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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Managing Absorbency of the Ground

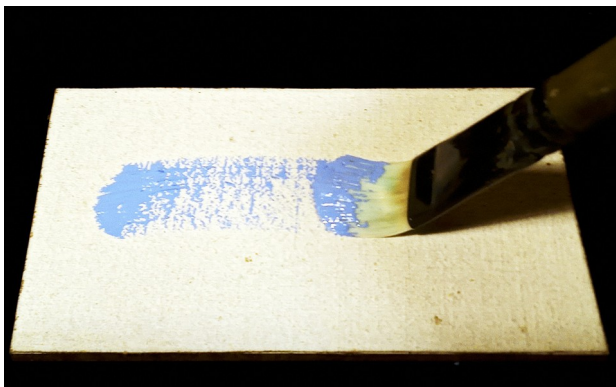
Ask the Experts: “When I start a painting, it feels like the brush drags across the gesso no matter how much paint I use. How can I get the brushstrokes to glide and flow?”

A: A primer or painting ground needs to have a certain amount of absorbency in order to promote adhesion, but some types of primer can take up so much of the paint vehicle in the first application that brushstrokes can break and drag. This can be managed by the artist, through:

- Primer selection
- Using a medium
- Modifying the priming layer

Some degree of absorbency is important in any oil painting ground, but some primers are formulated with a greater degree of absorbency than others. Less absorbent painting grounds are sometimes called “fast” grounds, because they facilitate rapid, easy brush movement; more absorbent grounds may be referred to as “slow”. Oil-based and alkyd-based primers tend to yield a “fast” ground. Acrylic-based primers are available in a range of absorbency, depending on the proportion of binder, pigment and chalk present.

A more absorbent ground can be handled by adding extra medium to paint, but that’s not always desirable. In addition to diluting color and changing the paint body, excessive oil in the paint can cause problems as the artwork ages.



Absorbent ground with broken brush strokes

It’s possible to choose a primer that offers the degree of absorbency desired, but this is not a very nuanced approach, especially if the artist prefers a lot of smooth brush movement in the first applications.

One effective method for controlling the absorbency of an oil painting ground is applying a tiny amount of oil or painting medium to the primed surface before painting. This process is referred to as “oiling out”. The correct way to oil out a painting support is by using a rag or gloved hand to apply the minimum amount of medium that the primer will accept, with no detectable residue on the surface. A support that has been oiled out should not feel oily or slick; if it does, use a rag or paper towel to wipe away any excess. The objective is to preserve the oil content of the paint, not to add extra oil.



Smooth, unbroken brushstroke after oiling out

Brush movement over a less absorbent ground should be fluid and easy without dragging or breaking up. It should be possible to apply a thin deposit of paint with unbroken coverage. Oil-based primers tend to yield a faster ground, but even those can benefit from oiling out if they feel chalky or “thirsty”.