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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: When Too Much Paint Comes Out of the Tube



Ask the Expert: “I went to set up my palette and WAY too much paint came out of a tube. Even worse, it’s an expensive color and it would normally take me half a year to use up this much. What’s the best way to save it?”

A: Every artist knows that feeling- if only you could draw it back into the tube! This situation doesn’t have to be a disaster, however. By acting quickly, it’s often possible to gather up excess paint and save it for later. The following advice doesn’t apply to partially dry paint or leftovers mixed with painting medium, though- this is mainly intended for fresh paint accidentally expelled from the tube, spilled from a jar or leaked from a burst package.

Work Quickly

Depending on the type of paint, drying may have started immediately upon contact with the air. The slower drying rate of oils buys you a lot more time to deal with the situation, but even acrylics can be salvaged if you jump into action.

Acrylic Paint

If excess acrylic paint has been accidentally dispensed or spilled, apply a light mist of water to slow drying- if the paint skins over, it can’t really be preserved in good condition. Gather up the paint and transfer it to a lidded container. If you will be using the paint soon and it’s not a large volume, a covered palette with a sponge insert can preserve it for a few days. If it’s a small amount of paint that could skin over in a jar, move on to the next step.

Put it in a tube

Keep a few empty collapsible aluminum tubes handy just in case it’s necessary to repack some paint, either excess on the palette or the last portion in a jar that might otherwise skin over. Use a palette knife to gather up the material and trowel it into the large, open end of the tube. Firmly tap the cap end on the floor or table to drive paint toward the top of the tube and chase off air bubbles, then flatten and crimp the end. Use canvas pliers or a bench vise to seal the crimp and engage the cold-wax seal to prevent leaks.

Freeze it (Oil paint only)

Many artists report good results freezing oil paint. (This is just for oils; acrylic paint should never be frozen!) While we haven't conducted testing on this procedure and don't specifically recommend it as the best way to store oil paint, we don't think there is any serious risk to freezing oil paint, as long as the product is brought slowly back to room temperature before use. Small amounts of paint should be fine frozen in small, tightly capped plastic containers. Make sure to clearly label and date any such packages.

Watercolor

Excess tube watercolor paint can be transferred to a small container, but often the best choice is to place the paint in the well of a palette and allow it to dry, so it can be reconstituted later. Dried tube watercolors are not as soluble as semi-moist cakes, however, so adding a drop of glycerin (from pharmacies or where candy making supplies are sold) to the paint before it dries can help it re-wet later.

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