



Utrecht Art Supplies

Studio Craft: The Principle of Fat over Lean

Ask the Expert: "Could you please explain the Fat over Lean rule? I was taught that it referred to the amount of oil you add to your paint on the palette. Does the same thing apply to acrylics?"

A: Simply put, the principle of "Fat over Lean" is a recommendation that initial layers should have a lower oil content than subsequent ones. Observance of this principle is a good way to achieve durable results and avoid cracking, crazing, wrinkling and other defects.

Adherence to "fat over lean" yields several important advantages:

- Ensures topmost layers are more flexible than those beneath
- Places slowest drying colors on top, avoiding movement between a dry skin and soft foundation
- Lower layers absorb some oil from the next ones so each subsequent layer can "key" onto the previous

Fat over Lean is not just about the amount of oil added by the artist in the form of medium, but also involves an awareness of the oil content of each color on the palette. Some pigments like Flake White require relatively little vehicle to produce a workable paint, while others are very absorbent and take up a lot of oil in the milling process.

It's not always possible to discern leanness by appearance alone- some very lean colors can tend to shed oil, which may collect at the top of the tube and give the impression that there is a lot of oil present. Conversely, a very "fat" pigment may take up a lot of oil yet still have a dry, waxy appearance.

The fat over lean principle does not apply to acrylics except as it relates to layering oil paint over acrylic gesso or paint (a dry acrylic film is treated as 'lean'). Regardless of the amount of medium added to acrylics, the resulting film can accept more paint with any amount of medium added, or none at all. Adhesion between acrylic layers is very strong, and acrylics don't undergo the same complex chemical changes as oils do over months and years.

It's important to remember that the craft of painting has always been about pushing the limits of the materials. Traditional "rules" like fat over lean are guidelines, not laws. It's admirable to place emphasis on permanence, but not at the expense of creativity. Oil paint is a resilient medium that allows for a good deal of variety in technique and process, and while indiscriminate layering may not be the best approach, there's no need to worry excessively about the absolute oil content of every stroke. General awareness of the principle is enough for most artists to have confidence in the durability of their results while staying focused on making art.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#)

Intended for reference only. Observe all package instructions. Dick Blick Holdings/Utrecht Art Supplies is not responsible for any damage to personal property that may result from use of the information presented herein. © Copyright 2015 Dick Blick Holdings Inc. All rights reserved.