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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Painting Without Mediums



Ask the Experts: “There are so many painting mediums out there, but since I’m self taught I never got any instruction on why you would use a medium. I use paint thinner a little bit, mostly for cleanup when I use oils but whether it’s oil or acrylic, I mainly just use the paint by itself. Is this not a good idea? What am I missing?”

A: We are firm believers that artists can (and should) use their materials in any way they want, as long as health, safety and the environment are given due consideration. Although most artists employ some sort of thinner or medium, using paint without modification, straight from the tube, is not an uncommon practice. Some use straight paint because they prefer a heavy body for impasto techniques, or because they like a dry, matte surface. Others use paint without thinners or mediums because they simply aren’t sure what advantage these accessories might deliver.

Why Artists Use Mediums and Thinners

Preferred technique, creative objectives, and training influence what type of medium the artist prefers. Health and safety, studio configuration, and the needs of others who share the workspace are also important factors. The main function of a painting medium is to reduce viscosity or otherwise make paint easier to apply in a thin, uniform layer. Some mediums cause paint to self-level, reducing visible brush marks. Some increase transparency for glazing and layering. If a matte appearance is desired, the medium may just consist of

solvent alone, or a product specially formulated to reduce shine. Mediums can also influence drying rate, help retain the wet appearance of colors, and compensate for an excessively absorbent ground.

Reasons why artists might avoid using mediums

Some artists who are fully aware of the advantages of mediums still prefer to use paint in its unmodified form. Most of the time, this is simply because the artist enjoys the concentrated color, heavy body and workability of paint from the tube, but this choice might also relate to a conservative approach to studio craft. Oil painters in particular may be concerned about potential future conservation issues from excessive complexity in layering, high oil content in the finished painting, or solubility from waxes and resins. Others avoid using mediums to reduce or eliminate volatile solvents from the studio or classroom.

Advantages of using unmodified paint

Artists’ colors are never more concentrated than in their original state. Unmodified paint delivers the highest proportion of pigment, and strongest tint strength. Before adding mediums or thinners, paint body and general working properties are more fully reflective of the natural properties of the pigments. Unmodified paints give a physical presence to artwork that is difficult to achieve with diluted or extended colors.

Challenges

Generally, painting mediums are much less expensive than artists’ colors, so exclusively using paint straight from the tube is more costly than extending color with mediums. Using a highly concentrated, dark pigment without medium may not be the best way to get the full effect of a color. Some very concentrated colors, especially transparent hues, actually benefit from some dilution in order to let some light in and achieve the full chromatic power of the pigment.

Paint from the tube can also be more resistant to manipulation with a brush. Thick, unmodified paint can be difficult to brush out or distribute uniformly, especially fast-drying or very thick, viscous colors. Fast-drying paints, such as acrylics, may not offer a long working time.

When using paint straight out of the tube, “elbow grease” becomes the medium. Unmodified paint can be blended and spread with a little extra mechanical force

and time. Stiff bristle brushes are a good choice for any thick paint. Thinner, flat applications can be achieved with painting knives and silicone-tipped tools.

Without using a medium, the natural drying rate of the paint becomes a more important factor. To prevent acrylic colors from skinning over prematurely, a light mist of water can be applied to the palette without significantly diluting colors.

Oil paints naturally dry at a slow rate compared to acrylics, and without the use of a medium, some colors may take days to solidify. One effective way to compensate is by including naturally fast-drying colors like raw and burnt umber in as many mixtures as possible. If individual colors dry too slowly to be practical, look for substitutions, like Ivory Black instead of Lamp Black, for example.

Paint that is applied without a medium will be more dramatically affected by an excessively absorbent ground. Primers that take up a lot of paint vehicle may cause acrylics to dry very fast, and can make oil paint look dull and waxy. As an amendment without mixing anything directly with the paint, the canvas can be moistened before painting to reduce absorbency and stretch the “open” time of colors. Oil painters can apply a very small amount of thinned linseed oil to the priming layer in order to reduce absorbency. Acrylic painters can moisten the canvas with water to prevent premature drying from an absorbent ground.

If using paint without a medium or thinner is yielding the results you like, we see no reason to change. If, however, it becomes a challenge to get the colors, textures, and pictorial effects you want to achieve, introducing a painting medium into the process may help.

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