



## Utrecht Art Supplies

### What Not to Use as Varnish



**Ask the Expert:** "Lately I've been finishing my oil paintings with a coat of alkyd medium to give a shiny finish. My friend says this might not be a good idea. If I can coat an acrylic painting with gloss medium, what's the problem with using alkyd medium on oils?"

**A:** Artists sometimes make the mistake of top-coating a painting with a medium or other material which gives a good appearance in the short term, but which causes problems later. Alkyd-based painting mediums are great for their intended purpose, but alkyds don't meet the requirements of a picture varnish.

**A picture varnish should satisfy these functions:**

- Permanently neutral in color and optically clear
- Impart a unified surface finish that does not interfere with viewing, lighting and installation
- Protects paint surface from damage due to casual contact and light dusting; prevents dust and contaminants from penetrating porous paint

- Removable with light solvents and gentle manipulation (should not require strong solvents or hard scrubbing)
- Should not fuse with, soften or dissolve completely dry paint
- Resin content should be documented to aid in later cleaning and care

#### Alkyd

Alkyd-based painting mediums are great for improving paint flow, imparting gloss, increasing transparency, and promoting a tough, flexible paint film, but as a top-coat, they aren't reversible with even very harsh solvents. A coat of alkyd is permanent, for better or worse. Also, some alkyd mediums impart harsh glare, making it difficult to install and light the finished work.

#### Wax

Wax is sometimes used as a top-coat over paintings, but it has some significant shortcomings for this application. Wax remains soft indefinitely, so it doesn't impart protection against mechanical damage from handling and casual contact. Wax also tends to attract and hold dust. Cold wax medium has an attractive appearance when first applied, especially when buffed to a shine, but can later become lackluster.

#### Oils

Some artists finish each oil painting by rubbing in a coat of drying oil (linseed, safflower, stand) to "quench" dry-looking passages, unify surface sheen and impart gloss. This practice was more widespread in the 19<sup>th</sup> c before the introduction of synthetic resins, at a time when theories about "old master" techniques were based more on a preference for dark, yellow paintings than on actual documentation. Coating the finished picture with oil causes paint to absorb the

material, resulting in a very "fat" film which can darken. Unfortunately, an oil coating is very difficult (often impossible) to remove.

### **Urethane**

A reputation as a tough utility coating tempts artists to try hardware store urethane as a varnish for finished acrylic paintings, sometimes with disappointing results. Urethane doesn't always adhere well to acrylics, and isn't intended to meet standards of stability or longevity necessary for permanent art. A urethane coating might blister or peel, and may not yield a completely clear coating.

### **Shellac**

Top quality white shellac does have some legitimate applications in the artist's studio, but varnishing oil paintings isn't among them. Shellac is too brittle for use as a picture varnish, and may crackle or flake off.

### **What You Should Use**

Solvent-borne, synthetic resin products are generally the best choice for varnishing oil, alkyd and acrylic paintings. Avoid layering dissimilar varnishes. When possible, try to record the resin type or brand used so conservation specialists will know how best to treat your artwork as it ages.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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