



Utrecht Art Supplies

Ask the Expert: Stretched Canvas and Cracking

Ask the Expert: "I recently read online that all canvases can be prone to cracking, and that we should all be painting on panels to avoid this. If this is true, why do so many artists still use stretched canvas?"



Yes, it's true that all paintings on canvas can be expected to exhibit some degree of cracking, at least in antique age. Whether cracking is merely cosmetic or more serious depends on craftsmanship, display conditions and care over time.

Cracking results when movement or dimensional changes exceed the flexibility of the paint film and primer. ('Crazing' has a similar appearance to cracking, but is caused by movement between fresh paint layers during drying.) Most paintings will eventually show subtle cracking when paint becomes brittle with age.

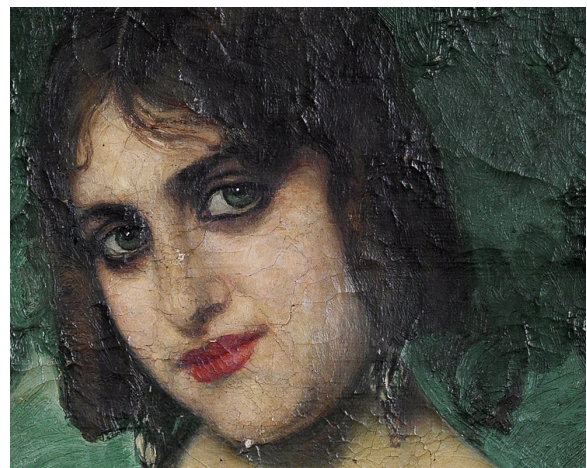
Stretched canvas has earned broad preference among the majority of painters because it offers some important advantages: cost, weight, ease of handling and transport, and tradition.

Originally, canvas painting supports were introduced to overcome problems with wooden panels like swelling and cracking in a humid environment. Stretched canvas also gave an

important alternative to painting in fresco on damp walls, and allowed artists to create monumental works in-studio instead of working on site.

Panels do offer excellent stability, but they can add significant weight, limiting overall scale of artwork and making installation challenging. Panel materials can also be vulnerable to corner and edge damage.

When cracks do appear, if they are subtle and each "tile" of paint remains attached to the support, it may be difficult to even spot any evidence of failure. Some paintings, however, develop serious cracks as a result of poor craftsmanship, improper use of mediums or bad handling. Colors with higher solid-to-vehicle ratio are usually less prone to shrinkage than "fat" colors high in oil, so dark passages with pigments like lamp black might show more pronounced cracking than passages in dense white.



This 1917 portrait by José Pinazo Martínez exhibits extreme cracking in dark passages, probably where pigment to oil ratio was low.

Honeycomb aluminum panels offer excellent stability and are very lightweight, but they are also costly and have to be custom-cut outside the studio. Also, artists who favor traditional materials may not want to use a distinctly modern product.



Careful selection of materials and good craftsmanship are essential in achieving durable results with stretched canvas. A well-prepared, heavy canvas offers much better support for paint than a lightweight, minimally primed fabric. It's important to choose fabric with sufficient weight for a large-scale canvas. Sizing and priming also have important roles in minimizing movement and dimensional changes. Sizing imparts stiffness, helping canvas maintain a flat surface after initial tension on the stretcher has relaxed. Sizing helps fill pores in the weave and minimizes shrinkage.

Ultimately, each artist must decide based on their own standards and objectives whether stretched canvas meets the requirements of their work. Modern sizings and primings along with top quality fabrics make it easier now than in any time in history to achieve permanent results with stretched canvas. Most painters are willing and able to manage the potential vulnerability of fabric supports in order to enjoy the advantages of canvas: light weight, portability, ease of preparation and overall excellent performance throughout the history of the craft.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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