# Utrecht Art Supplies
# The Function of Varnish in Mediums


**Ask the Expert: "Why do so many recipes for painting mediums call for varnish? What exactly does varnish contribute? Does it matter which one to use?"**

A: The varnish component of a painting medium has several functions. Some are obsolete in the modern studio, while others improve paint handling, appearance and stability.

**Imparts uniform sheen**
There is a lot of variation in absorbency and "fatness" between pigments; this leaves some passages looking lackluster or flat, and others very shiny. Irregular surface sheen makes it difficult to view a painting, especially in a location where control over lighting is limited. A painting medium with varnish lends a uniform surface quality overall, making it easier to work on and view the picture.

**Preserves wet appearance of colors**
Colors change during the drying process; dark hues have greater apparent depth when wet, and colors may look more brilliant. This difference in appearance between wet and dry paint makes it challenging to resume work from one session to another. A medium containing varnish helps reduce apparent color change, lending a "candy" gloss and preserving the original appearance of mixtures, so subsequent color mixing is more accurate and consistent with earlier layers.

**Helps paint solidify quickly**
Adding varnish to the painting medium helps paint set up on the canvas quickly, so recently applied passages don't lift or flow excessively

**Prevents beading**
Especially when using Stand Oil, fresh paint can tend to bead up on previous layers. Damar varnish imparts tack to paint, preventing beading and other undesirable behavior of wet brushstrokes.

**Isolates incompatible colors**
While not a concern with the modern palette, it was long believed that certain historical colors could interact chemically with lead-based whites, with adverse results. Varnish in the medium was believed to help reduce the chance of destructive interaction.

**Reduces migration of unstable, dye-based colors**
Occasionally, a pigment made by fixing a dye to an inert solid can release color which bleeds through other layers. Varnish resins in the dry film can help reduce color migration.

Depending on type, a varnish might also impart solvent resistance to the dry film (useful for glazing). Historical "cooked oil" varnishes made from semi-fossil or fossil (amber-type) resins produced a film that would not re-dissolve or stain from subsequent glazes. Modern painters use alkyd-based products to achieve a similar effect.

Questions? Ask the Expert