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ASK THE EXPERTS

Product Profiles: Is Acrylic Gesso “real” Gesso?



Marble Dust (calcium carbonate) and polymer binder are two components of Acrylic Gesso

Ask the Experts: “I was corrected recently by another artist when I said that my acrylic primed paintings were on gesso. The artist said that acrylic primer is not “real gesso” and shouldn’t be called by that name. Is this correct? Why is it called “acrylic gesso” then?”

A: In our opinion, the correction wasn’t necessary. “Gesso” is an Italian word meaning chalk, gypsum, or plaster. In relation to the craft of painting, ‘gesso’ is a priming mixture of chalk, white pigment, and a binder. There are several types of primer which are called “gesso”, each with a different formula and paint compatibility.

Today, the term “gesso” is mainly associated with **Acrylic Gesso**, a water-based, synthetic primer. The word “gesso” can, however, also refer to other painting grounds which contain calcium carbonate, gypsum, or another absorbent, inert solid. Regardless of the type of gesso, all derive essential texture, absorbency, and covering power from the same chalk component.

“**Glue gesso**” is a traditional, hard, absorbent coating consisting of chalk, white pigment, and animal-derived hide glue. This type of gesso has been used for centuries to prepare panels and sculptures to receive paint, decoration, and gilding. It can be polished, embossed, or sculpted in low relief. Glue gesso is only suitable for rigid supports like panels, however, because its hardness makes it prone to cracking when applied to stretched fabric. Glue gesso is still in use, particularly for egg tempera and highly detailed oil paintings. Some artists consider glue gesso to be the only “real” gesso, in part because acrylic gesso is not compatible with egg tempera.

“**Oil gesso**” is another traditional formula which incorporates linseed oil with hide glue, white pigment, and chalk. This gesso is prepared in the studio to provide a ground flexible enough for use on fabric supports. Despite this traditional application, oil gesso does not perform as well as modern artists’ grounds like oil priming white, alkyd primer, or acrylic gesso.

Acrylic Gesso, developed in the 1950s as a one-step, universal painting ground, contains the same chalk and white pigment as other kinds of gesso, but the binder is synthetic. This binder is a polymer dispersion, a water-based carrier medium that contains microscopic particles of acrylic plastic. Because it’s easy to apply, comes in a safer, water-based formula, and can be used with a huge range of supports, acrylic gesso quickly replaced older primers like oil gesso and lead white for preparing canvas and panels in the studio.

Some artists and educators have argued that the term “gesso” should only be used in reference to the historical chalk/glue products. A few have advocated for use of the alternative term “acrylic dispersion painting ground” instead of “acrylic gesso”. We think that might be an accurate, generic description for the category of product, but given the wide adoption of the name Acrylic Gesso, and the established, common use of acrylic-based grounds, we feel artists can confidently just say “gesso” as a noun referring to acrylic primer, or as a verb meaning to apply an acrylic priming to a painting support.