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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Painting on Raw Canvas?



Ask the Experts: "I got some Belgian linen to paint on, and it seems such a shame to just cover up that pretty, natural fabric with gesso! Is there any way I can just paint right on the linen and let the color show through?"

A: It is possible to incorporate the bare support material (in this case, linen) into the painting as a color or texture element, but in order to ensure durable results, there are some steps you should take first.

If you will be using oil paint, a sizing or "clear gesso" should be applied to isolate the paint from the support. Drying oils can have a destructive effect on unprotected fabric or paper, and raw fabric that has been in direct contact with linseed oil can discolor and become brittle.

Another potential consequence of painting directly on uncoated fabric is loss of binding strength of the paint. Unsealed fabric can absorb too much paint binder, and when underbound paint dries, it can look dull, fail to resist cracking, and lack adhesive power.

Treating fabric painting supports with Gloss or Matte Acrylic Medium or Acrylic Sizing will protect canvas fibers while allowing the canvas color and texture to show through. Acrylic sizing and Medium are not, strictly speaking, painting grounds, but they do offer adequate texture and absorbency for thin-to-moderate paint layers. For heavier painting techniques, products sold as "clear gesso" offer performance closer to traditional acrylic primers without obscuring canvas color and texture.

If you will be painting with acrylics, direct contact between paint and canvas isn't a concern like it is with oils, but there are good reasons to apply acrylic sizing prior to painting on bare cloth. It takes more paint to cover and fill pores on bare canvas than when it has been sized. Also, coating the canvas makes cleaning and maintaining finished art much easier than if bare fabric is exposed to dust and dirt.

Sizing also stiffens canvas, helping maintain a flat plane to reduce sagging and movement under the paint. An unsized canvas that is heavily laden with thick paint can shrink irregularly, leading to wrinkles, and fabric can later sag.

A thorough coating of clear acrylic can help offset most potential issues while preserving the attractive natural look of good canvas. The "clear gesso" approach offers most essential benefits of traditional primers, making it possible to let the support show through as a featured visual element without sacrificing durability.