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ASK THE EXPERTS

## Studio Craft: Cheating with Gouache



Gouache sketches executed in a variety of techniques

**Ask the Experts: “We have to use gouache for a class assignment and I can’t get it to work right. The colors I mix don’t look the same on paper, and I hate that I can’t paint over my mistakes. A friend told me about a cheat where you mix the paint with glue to make it work better. Does this work, and would that really be cheating?”**

**A:** Gouache can be a challenging medium for artists accustomed to easy over-painting in acrylics, as well as oil painters used to suave blending. Even experienced watercolorists are sometimes mystified at first by the tendency of gouache to dry a slightly different shade from its wet appearance. After getting used to the personality of this rich and expressive medium, those unique properties become desirable advantages, but if you need it to work by Monday morning, there probably isn’t enough time to master the peculiarities of the medium.

Whether using something other than water with gouache amounts to “cheating” or violates the guidelines of the assignment is something only your instructor can decide. Using glue with gouache is a practice that persists in art schools where desperate

students are willing to try anything to finish an assignment on time.

### **PVA glue:**

The art school “cheat” described by your friend involves mixing colors with PVA glue as a medium. This makes gouache into a “poor-man’s vinyl emulsion”, altering its performance and appearance. While some will use any household or school glue to get the job done, artists concerned about permanence will want to use high-quality, “archival” PVA adhesive.

### **How it works:**

Gouache has a matte surface with lightly bound pigment. PVA provides a strong binder, enveloping pigment and allowing light to penetrate and reflect off the paint. This change also stabilizes the paint appearance as it transitions from wet to dry, so that it dries closer to the way it looks on the palette.

PVA seals each layer as it dries and resists re-wetting. This reduces intermixing, and isolates each layer so darker colors underneath don’t show through top layers.

This quick fix changes the paint appearance significantly. An experienced instructor (who may have used this trick themselves) might spot the telltale signs and grade accordingly. If the goal of the assignment is to master the natural properties of gouache, adding PVA is definitely circumventing the lesson. We think it’s a shame to avoid the initial adjustment period, because the characteristic personality of the medium is well worth going through a brief period of discomfort, but ultimately each artist needs to decide for themselves what the situation requires.