



## Utrecht Art Supplies

### Varnish: temporary or permanent



**Ask the Expert: "I've read that artists are supposed to use removable varnishes on paintings. So, if art is supposed to be permanent, why not use a permanent (non-removable) varnish? Wouldn't that seal in the paint and protect it?"**

A: A non-removable varnish would not only seal in the paint, but also any defects that might develop over time. Non-removable varnishes might also contain ingredients that can adversely affect paintings.

In the past, before the introduction of synthetic resin solution varnishes, paintings were often coated with oil-resin mixtures that could not be removed. As these paintings aged and darkened, conservation specialists found that the boiled oil coatings were insoluble, making them very challenging to remove. Historical oil-resin varnishes and those made from tree

exudate gums like damar and mastic also become less soluble over time, requiring progressively stronger treatments in antique age.

Varnishes sold as clear top coats for hardware and craft applications, similar to the oil-resin varnishes they replaced, are often only removable with strong solvents which could have a destructive effect on paint beneath. In some cases, the carrier solvent in the varnish itself can be strong enough to fuse with the paint, making removal particularly problematic. For these reasons, it's best to reserve this type of varnish (lacquers and craft clear coats) for display or exterior purposes, where weather resistance is more important than long-term permanence, and future conservation treatments are not an issue.

Products sold as artist's picture varnish are formulated to be safe for completely dry paintings, and removable with light-duty solvents. The two main types are Picture Varnish and Retouch Varnish. Some products can be used as both- check package label for directions.

Retouch Varnish is intended for short-term use on recently executed, touch-dry oil

paintings that are too fresh for a heavy varnish. Some artists routinely remove retouch varnish in-studio, but not every painter is comfortable with this procedure. If the retouch product is of a type that is compatible with a final varnish, the retouch layer can usually be left in place and top-coated. The original retouch layer will re-wet and incorporate into the final picture varnish. When doing so, make sure to select a picture varnish that has the same solvent and resin content as the retouch layer.

All picture varnishes suitable for permanent art should be removable with solvents that will not attack fully cured paint. In the event that a defect develops in the paint layer (e.g. bloom or haze), or the varnish can't be cleaned due to smoke damage, conservation specialists may determine that the best course of action is to remove the varnish and re-apply. If the top coat is a lacquer-type product that will only yield to very powerful solvents, the paint beneath could be affected. Properly applied varnishes soluble in odorless mineral spirits are usually easy to remove without damaging paint, and can sometimes even be removed by the artist in-studio.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

Intended for reference only. Observe all package instructions. Dick Blick Holdings/Utrecht Art Supplies is not responsible for any damage to personal property that may result from use of the information presented herein. © Copyright 2018 Dick Blick Holdings Inc. All rights reserved.