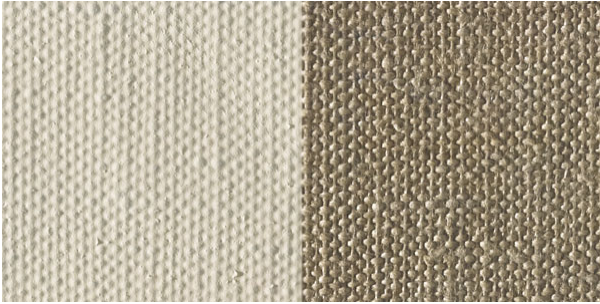


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ASK THE EXPERTS

Painting on the Wrong Side of Canvas?



Ask the Experts: “As much as I enjoy the smooth primed surface of a stretched linen canvas, the back side of it is so beautiful, I can’t help wanting to paint on it! Since the front is primed, would this mean that the back would get some protection?”

A: Many artists enjoy the natural color and texture of unprimed linen, and choose to incorporate it as an element of the painting. Francis Bacon, for example, famously painted many works on the backs of stretched canvases. Working on the reverse of primed linen is one approach, but doing so means potentially losing some important advantages of a fully primed surface.

Sizing, the first treatment applied to a fabric painting support, stiffens the cloth (helping maintain a flat plane) and closes apertures in the weave network. Sizing also isolates fibers from direct contact with the oil paint vehicle, which can have destructive effects on unprotected canvas. The back of a canvas will likely have some protection if the sizing has traveled through the weave, but not nearly enough to completely isolate the fabric.

Priming provides texture, absorbency, and a neutral, uniform base color. Artist's primers are usually formulated with high solids to provide absorbency and hiding power, while reducing shrinkage and movement in the lower layers.

The reverse (unprimed) side of a canvas should still maintain a stiff, flat plane. The exposed fibers could still react to moisture and humidity, however, and they will be directly exposed to contact with the oil paint vehicle. How

much oil the fabric takes up will depend on the thickness of the paint and amount of oil painting medium used. If catalytic siccatives (driers) are also present, that could determine the speed and degree to which the oil affects the canvas.

Unsize fabric will remain very receptive to dust and dirt, so any unpainted passages will be vulnerable, and probably hard to clean and maintain.

Untreated canvas tends to wick away a lot of binder from oil paint, leaving a waxy, low-shine finish that some artists enjoy. If too much vehicle is blotted up by the canvas, however, the paint film could be left weak with a chalky surface.

For artists wanting to paint directly on linen, treating the fabric first with a synthetic sizing would be a sensible measure to protect the canvas and reduce excessive wicking of the paint vehicle while still revealing the natural canvas color and texture. PVA or acrylic-based sizing would both serve this purpose. Since a simple sizing layer will not offer the full absorbency and tooth of a full priming, we recommend thin applications of paint that are minimally diluted, with no broad, continuous thick films for this approach.