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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Using Gesso as Paint



Ask the Experts: “It seems like gesso is pretty close to white acrylic paint. Any reason why I can’t use acrylic gesso to replace white in acrylic paintings? Why can’t I just use that and some acrylic paints to make an underpainting for oils?”

A: Acrylic Gesso and acrylic artists’ colors (paint) are very similar in formulation, and can be intermixed, but they aren’t exactly the same thing. Acrylic colors can be used to tint Acrylic Gesso, and it is possible to create a whole underpainting in tinted gesso and acrylics that will later be overpainted in oils. Whether or not Acrylic Gesso will work well as a substitute white in your painting depends on your pictorial objectives and technique.

High quality gesso like Utrecht Artist’s and Professional grade can be used as a substitute for white in many painting applications, but there are some important considerations. Texture and absorbency are key advantages of Acrylic Gesso which help paint adhere; these same properties, however, could be problematic when gesso is used as paint.

A painting executed with acrylic gesso as substitute white can be extremely flat in surface sheen. This may be desirable depending on the artist’s objectives, but irregularity between shiny and dull passages can be distracting.

The high absorbency of gesso can make it difficult to varnish works where the acrylic primer is exposed. It may take extra layers of varnish to achieve all-over, uniform gloss while avoiding dull spots where gesso has absorbed a lot of the coating.

Concerns over irregular gloss and absorbency may not be as significant a factor if the entire acrylic layer will be covered in oil paint, but these properties may affect how paint handles. If oil paint is applied directly on top of the completely dry acrylic gesso layer, the absorbency can cause brushstrokes to drag and break in the initial application. This is expected when starting a painting on a newly gessoed support, but it can be challenging when painting over acrylics with oils.



Applying oil medium, or "oiling out"



Painting coated with Acrylic Matte Medium as an isolation layer

To improve brush movement; rub a very small amount of oil painting medium into the acrylic surface. This practice, called "oiling out", involves the minimum effective amount of medium, just enough to reduce absorbency without an oily texture.

A dry acrylic paint surface can normally accept oil paint of moderate thickness, but acrylic paint is not the equal of gesso when used as a painting ground. For an acrylic underpainting where you will be combining gesso and tube paints, it's best to mix some gesso into all mixtures so that every passage can promote adhesion of thicker, heavier paint.

If the oil layer will be limited to thin glazes and scumbling, some isolation between the two paint layers can be achieved by applying a coat of Matte Acrylic Medium. Coat the acrylic layer uniformly, and allow it to dry completely before proceeding. The clear isolation coat will allow light to reflect through the glaze layers, and keep lighter colors beneath from staining.