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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Painting under a Deadline



J.M.W. Turner on Varnishing Day by William Parrott, 1840s

Ask the Experts: “I have an opportunity to enter a show with several paintings, but it’s only a month away. I am primarily an oil painter. Do I have time?”

A: Four weeks is a very short amount of time to create oil paintings and have them ready for presentation, but it is possible. Artists have always faced pressure to deliver paintings in a hurry, often pressing the limits of the medium. The defects in Leonardo’s “The Last Supper” have been attributed to the artist’s experimental oil paint mural technique, using heat to speed drying. In the 19th century, artists at the British Royal Academy relied on the tradition of “varnishing day” to touch up pictures while already framed and hanging on exhibition. J.M.W. Turner famously delivered practically blank canvases, and on “varnishing day” was reported to have executed paintings entirely on site.

Some techniques lend themselves better to fast drying than others. Supports and mediums should be selected and prepared to promote fast drying. Finally, the presentation method will need to be chosen correctly for paintings that will continue to cure for weeks or months.

When pictures need to be executed and dry to the touch within a narrow window, the actual work will need to be completed as quickly as possible. Start with a realistic plan for the number and size of paintings you can accomplish in the time available. Using factory-prepared supports will save time in preparation, but in-studio application of an acrylic gesso ground may also be an option if completed promptly.

Both canvas and panel can be prepared to support rapid drying, but with a deadline fast approaching, oil priming is probably not an option due to a required long curing time. Instead, focus on ready-to use supports or acrylic primers.

Factory-prepared hardboard panels with highly absorbent clay-based ground can induce very rapid initial drying of thin to moderate oil paint. Supports prepared in-studio can be primed with a professional-grade acrylic gesso formulated with calcium carbonate for absorbency.

The oil paint techniques which best promote fast drying involve thin application and exposure of maximum surface area in the paint. Impasto should be avoided when you are not able to allow adequate curing time, because even if a touch-dry skin forms, it’s likely that material beneath will remain soft and wet for weeks or months. Knife applications should be as thin as possible, since a smooth, flat surface free of articulations will provide less contact with air than textural brushstrokes. When working in more than one session, be conservative with layering to ensure that the overall paint surface can dry at a uniform rate.

Alkyd-based painting mediums are indispensable for inducing fast drying in oil paints, more safely and reliably than earlier formulas. Traditional mixtures for fast drying mediums relied heavily on siccatives, metallic salts which forced oxidation. Used in excess, metallic driers can cause defects in paint, including darkening and embrittlement. Use of driers in the studio requires observing special health and safety concerns. Unlike older mediums mixed in-studio, alkyd-based painting mediums are ready to use from the package, and in most

cases can be added directly to paint. Some gel formulas can even be dispensed on the palette alongside paints. In order to achieve uniform drying, alkyd medium should be mixed with all colors, especially slow drying ones and those containing a high proportion of oil.

Completed paintings need an environment that supports drying, with plenty of air space, low humidity and warm temperatures. If studio conditions are cool (under 70 degrees F), use portable lamps as a gentle heat source, placed at a safe distance from artwork. Don't attempt to force drying by exposing paintings to extreme heat; in addition to flammability risks and release of harmful fumes, excessively high heat or lamps placed too close to artwork can compromise durability of the paint film.

It's important to keep in mind that any oil painting that is only a month old, even if dry to the touch, will not be fully cured for potentially several months. During this time, the paint takes up and releases gasses, and undergoes changes in physical properties. This is an important consideration in how the fresh paintings will be prepared for presentation.

Fresh pictures can receive varnish, but the coating must be very thin and permeable. Retouch varnish, a thin, temporary coating, can be applied to unify surface sheen and facilitate dusting without causing issues as the painting dries. A heavy, final picture varnish should not be applied until the paint is fully dry. If paint is still slightly tacky, framing and packing material should not come in direct contact with the painting surface.

Before delivering paintings to the exhibition, inspect each piece to make sure no wet paint remains. Any thicker passages should be checked for soft material beneath, by gently pressing a thumbnail into the paint in a less significant area. When artwork is delivered, consider advising the gallery representative that the paint may be delicate. If your intention is that the pictures should be varnished, make sure that this information, and your recommended products, are included with each painting.

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