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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Fixative on Paintings



Ask the Experts: “I finished my charcoal drawing and I’m ready to start painting. Should I use spray fix to set it beforehand?”

A: Strictly speaking, the best practice is not to apply fixative to a sketch on canvas, though many artists do adhere to this practice. Even though fixative can reduce smudging of a charcoal sketch under paint, any isolation coat- including fixative- can change the painting ground’s absorbency, texture and overall receptiveness to paint. Charcoal marks left uncovered by paint can also make maintaining and cleaning the finished artwork more challenging than if the surface were completely painted and varnished.

While most of the time fixative under paint causes no obvious problem, if the priming layer is rendered too resistant, subsequent paint applications might not adhere as well as they would on an optimal surface. The type of paint and fixative used can have a bearing on whether there will be issues, and to what degree they could affect durability.

“Workable” fixative, unlike older versions of this product, is formulated to accept more medium on top for layered techniques. Under the best conditions, workable fixative leaves surfaces receptive to additional applications of medium. A light coating, or even several layers, can still leave the texture and fiber structure of paper largely open and receptive. While some beading can occur with wet media, adhesion of paint on paper is generally not reduced by the presence of fixative. Used correctly, even fluid media like watercolor can be layered in succession with fixative preventing lower layers from bleeding. A light application over friable or powdery media like pastel and chalk can reduce the amount of dust that deposits under frame glass.

Acrylics usually work well over moderate applications of fixative on a gesso ground, but oil paints, especially when heavily applied, might not achieve full adhesion if the ground layer has been fully sealed. Depending on the carrier solvent, however, it’s possible for oil paint to re-wet fixative, which becomes incorporated into the paint film, somewhat improving adhesion.

Another factor to consider is whether the goal is to leave the preliminary sketch visible in the finished artwork. If so, fixative may not offer enough protection from casual contact and cleaning, and the finished work may require framing under glass. If the preliminary drawing will be completely obscured by paint, and colors are sufficiently dense to absorb charcoal without discoloration, it may be wise to avoid fixative altogether when working on canvas.

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