

Studio Craft: Artist's Tapes



Assortment of tapes

Ask the Experts: “I usually use masking tape or blue painter’s tape, but at the art supply store I noticed different artist tapes, some of which say “archival” on the package. Do I need to use special tapes for making art? Should I worry about my art that had ordinary tape on it?”

A: Most artists (and most people) consider adhesive tape an indispensable item, but with careless use it can cause problems on artwork. As with any other art supply, users need to know the advantages, limitations, and performance capabilities of the tapes they choose. General-purpose products like masking tape, clear tape, and even duct tape have a place in the artist’s studio, but if tape will be placed on something you care about, it pays to consider better alternatives made specifically for artistic use.

Specialty tapes for drafting have been around for a long time, but **Artist’s tape** as a product category for fine art is a relatively recent development. These are designed to deliver better performance and compatibility with other art materials than general purpose tapes, and are intended to be applied to paint surfaces and fine papers.

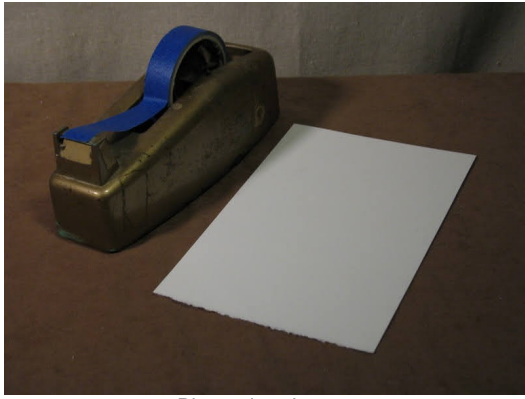
Artists have used products like masking tape, gummed kraft tape, and painter’s tapes for decades, but each type has some shortcomings when adapted for use as an art material. Pressure sensitive masking tape can lift

paint or paper fibers; water-activated, gummed kraft tape usually needs to be cut from the page. Painter’s tape is initially less damaging to paper and paint, but may become less removable if left on longer. Both masking and drafting tape can allow wet media to crawl underneath at the edges unless sealed before paint is applied. Artist’s tapes, by comparison, were designed for these applications, with adhesives that can remain in contact with artwork longer, remove more completely without damaging paint and paper, and perform well with wet media.

When a product is sold as “archival” it means that it can be used, according to correct practices, in long term contact with valuable items. While artist’s tapes are often labeled as “archival” as a general statement of permanence and quality, **Archival tapes** as a product category are designed for preservation, presentation, repair, and storage of valuable objects and documents.

Because common tapes are not designed to meet the standards of durability for permanent art, they may not remain stable over time. Some types of tape can break down as they age and release decomposition products that can discolor and harm other materials. Only reversible, stable tapes should be used for bonding, hanging, and storing works of art. Repairing torn works on paper is best left to conservation professionals, but when artists must repair a torn sheet of paper with tape, only archival products should be considered.

Most artist’s tapes include on the package guidelines for how long the product can safely stay in place on artwork before removal becomes more risky. The adhesive used on archival tapes is normally considered permanently reversible, but doing so might require application of heat or solvent by a trained conservation professional. Full removal might be challenging even for a professional, so artists should not assume that they will be able to cleanly remove a permanent mounting or repair tape in the studio.



Blue painter's tape

There are many uses in the studio for ordinary utility tapes, as long as you know the limitations of the product, and don't exceed them. Masking tape is commonly used by many artists for temporarily tacking or holding papers in place, and for masking borders of a watercolor or gouache painting. The masking tape adhesive, however, forms a strong bond with paper and painted surfaces, which can lead to damage when tape is removed. It's possible to slightly reduce the adhesive power of masking tape by applying it to clothing, picking up some lint fibers, before use on paper. The longer masking tape is left in place, the greater the difficulty in achieving clean removal, so it's best to remove it the same day it was applied.

For packaging and crating works of art, it's normally fine to use standard packing tape, especially for tasks where it will not come in direct contact with artwork, like box construction and securing bubble wrap. In long term storage, however, tapes that can break down over time may not be the best choice. For constructing portfolios and storage boxes, products sold for bookbinding and repair are a better choice. Book spine tape, for example, is made to remain in place for longer than packing tape, and will generally retain strength and flexibility for years.

If tape has pulled away cleanly, and there's no sign of leftover adhesive, there should be no reason to worry. Usually, damage caused by adhesive tape is immediately obvious in the form of altered artwork surface, missing or torn material, and permanent adhesive residue. If something like cellophane or masking tape has been left on paper for a long time, however, there may be cause for concern. Tape stains on paper objects are considered some of the most challenging conservation problems.

An appropriately selected, common tape can be an option for short-term contact with art and disposable storage and for shipping tasks, but specialty tapes for artists are the better choice when long term durability counts. Artist's and archival tapes surpass ordinary, utility products when it comes to achieving good artwork appearance, gaining extra working time, and feeling confident that art is created, presented, and stored in a safe and durable manner.

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