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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Essence on Paper



Image: "Three Dancers" Degas, 1872-74

Essence should be used on paper or porous board, supports with a permeable weave which can hold this light, underbound paint; applications should be thin, like watercolor or gouache. Thick layers may powder off or flake. Essence lacks sufficient binder for use on canvas, panel and other typical oil painting supports.

As with any technique involving solvents, painting in essence requires adequate ventilation, and should only be used with appropriate protective measures, away from flame or sources of ignition.

Ask the Experts: "I have seen "essence on paper" listed as the medium on works by Degas. What is "essence"? Is it a type of paint?"

A: "Essence" refers to oil paint that has been deliberately underbound and thinned heavily with solvents. "Peinture à l'essence" is not very common today, but several key Impressionists favored this technique because it offered the immediacy of watercolor and gouache, while allowing the artist to avoid the cockling and saturation caused by water-based media.

Oil paint is not normally considered suitable for direct use on paper because drying oils can induce darkening and embrittlement. In order to prepare oil paints for use as essence, the artist typically deposits the color on an absorbent material like blotter paper and allows the heavy stock to wick away a large portion of vehicle. The oil-starved paint is gathered up and mixed with solvent like turpentine for use on paper. The modified paint can be further thinned to a very light wash, as thin as watercolor. Essence sets up to a semi-solid consistency very quickly, an advantage for mixed techniques with drawing media. Depending on the solvent used, wax-based colored pencils can soften and intermix with this interesting medium. Graphite, charcoal and pastel are also natural pairings with essence.