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Studio Craft: Customizing Factory-prepared Painting Supports



Pre-stretched, acrylic primed canvases are unbeatable for convenience and reliability, but sometimes a factory-applied surface may not be ideal for every artist's approach. Adding an additional layer of priming or different type of ground is a great way to get the time-saving advantage of pre-stretched with a custom ground that meets your specific standards.

Start Clean: When using an unfamiliar brand of pre-stretched support, it's a good idea to clean the surface before priming or painting. Some factory-primed canvases are prepared with a drying agent that can cause problems with adhesion if not removed. Denatured alcohol or acetone can be used to remove this residue before applying additional gesso or paint. Acetone works quickly but needs to be wiped away promptly to prevent softening of the ground. Alcohol takes a little longer to lift the coating but is less prone to affect the primer. (Make sure to work in an adequately ventilated space, away from flames, when using solvents.)



Inspect the surface: Before applying additional acrylic-based primer to a factory-prepared surface, take a minute to check the surface for flaws or slubs (knotty inclusions in fabric). Knots and loose threads can be picked out at this stage, and irregularities in the priming can be sanded or shaved off at this stage. If you plan to use an oil-based primer, take care not to expose any canvas fibers while grooming the surface, or some of the oil vehicle may be taken up by the fabric.

Choose your ground: There are several options for top-coating a primed canvas. The lightest and simplest treatment is a thin imprimatura, a very light coating of color that helps unify subsequent colors. Artist's acrylic colors can be used to create an imprimatura that can quickly be ready to accept oils or acrylics. Oil paint can also be used for imprimatura; make sure to select lean colors, and add alkyd medium to support fast drying.

Acrylic Gesso is an ideal choice for artists who want to add a customized ground to ready-made acrylic primed canvases, and have them ready to use in the minimum amount of time. Acrylic-primed pre-stretched canvases are 100% compatible with additional coats of acrylic gesso, so a strong, durable bond between the original and subsequent priming is assured.

Acrylic Gesso can be tinted to create brilliant toned grounds with ideal texture and absorbency. Tube colors thinned with water can be used to tint gesso, but fluid acrylics are the best choice for consistent, streak-free mixtures with minimal dilution.



Heavy-bodied acrylic painting mediums can be used to impart textures and relief in the priming layer, where stability can be easily achieved. Use Pumice Medium to add a sanded, fresco-like texture that will not shed particles later. Modeling Paste can be used to build textures in high relief, creating the illusion of thick impasto without using large volumes of slow-drying paint.

Collage elements and special textural treatments can also be incorporated during the priming process. The binding power of acrylic gesso is sufficient to adhere and seal most light inclusions before paint is applied. This is generally a more sound approach than pressing items into wet paint, especially oils.

Top-coating with oil priming is also an option with acrylic-primed, pre-stretched canvas. For best results, add a small amount of alkyd medium to speed drying, enhance adhesion and support flexibility.

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