

HANDCRAFTED
EST
1949
BROOKLYN·NY

Utrecht
ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Oil on Untreated Panel



Image: Detail of 17th c. painting on panel with cracking and some paint loss

Ask the Experts: “I did a series of paintings in oil on plywood panels last year. Now that they are dry, I am noticing some cracks appearing. I used oil paint directly on the wood, no gesso or anything because I like the look of wood grain. Is there something wrong with the panels, or the paint? Can I fix it or fill in the cracks with something like wax medium?”

A: Oil paint applied to wooden panels will normally exhibit some cracking as the grain pattern persists through the paint. Especially if there is no transitional layer like paper, fabric or some type of priming, it's just something that happens. Depending on the paint thickness and formula, it may not happen immediately, but it should be expected to develop eventually. So, the fact that oil paint cracked when applied directly to unsealed wood would not indicate that there is a defect in the panels themselves.

Actually, it has been theorized that the development of canvas as a painting support was driven by the effort to mitigate the problem of paint cracking on wooden supports. Fabric was glued to panels to mask wood grain which caused paint to crack through expansion and contraction. Eventually, artists discovered that glue-impregnated fabric alone would provide a good painting support, particularly in the damp, humid environment of

Venice where it is believed that canvas painting supports were first widely used.

Another potential problem that can result from working in oil directly on unsized/unprimed wood or hardboard panel supports is excessive absorption of the paint vehicle. A painting ground needs to be somewhat absorbent in order to be fully receptive to the paint, but if too much oil is wicked away, the remaining paint can be rendered underbound and weak with a dull, lackluster finish. When a weak paint film dries, it can crack, especially if the underlying support flexes or expands.

Unfortunately, we can't responsibly recommend a remedy or repair technique, because this would be a conservation treatment. Anything applied over top could potentially cause paint to detach, and would do nothing to improve overall durability. Only a qualified professional should carry out a repair on a picture in this condition. Especially if the paint appears to have retained adhesive power and no pieces have been lost, the best course of action would probably be to leave the picture in its current condition and simply take steps to preserve it.

Going forward, if you wish to continue to incorporate the wood grain into your images, you could apply a small amount of alkyd-based painting medium to reduce absorbency. This would leave the natural appearance of the wood while reducing uptake of the paint vehicle and enhancing adhesion. Rub a very small amount in with a cloth, while wearing nitrile gloves. Just the minimum amount will help reduce thirstiness. You may still eventually see some cracking, but the paint should keep its normal strength and adhesive power, and as a result, cracking may be reduced.