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ASK THE EXPERTS

## Canvas Without Stretchers: Alternatives

**Ask the Experts:** “I’m working in a smaller space than I used to, and stretched canvases are really taking up a lot of space. I know I won’t be happy working small scale, so I am looking for ways to keep working on canvas but eliminate the bulky stretchers. Any ideas?”

**A:** It is definitely possible to work on canvas- even on a large scale- without permanently leaving paintings on stretchers, as a means of conserving space and materials. Artists have devised various ways to achieve this goal while still providing the essential advantages of stretched fabric.



Assistants painting canvas on the floor, David Francis Millet studio ca. 1900

Any system for painting on unstretched canvas should still provide a flat plane without sagging or rippling, and a uniform surface that is free from textural inconsistencies. Raw canvas primed loose, especially with water-borne media, can be affected

by shrinkage, strike-through and rippling, defects which can seriously impact artwork appearance. Even without using a traditional stretcher frame, however, there are ways to get good results.

### Stretch and remove



Paintings that have been executed on stretched canvas can be removed from stretchers when dry for compact storage. Canvases stored off stretchers long-term should be kept flat rather than rolled, to avoid damage. Museum board can be layered between paintings for support and isolation. Watch for areas of heavy impasto that could still be wet and soft underneath- stacking or compressing a soft paint film could lead to crushing or rupturing impasto. Avoid long-term direct contact between bubble wrap and painted surfaces.

### Factory-primed Canvas

Fabric that has been factory-primed can be cut to size and used with oils without stretching. The sizing and priming combination on this type of fabric helps maintain a flat plane and closes apertures in the weave, preventing wet paint from traveling through to the back. Techniques involving heavy saturation

with water can still cause rippling, however, so it's advisable to staple the painting to a sealed plywood board if using acrylics.

Most paintings executed off the stretchers will still need to be stretched eventually for presentation, so it's important to determine dimensions and edge positions. If sharp edges are desired, mark off image area with a pencil or charcoal and straightedge. For even more crisp edges, use painter's tape to block off the image area.

Alternately, working "full bleed" (extending the painting past the image area) will allow you to achieve a gallery-wrapped appearance when the finished canvas is stretched for display. A gallery-wrapped canvas is displayed frameless with fully painted, wide-profile sides for a minimal, modern effect.



### **Use a temporary stretcher board**

Primed or unprimed canvas can be stapled to a sealed wooden board instead of stretchers. When working in this manner, however, be aware that primer can "strike through" (penetrate) the weave and adhere fabric to the board. Strike-through can be reduced by applying a light coat of acrylic sizing to canvas prior to priming. Place canvas across the

stretcher board and staple all edges, pulling taut. Size and prime as desired.

The stretcher board can be positioned on the studio floor to accommodate very large canvases. Some artists actually staple canvas directly to a wooden studio floor, but this is obviously only recommended where permitted by the studio owner.

### **Canvas Panels**



For small to moderate-scale paintings, consider making canvas panels. High-quality canvas covered panels can be made in-studio to provide a slim, rigid support with the texture and appearance of canvas, with the sturdiness and compact profile of board. Use Gloss Acrylic Gel Medium as an adhesive to attach lightweight canvas to hardboard panels, and prime as desired.

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