercolor, and tempera paints, oil paint does not "dry" as it is exposed to air and heat. Instead, the emulsifying oil (binder) in the paint oxidizes (chemically combines with oxygen, removing hydrogen). For this reason, only drying oils can be used to emulsify oil paint. Common options are linseed, poppy seed, walnut, and safflower oils. For this reason, oil paint is extremely durable and difficult to damage.

5. Unlike other paints, oil paint is not water-soluble and must be cleaned with a chemical solvent, which is toxic and flammable. Avoid breathing fumes and handle carefully.

6. Like all paints, oil paint is made by mixing pigment into a binder. Unlike other paints, oil can also be mixed with another medium to change its behavior. Most mediums used today use a chemical called alkyd, which thins the paint, shortens its drying time, and adds a sheen to the final painting.

Oil paint is manufactured from similar minerals and chemicals as other paints, but usually contains a purer concentration of pigment. Many artists still prefer mineral-based paints, but many have been phased out of production. While paints such as cobalt blue, lead white, and cadmium red are still made by some companies, they have lost popularity due to their toxicity. They have largely been replaced by synthetic colors such as phthalocyanine blue, or by safer mineral colors such as titanium white or alizarin crimson.

Basic Techniques

Due to the viscosity of oil paint, it can be applied in many ways. The most typical is by paintbrush, but one can also experiment with palette knives, rags, scratching tools, fingers, etc. This viscosity along with slow drying time makes oil paint ideal for experimentation and blending. Slow drying time also allows for a technique unique to oils called "wet-on-wet" painting. Also called "alla prima," wet-on-wet allows for blending for days, or even weeks, after the initial painting began. In order to paint wet-on-wet, one must use thick paint, which builds up a depth of layers and colors that cannot be achieved with other types of paints.

A basic rule of oil painting is "thick over thin," meaning that paint should be applied in thinner layers first and progressively thicker layers. This does not mean that one cannot paint in even layers; the rule simply ensures that the paint will dry evenly and not crack if thin paint is stretched over thick. When painting wet-on-wet, it is important to follow this rule, especially for impasto (painting with very thick paint in deep layers, allowing the paint to retain texture that is not flat).

After other layers of paint have dried, one can consider a technique called glazing. Glazing involves mixing paint in a ratio of at least 1:1 with medium and applying it lightly to the work. This allows painters to simply tint an area. This may embolden or dull the color, based on the artist's choice; but most importantly, it leaves a translucent layer that light can shine through, as if glowing, in a way that is unique to oils.

It is useful, though not required, to varnish a completed painting. Varnishes are typically made from dammar gum, a type of tree resin, dissolved in turpentine. These varnishes strengthen the durability of the painting and can be removed without harming the painting, which allows for better storage and cleaning.

Conclusion and Summary

Oil painting is a unique medium which many artists enjoy. It is extremely different from other painting media. It has advantages, such as flexibility and an expressive light-sensitive quality. It also has disadvantages, like safety concerns and impractical drying time. However, it is important to note that other painting media such as tempera have been almost completely replaced by oils.

Oil painting has specialized techniques that other painting media cannot mimic, such as wet-on-wet painting, impasto, and glazing. While these difficult techniques may be unfamiliar to painters of other media, they offer variety and a chance to try something new.

Reference List

1. Barry, Carolyn. "Earliest Oil Paintings Found in Famed Afghan Caves". National Geographic Society. 2013
2. Sciencemage.org, Science Magazine. 2008
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