



ACRYLIC PAINTS

~ WORKING PRACTICE

Many people find acrylics hard to use because they try to use them as a substitute for oil paints instead of as a medium in their own right with their own handling properties. Although they are often considered a very easy-to-use medium compared with oil paints this has unfortunately led to the idea that there are no technical restrictions on the use of acrylics. The following guidelines will help to ensure the best results when using acrylic paints. (All the advice assumes the use of artists copolymer emulsion colours rather than PVA based paints)

PAINT COMPOSITION

Acrylic paints contain a lot of water. In a good acrylic medium the resin content can be anything from 40 to 60%. This means that approximately half of the volume of the paint is lost on drying. A very thick impasto can develop cracks on drying. While this does not necessarily structurally weaken the paint it does allow dirt to penetrate if it is left unprotected.

The alkalinity of acrylic mediums means that some pigments are incompatible as they can react with the medium. One notable example is Prussian Blue. With this pigment, however, major manufacturers have overcome the problem by first applying a special coating to the pigment particles before mixing with the medium. Many metallic powders will tarnish badly if left in a wet acrylic medium.

Mixing other substances into acrylic paints or mediums may also cause problems of reaction or reduce the permanence of the paint. An excess of solid matter which reduces the binding power of the paint or medium may lead to flaking or disintegration of the paint film.

PRIMING

Acrylics can be painted onto many things but they do not adhere permanently to shiny impervious surfaces such as glass, formica, polished metal, enamel or oily surfaces (including oil paint). They can be applied directly to absorbent and textured surfaces such as paper and canvas but to ensure the best adhesion a priming coat of acrylic primer or acrylic gesso primer is recommended. If a transparent layer is required apply a coat of acrylic medium.

DRYING

Acrylic mediums will generally look milky when wet, only turning clear when they are dry. If the drying process is disturbed, e.g. by brushing into the medium when almost dry, this can cause a disruption which leaves the film cloudy when dry. It is best to allow it to dry and then apply another coat. For the same reason never work back into a drying varnish.

A cloudy film can also be the result of using too thick a layer which dries faster on the outside, trapping moisture which cannot be released. An impasto of 5mm can take between 2 and 5 days to dry. It is better where possible to build up such thicknesses in more than one layer.

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~ WORKING PRACTICE (continued)

The use of a retarder can increase the drying time by up to 25 or 30% but using excessive amounts of retarder can stop the paint from drying completely. Do not add more than 20% retarder. Other ways of slowing down the drying time are to spray the surface of the paint with water at regular intervals or to paint into a thick layer of wet gel medium.

THINNING PAINT

Acrylic paint can be thinned extensively with water, but in order to keep the binding strength and flexibility it is better to dilute by no more than 50%. It can also be thinned by using a fluid acrylic medium: if medium and water are used 1:1 a very liquid paint can be made. If the paint is thinned further it should be used on a support with a good absorbent surface, such as paper or raw canvas, so that the paint can penetrate and bind well. Using a large amount of matt mediums can change the tonal value of colours.

FLEXIBILITY

Acrylics become less flexible and more brittle when very cool. It is best not to store them in very low temperatures and not to roll or unroll acrylic paintings at temperatures less than 10 degrees C. Modelling pastes are often based on marble dust and may be brittle in thick layers. When using them on flexible surfaces mix with 50% gel medium to increase the flexibility.

Being thermoplastic, acrylics are sensitive to pressure at higher temperatures and can stick to other surfaces. Avoid leaning them against surfaces and particularly other pictures. A varnish layer using a solvent based acrylic varnish can help to protect against this problem.

VARNISHING

Acrylic paints have a porous structure which will hold dirt. Warm conditions will also encourage dirt to stick to the surface. For these reasons it is best to apply a varnish to protect the work if it will not be framed behind glass.

If a matt finish is required a first varnish layer using a gloss varnish is recommended to even out any variations in the gloss of the paint finish. A second layer using a matt varnish can then be applied.

COVERAGE

A rough estimate of coverage for a good acrylic is approximately 5 to 8 square metres per litre brushed onto a smooth surface. This will be dependent on absorbency, thickness of application and drying time.

For more information
about acrylic paints we recommend reading
"The Painters Handbook" by Mark Gottsegen

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