

Studio Craft: Winter in the Studio



Image: Egon Scheile, Houses in Winter (View from the studio) 1907

Ask the Experts: “Winter is fast approaching, and I’m planning the weeks ahead in a new studio that gets chilly at night. What steps do I need to take in order to make sure my artwork and art supplies make it through the cold season?”

A: Depending on the nature of your work, colder studio conditions can be a blessing or a curse. Temperature and humidity can have a significant impact on how some materials behave.

Oil paints can still be used in cold temperatures, but drying times are much longer. This may be an advantage for artists who enjoy a long “open” time when paint can be manipulated, but this also means that paintings may not be ready to varnish for months longer than in warmer conditions.

If temperatures will drop below 50°F overnight, acrylic paints and primers may not achieve full integrity on the canvas. Because acrylics cure best at moderate temperatures, it’s important to keep the studio environment above this temperature, which is for most acrylics the “minimum film forming temperature”. Even after paint has dried to the touch, it’s important to maintain this temperature through the curing process. Determine whether an electric studio light can be left on

safely in the area where paintings are curing; even an increase of just a few degrees may be all that is needed to ensure that the paint or primer reaches full strength.

In addition to falling temperatures, the amount of moisture in the air usually drops in the winter. Low humidity at moderate indoor temperatures induces faster drying in water-based mediums. Watercolors tend to dry faster when the heat is on indoors, facilitating layered techniques. Acrylic paints may skin over more quickly on the palette and canvas; use a spray bottle of water to apply a light mist to the palette as needed. This can also be used to moisten the canvas surface to make paints flow better on a dry surface.

Varnish is another product which can be affected by seasonal changes in temperature and humidity. Lower temperatures can lengthen the amount of time it takes for varnish to dry, so this should be considered before coating finished artwork. Dry air tends to promote dust, so freshly painted and varnished surfaces need extra protection until the surface is no longer soft or tacky.

An easel that inclines slightly forward can be positioned so that dust doesn’t settle directly on a painting. Smaller works can also be placed inside a lidded cardboard box while drying. One benefit to dry interior air, however, is that varnished and painted surfaces generally dry tack-free, unlike in humid conditions which can lead to a sticky finish.

Studio ventilation is a challenge any time of year. In the winter, when doors and windows are closed, it’s especially important to provide adequate air movement to eliminate fumes. For small quantities of materials requiring ventilation, exhaust fans and portable ducts can be used to direct air out. If necessary, postpone use of materials requiring heavy ventilation when extreme cold prevents opening doors and windows.

If the area where materials are stored gets very cold, it may be necessary to relocate vulnerable items. Oil paints and thinners can tolerate low temperatures, as can dry media, unprimed fabric and paper. Water-based products, however, may suffer diminished quality or even spoilage if allowed to freeze. Acrylic paints and mediums that have frozen can separate and develop a cheese-like, clotted texture. Acrylic-primed canvas, glues and tapes can also be harmed by exposure to freezing temperatures, becoming brittle or cracking.

Temperature-sensitive materials that have gotten cold, but not frozen, should be brought back to moderate indoor temperatures before use. Non-acrylic inks and paints that have separated may be stirred if separated; if a normal consistency can be achieved, they are likely fine to use.

Even in cold temperatures, oil-saturated rags, steel wool and gloves can still generate enough heat through oxidation to combust, if collected in sufficient quantity. These need to be kept in a lidded metal container with water, and removed from the studio daily, year round.

Use extreme caution when space heaters are used in the studio. Always read and follow safety instructions on the package. Keep flammable materials safely away from any source of ignition.

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