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ASK THE EXPERTS

Product Profiles: Supports, Grounds and Paint Appearance

Ask the Experts: “On several of my recent paintings, the colors and textures seem to be changing, and I started to wonder, what effects can the canvas and gesso have on the paint?”

A: At the easel, the artist’s focus is mainly on the paint itself, but the painting support and ground can strongly influence the appearance and performance of colors and mediums. The physical properties of the foundation materials affect the paint both directly and indirectly, immediately and as the painting ages.



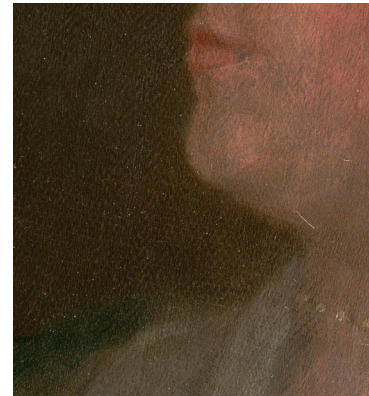
Partially constructed canvas panel with sized fabric over hardboard core, waiting to receive a ground

Anatomy of a painting:

Underneath the paint and varnish, there are several layers of material: the **Support**, **Sizing** and **Ground**. The **painting support** is the substrate which provides physical structure for the work of art, such as paper, panel or canvas. A good support stays flat and resists shrinkage and expansion to minimize stress on the paint as it ages. The support should promote a long-term bond with all layers from sizing to varnish. In the future, the paint may lose flexibility and change physical

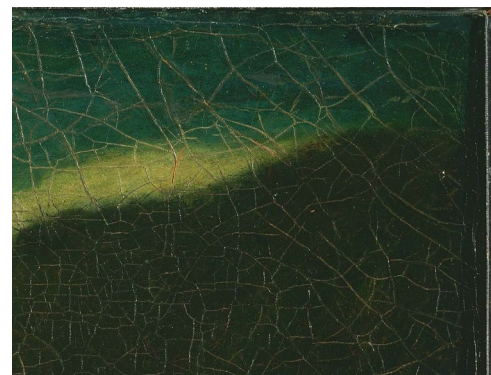
properties, so the preservation of adhesion is critical to ensuring durability.

How the support affects painting appearance: A fabric painting support imparts an attractive weave texture that also helps the paint to adhere and resist detachment as it ages. Canvas should be selected in a weight that is correct for the scale of the painting. When a canvas of adequate weight is stretched tightly, it provides a flat surface that doesn’t stress paint by flexing or sagging.



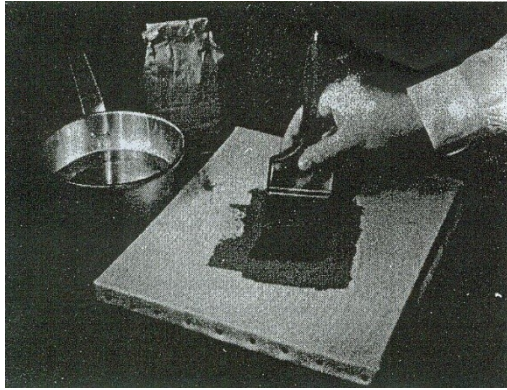
Detail, portrait by Hogarth showing prominent texture from canvas weave

Fabric that is too light may sag or move under paint, causing cracking or flaking. Canvas with a porous weave may take a lot of sizing and primer to close holes and prevent paint from passing through to the back.



Corner of an 1880 painting by Ryder showing patterns of diagonal cracks in the direction of canvas tension

Sizing is a binder, glue or starch which is applied directly to the support, before the ground, or as part of a single-step primer. (Utrecht Acrylic Gesso functions as sizing and primer in one product.) Sizing improves the ability of the support to receive and retain the painting ground, isolates the two layers, and imparts desirable physical properties to the support.



Application of rabbit skin glue (a protein sizing) to stretched canvas
(Image: Vintage Utrecht Linens catalog)

How sizing affects the appearance of a painting:

Sizing improves the support surface by providing uniform texture and absorbency from corner to corner. This promotes durable, strong attachment with the painting ground. Without a sizing, the painting ground might have an irregular appearance, too smooth or rough in some passages, or might not attach as well as it should. Some kinds of sizing can make fabric painting supports more rigid so the painting surface stays flat even if the canvas doesn't remain tightly stretched.

