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ASK THE EXPERTS

Product Profiles: Gesso Demystified



Ask the Experts: “There seem to be a ton of gesso brands, and at least three “grades” of each. For the average artist, is there really all that much difference between brands and grades, other than just how thick it is?”

A: All acrylic gesso, regardless of brand or grade, has a primary function: to make support materials (panel, canvas, paper, etc.) ready to receive paint. Each manufacturer creates their own formulas and “grades” of acrylic gesso, with differences in composition, price, and product performance.

Depending on the formula, each type of acrylic gesso may have differences in basic properties that determine how it should be used, and in some cases, whether it is suitable for permanent art. Some types of acrylic gesso are more absorbent or textural, while others feature brightness or covering power. Some are fluid and ready to use straight from the container, but other types of gesso need to be thinned to achieve smooth, uniform application.

Composition:

Each type of acrylic gesso contains different proportions of **pigment, inert solids, and binder:** pigment for color, inert solids for texture and absorbency, and binder for adhesion and film strength.

Gesso that is made with a high proportion of white pigment has a bright, neutral color, and can cover dark-colored support materials in fewer coats.

The term “gesso,” Italian for chalk or plaster, refers to the inert solid component of acrylic primer, which is a form of calcium carbonate or “marble dust”. Acrylic gesso that has a larger amount of inert solids has a softer color and may take more coats to cover dark supports, but it also has a more pronounced texture and a greater degree of absorbency, which promote strong, durable paint adhesion.

The fluid component for gesso, also called the “vehicle”, is polymer dispersion, a water-based medium containing micro-particles of a plastic binder. The binder is the adhesive that sticks to the support and forms a permanent, dry film after water and other fluids have evaporated.

Genuine acrylic binder is used in high quality acrylic gesso. Other polymers used in gesso include vinyl and styrene. Lower quality, scholastic-grade gesso doesn't always come with polymer content listed. Gesso made with genuine acrylic polymer base yields a durable priming that retains flexibility and neutral color as it ages. Some types of gesso are formulated to yield a more rigid film, best suited to panels and other hard supports.

Some gesso is thin enough for application straight from the container, while others have a heavy, paste consistency which should be thinned before use. Viscosity alone doesn't necessarily indicate that the polymer base is diluted or reduced in strength; some thinner types of gesso yield a strong, highly durable priming despite having a more fluid body.



Grades of Gesso

Generally, Acrylic Gesso is available in three grades: **Student, Artist, and Professional**. Each manufacturer grades their products independently, but most use similar standards, based on price point, usage profile, ingredient cost, and permanence.

Student Grade acrylic gesso is formulated for high volume use at an affordable price. This grade of gesso is best used where durable results are less important than training and skill building. While it is sometimes possible to achieve lasting results with student grade primers, in general these products don't meet the standards of durability necessary for professional art. In the classroom, however, student grade gesso provides an excellent first painting experience, and helps stretch an educational budget.

Normally, student-grade gesso is ready to apply from the container with no water added. Gesso that is sold at a very low price for scholastic work likely will not perform well if diluted.



Artist's Grade

Acrylic gesso that is labeled "Artist's Grade" is suitable for permanent art, sold at a price that is affordable for most artists and students. Artist's grade gesso usually uses a high-quality polymer

base, but may contain a higher amount of inert solids (chalk). A high chalk content with lower pigment load gives artist's grade gesso a softer white color, and lower hiding power, so this type of gesso may take an extra coat to cover a dark-colored support material like hardboard. This category of primer can normally be diluted, so teachers may want to consider Artist's Grade gesso instead of Student Grade for advanced classrooms, where artists in training can benefit from using better quality materials.



Professional Grade acrylic gesso is formulated for the best possible performance and appearance, where artwork is intended to be sold or placed in a permanent collection. Professional gesso is priced higher than artist's or student grade because it contains larger amounts of premium quality ingredients. Despite the higher price, however, professional grade gesso represents a good value because it's highly concentrated, has excellent covering power in fewer coats, and can be diluted without diminished performance.

Professional grade gesso is always a good choice for permanent artwork, and any type of painting that requires highly durable materials, such as murals, large-scale paintings and commissioned portraits.

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