Utrecht Art Supplies
Product Profiles: The Working Properties of Paint

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The term "workability" sometimes seems a bit subjective, but there are specific physical properties that artists' colors must deliver. For more than six decades, Utrecht has encouraged artists to evaluate working properties of paint as one of the key benchmarks of quality.

Each pigment imparts unique properties to paint as a result of variations in particle shape and size, absorbency and hardness. The paint maker must bring each color to its best advantage, preserving the authentic character of the raw materials while applying subtle amendments. The resulting paint should represent a balanced interpretation of each pigment, adjusted to enhance workability and stability without making the assortment too uniform or generic.

By "workability" we mean the way paint moves and flows, how it reacts to pressure and manipulation. Learning to evaluate paint is an essential studio skill that enables the artist to predict how well the material will create desirable surfaces and brushstrokes .

Obviously, acrylics will not exhibit the same properties as oils or alkyds, but all paint will offer workability in degrees between contrasting properties.

Key Properties:

- **Smooth to Grainy**
- **Buttery to Ropy**
- **Stiff to Loose**
- **Oily to Waxy**

Smooth to Grainy

Mechanically milled paint should generally have a very smooth appearance, both from the effectiveness of milling equipment and because the majority of pigments are produced with very small particle size.

When evaluating paint, observe carefully for large pigment grains or clusters. Excessive graininess results from underprocessing, either from milling a hard pigment too few times or simply not milling long enough to break up clusters of solids.

Buttery to Ropy

The terms "buttery" and "ropy" describe the shortness or length of the paint body.

What most artists think of as the characteristic Old Master brushstroke involves long, sinuous paint that pulls in strings. Certain pigments like synthetic ultramarine and some variations of lead white tend to produce a ropy paint. Undesirable ropiness can be amended with the addition of wax medium, but the

paint maker should leave room for further modification on the palette.

Buttery or "short" paint can be spread with minimal break on the canvas. When worked with a knife, buttery paint cuts easily with no stringiness. Paint that is very buttery or has an extremely short body results from absorbent pigment that takes up a lot of vehicle. (Many synthetic organic colors produce buttery paint.) Excessively buttery paint can also be caused by improper use of fillers, in particular waxes and stearates.

Stiff to Loose

Paint that is "stiff" will hold peaks when piled, and create sharp cuts with a knife. When drawn across a rough canvas, stiff paint will create a broken brushstroke. Paint with a high ratio of solids to vehicle tends to be stiff. In high quality paint, this means a heavy pigment load. In scholastic grade paints, stiffness may indicate the use of inert fillers (barium, calcium carbonate or talc).

Loose paint slumps when piled or applied thickly, and brushes out easily to a uniform layer. Loose-bodied colors are good for "indirect" techniques like glazing and scumbling. Paint with insufficient pigment load can be undesirably loose. It's possible to improve loose paint by blotting excess vehicle on paper; old telephone books work well for this.

Oily to Waxy

Oily paint is shiny with free oil on the surface. Oily colors dry to a lustrous appearance with good depth of color, especially in darks. Oiliness does not necessarily indicate that there is proportionately too much oil in paint; certain colors tend to take up less vehicle, or may have a high specific gravity that leads to a degree of settling in the package. Paint that is excessively oily can result from insufficient pigment load, or when a pigment with low absorbency is not amended with stabilizers.

Waxy paint has a soft, flat appearance with a velvety texture. Waxiness is desirable when the paint surface is an important aesthetic element, but it can reduce the depth of very dark colors. Colors with too much wax added can remain soft and soluble in the dry film, leading to challenges in varnishing and cleaning finished art.