



Utrecht Art Supplies Risks of Cleaning a Painting



Cleaning an antique or valuable painting should only be done by a trained professional

Ask the Expert: "I have a painting that needs cleaned. What are the risks if I do it myself, and how can I be 100% sure not to damage it?"

A: It's fairly common for painters to occasionally remove varnish from their own work, in preparation to alter or rework a piece or to replace an earlier varnish application. Most artists consider any work done on a piece in the artist's studio- including varnish removal- a legitimate part of the painting process. Unless you're a trained restorer or conservation specialist, however, there's no way to clean a painting without some risk involved. Contact with solvents, physical abrasion and even handling artwork can lead to damage.

How risky it might be to attempt cleaning by yourself depends on how recently the painting was executed, whether it's your own work, how much you know about the materials used and the degree of skill, time and care you can devote to the effort. We think it's a bad idea for artists or untrained collectors to attempt to clean any work other than their own, especially valuable or antique paintings. In calculating risk it's very

important to consider the value of the art in its pre-cleaned condition, because there's a significant chance an expert would consider value diminished if appearance or durability is impacted.

If in-studio cleaning is the best (or only) option, the first step in reducing the risk of damage when handling a painting is to plan your move. Clear the path to the area where you'll be working, and have a work space ready so you can just put the painting down rather than having to set it down and pick it up multiple times.

Arrange for help moving large or awkward pieces. Never allow a stretched canvas to lean into another object to avoid stretched and distorted fabric or cracked paint.

Extreme care should be taken in removing a canvas from a frame. Especially if tools are involved, paint can get scratched and canvas can be torn. If tools are necessary for the task, use stiff cardboard to cover any vulnerable paint or canvas until the work is done. Before pulling the painting free, look for any areas where paint may have stuck to the inside of the frame. If it's apparent the piece can't be pulled out cleanly, it's probably a good idea to stop until the stuck paint can be addressed.

Most of the time, varnish removal involves the use of solvents which have the potential to adversely affect a paint surface. Some of the destructive effects of solvent use are immediately obvious, like pigment lifting or smearing, but there are also subtle effects like embrittlement and weakened paint

bonds which may not be apparent right away.

In-studio cleaning is particularly risky when a high proportion of wax or varnish resin is present in the paint film. This is also a factor when varnish was applied too soon, allowing the top coat to fuse with the paint beneath. In both cases, permanently soluble paint components can lift with the varnish, permanently altering the picture. If too-harsh solvents are used, even well-cured paint can be affected, so it's important to select the correct solvent for the varnish rather than using a very strong, all-purpose stripper. Always follow package directions, and work in a properly ventilated environment with adequate protective equipment.

In any cleaning attempt, it's essential to watch for signs that something other than dirt and varnish are being removed. If any trace of color appears on (preferably white) swabs or rags, it's a sign that paint is being affected, and cleaning should stop.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

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