Oil-based paint and primer vehicles can have a destructive effect when they come in direct contact with canvas, causing it to darken and lose strength. Sizing preserves canvas by preventing this interaction. Sizing also closes small spaces in the weave network of fabric so that primer and paint don't pass through to the back.

Some types of sizing prevent stain compounds in panels from discoloring water-based primers. Sizing also prevents panels from absorbing too much vehicle from primer and paint. An absorbent panel may not be subject to damage from oils like canvas, but an unsized panel can soak up too much oil from paint or primer, leaving color under-bound, weak or dull-looking.

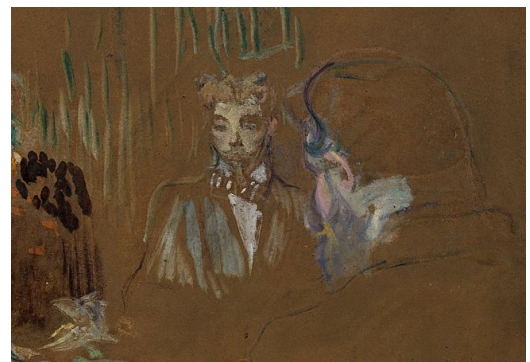
The Painting Ground is a coating on the support which provides a stable layer to receive and retain paint. The painting ground may be acrylic, oil-based or a traditional glue/chalk combination, depending on the support materials. A painting ground needs to resist shrinkage and expansion in order to reduce stress on paint. The ground should absorb an appropriate amount of paint vehicle to promote strong adhesion, without rendering the paint under-bound. The ground should have a color which supports the artist's pictorial objectives.



1900 painting by John William Waterhouse shows the reflective white ground supporting bright jewel tones

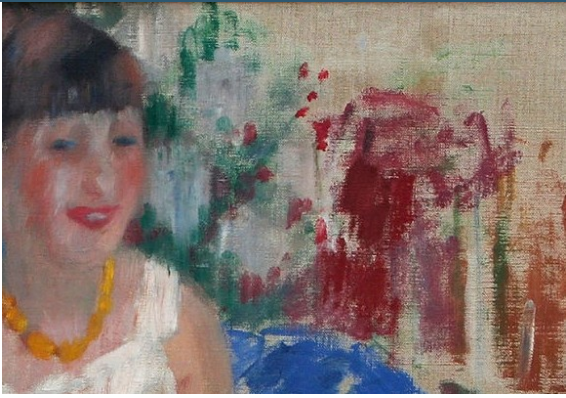
How the painting ground affects the appearance of the painting:

The color, texture and absorbency of a ground strongly influence the physical and optical properties of a painting. Depending on whether the ground will be visible in the final work of art, it may either be a neutral color that is easily covered, or one that interacts harmoniously with the palette. A light-colored, reflective ground can be used to emphasize brushstrokes in transparent or translucent applications, and can help achieve bright whites and light tints.



1898 painting by Toulouse-Lautrec incorporating the dark color of the support itself in the image

Mid-toned and dark grounds create immediate contrast with the first applications of color. In traditional, indirect paintings, this property of dark grounds was leveraged to establish strong, bright whites in flesh tones and reflections.



Detail from a 1912 painting by Belgian artist Rik Wouters with distinctly broken, dragged brushstrokes on an absorbent ground

Highly absorbent grounds take up a portion of the vehicle in the first layers of paint. By reducing the amount of vehicle, an absorbent ground makes brushstrokes drag and break, creating a lively texture. Paint may dry to the touch more quickly as well. Oil paint made more lean by an absorbent ground may look darker or more dry while curing, because the pigment may not be as thickly enveloped in oil as it was on the palette. Many artists choose to incorporate the dry appearance into their artwork; this effect can be controlled by using additional painting medium.



Detail from a 1946 painting by Arshile Gorky with fluid, unbroken brush movement over a resistant ground

A less absorbent, more resistant ground facilitates fast, fluid brush movement. Paint applied on this type of ground spreads more thinly, and a loaded brush travels farther without replenishing. The first layer of color on a resistant ground retains more vehicle, and so may take longer to dry and may keep its wet appearance longer.

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