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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Improving Bad Paint



Ask the Experts: “I found some off-brand acrylics and oil paints that were so low priced, I couldn’t turn it down... but now I wish I had! The acrylic is thin, runny, and doesn’t cover very well. The oil is a little better but still not great, lots of excess oil and the white is too transparent. Can I do anything to improve this stuff?”

A: While more expensive paint isn’t necessarily always the best paint, generally products in higher price categories deliver much better performance and appearance than “economy grade”. Craft and student-grade paints are great for keeping costs low when results don’t need to last for a long time, and when a lot of students just need to practice.

Everyone loves to save money, so more advanced artists often look at entry level art materials as a way to “trade down” and compromise a little quality for cost savings, but that usually leads to disappointment. You can’t turn craft-grade and scholastic-grade paints into professional quality artist’s colors, but there are things you can do in the studio to make lower quality paint look a little better and make it more pleasant to use.

The lowest priced paints usually have a lot less pigment, the ingredient that gives paint its color. The only ways to improve this are to add pigment, or by removing some of the liquid vehicle. Of course, both of these methods are going to add cost to the cheap paint, because you will either be adding pigment in the form of better paint, or reducing the volume of paint by condensing it.

Oil paint that has a low proportion of pigment to the amount of oil present can be condensed by blotting up some of the excess vehicle. This can be done by depositing the paint on thick cardboard, sheets of newsprint, or other absorbent material. The blotting medium should be smooth so that after the desired density is achieved, the paint can be easily gathered up with a palette knife and transferred to the palette. It’s important to note that blotting won’t remove fillers, so any inert solids added to stretch a small amount of pigment will be condensed along with the color.

Lightfastness of a lower quality paint is something that can’t be improved, only managed. Alizarin Crimson is the least lightfast pigment still included in the permanent palette, and anything with a lower lightfastness rating than alizarin would not normally be used in good artist’s colors.

Craft-grade paints may include dyes and colorants that would not meet the standard of professional quality in terms of fade-resistance. Some practices can help minimize eventual fading of fugitive colors. Adding white can make colors fade more quickly, so using them full strength or as glazes over darker hues can reduce the amount of light exposure that induces fading. Varnishes and picture glass with UV light stabilizers may help retard fading to some degree, but as long as certain pigments are exposed to light, fading can occur.



One shortcoming of lower quality paints is that they usually aren’t very bright in color due to the excessive presence of fillers or low pigment load. Usually the best way to deal with lack of brightness or color strength in a

lower quality paint is to use it mostly for mixtures or for making pale tints. It might be necessary to apply several layers of paint that's thin in color in order to get a good appearance.

If a paint doesn't have enough binder, or the binder is too weak, the paint might not dry to a strong film, and it might not stay attached to the painting. Binder is the cement that holds paint together and makes a durable solid, with adhesive power to stick it to the support.

One way to improve paint with insufficient binding power is to add a compatible painting medium that contains a binder. Acrylic painting mediums provide an easy way to boost the amount and quality of binder in thin paint. Lower quality oil paints normally suffer from a high proportion of oil vehicle (which is also the binder), so adding more oil to poor quality oil paint is likely not going to yield an improvement, but alkyd-based mediums for oil paint can add a tough, flexible resin that might improve drying and film strength.

The addition of medium might help make paint handle better and improve durability, but adding more medium will also change the proportion of solids to vehicle. That means that when you mix medium into paint, the resulting mixture is going to have a lower amount of pigment, and may look weak in color or more transparent.

Runny, thin paint can be made stiffer or more opaque by adding a bulky medium, or an inert filler. Adding dry powders like marbledust to stiffen colors is possible, but it's easy to add too much, resulting in a crumbly, weak paint. The safest, most reliable way to do this is with a pre-formulated medium that is compatible with the type of paint you are using. Acrylics can be made stiffer with Modeling Paste and Extender. Oil paints can be bulked up with an impasto or wax medium, however wax should be used in the minimum effective amount, to avoid making paint soft and soluble.

Ultimately, all the measures to compensate for lack of quality pigments, excessive dilution, inadequate binder, and other shortcomings involve adding something extra, or ending up with less paint, or weaker colors. Just as with most other consumer products, the cost of artist's colors is directly related to the ingredients and resources that go into making them. Most artists own a few supplies that aren't quite up to standards, and while it's sometimes possible to use them on permanent art, it's usually best to stick to professional grade materials for professional projects, and save the lower quality supplies for temporary displays, decorations, and applications where permanence isn't important.

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