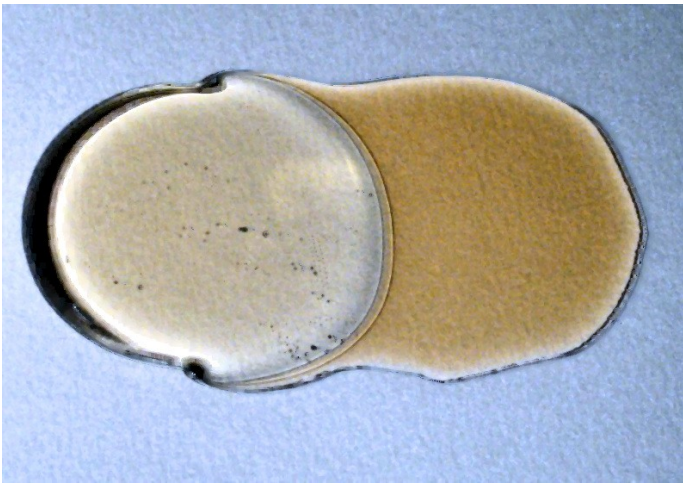


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ASK THE EXPERTS

## Studio Craft: Color Variation in Painting Oils



Side by side comparison, light and dark colored oils

**Ask the Experts:** “I recently bought some linseed oil, and the stuff in the new bottle is darker and more yellow than the half bottle I have in the studio. I looked at pictures online, and it looks like every brand has a different color. There is also “cold pressed” linseed oil, safflower oil and other types, which are totally colorless. Do I need to worry about using this new, more yellow bottle? Are some of these oils better for painting than others?”

**A:** Oils used in painting vary in color from very neutral to yellow/amber color. Linseed oil tends to have a yellow cast. Other vegetable oils used in painting, like safflower, poppy and walnut, are more neutral in color. The color of a drying oil, which is related to its chemical composition, may inform its suitability for specific techniques, and can indicate its potential performance in an oil painting.

In considering the color of drying oil, it's important to understand that a natural yellow tint may be positively related to film strength. (This is different from yellowing and darkening after the oil has formed a dry film.) While color alone isn't an absolute indicator of suitability as a painting oil, vegetable oils which dry to the strongest films tend to have an amber color, due to the presence of fatty acids with strong molecular double bonds. For example, linseed oil with higher ratio of linolenic to linoleic acid is generally more yellow, and usually dries more effectively to a stronger film.

Linseed oil may appear amber in a clear container, but in paint mixtures, the color of the oil is easily masked by pigments. In some cases, however, it's desirable to use alternatives that have a more neutral, natural color. Whites and pale, cool tints are sometimes prepared in safflower or poppy oil rather than linseed, and some artists use these oils for painting mediums as well. While safflower and poppy oil may not equal linseed oil in drying and film forming properties, these neutral-colored oils are still completely suitable for permanent painting.

Within the product range of linseed oil itself, there can be noticeable color difference from brand to brand, or even from bottle to bottle. This variation in color is a normal property of linseed oil, and is not indicative of diminished quality. Alkali-refined linseed oil (the most common type in the typical studio) will normally exhibit some variation. Linseed oil that is stored in dark conditions may develop a deeper, darker color, while stock that is exposed to light becomes more neutral and less dark. Artists who prefer a more neutral appearance in the bottle can lighten their oil by storing it in a location where sunlight or strong artificial light is present. Doing so

doesn't enhance the performance of the product, but it can make the bottle cosmetically more appealing.

Oil-primed canvas and finished oil paintings made with linseed oil can also darken when excluded from light in storage. Just as with liquid oil, the yellowing effect in dry paint is reversed when exposed to light.

The seal at the top of a container of linseed oil is to prevent leakage, rather than preventing spoilage. A capped, full bottle without an inner seal is sufficient to exclude air and prevent oxidation.

There are telltale characteristics which can indicate that painting oil may have undergone undesirable changes. Unusual thickness or gummy-looking inclusions, cloudiness and sediment in alkali-refined oil would indicate diminished quality. Oil that is said to be "rancid" has undergone some oxidation, and will have a strong smell, but it can still be used for painting.

Cold-pressed oil, on the other hand, is less refined, so this product may exhibit properties which would not be seen in refined oil. Cold-pressed usually has a darker color, and might develop a "foot" of sediment at the bottom of the container, yet still be in perfectly usable condition.

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