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ASK THE EXPERTS

## Studio Craft: An Introduction to Linen Canvas



**Ask the Expert:** “I have only ever painted on cotton canvas and I want to start experimenting with linen. There seem to be a lot of choices, and a big price difference. Where do I start?”

**A:** Linen fabric comes in a wide range of types, and not all are equally suitable for painting. Understanding some facts about how linen canvas is produced can help in the selection process, but it's easy for any painter to understand the qualities that make a good canvas, regardless of the fiber type.

### What Is Linen Made Of?

Flax is a bast fiber taken from the stem, unlike cotton which comes from the seed-bearing boll. Flax that is

cultivated primarily for high-quality fabric is planted with close spacing to induce the formation of a long, strong stem. Flax that is grown for seed or mixed seed and fiber is spaced farther apart to encourage branching, so the resulting fibers are shorter and less consistent. The plant is harvested whole and the stem material is broken down, yielding flax fiber.

### Degrees Of Quality

When selecting a linen artist's canvas, look for threads which are lustrous and smooth, without "slubs" (knotty inclusions) or bits of tow (straw residue).

Fabric made from long, strong "line" fibers will be uniform in appearance with very few slubs. The lowest quality "sacking" fabric has a very loose single weave (single warp yarns and weft threads) and a lot of odd bits in it, too many to pick out. This type, primarily intended as a utility fabric for feed sacks and the like, is sometimes used as a painting support, but it has to be liberally slathered with sizing and priming to close the weave, which has large, visible gaps between threads.

### Fabric Texture

Choose a texture that is consistent with your artistic objectives. Traditionally, canvas texture is selected for the optical effect desired, and distance intended from the viewer. A fine "portrait weave" would be chosen for works viewed at an intimate distance, where smooth, continuous brushstrokes and suave gradients are desired. Rougher weaves might be chosen for larger canvases viewed from

a distance, where broken brushstrokes with a "dragged" appearance are intended, especially where colors would mix visually in the viewer's eye. These are not firm rules, however. Some artists deliberately choose canvas with an aggressive texture for small works, when a highly visible weave is part of the overall intended appearance.

Rough fabric does allow the primer to "key" on the surface well, but a good product applied correctly will work just fine on smooth fabric, especially if lightly groomed with a pumice stone or fine sandpaper before sizing/priming.

A good type of medium- or rough-textured canvas should still be woven tightly enough to avoid significant strike-through (leakage through gaps in the weave) of the sizing and priming. Usually combination weave (single ply warp yarns and multi-ply weft) or double-weave (multi-ply warp and weft) are what you will want to select. Double-weave is better overall, especially for large scale works and for heavy paint. Combination weave is a good compromise when budget is a factor. Single weave is good for facing canvas-covered panels and small sketches.

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