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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Alternative Fabric Supports



Ask the Experts: “When I was at the fabric store, I saw some really interesting cloth which I think would be nice for painting. Are there any reasons why it shouldn’t work?”

A: There is a long history of adapting existing materials for use as painting supports. Mattress ticking, canvas tarps, sailcloth and even chamois have been used for paintings. Modern cloth is different from historical canvas in some important ways, however, and many types sold for household use, interior decoration and hobby sewing are produced in ways that make them less suitable for artistic painting.

Before using an unfamiliar cloth as a painting support, consider whether it has the qualities which make it suitable for use. These include:

- Regular, tight weave that will not allow priming to pass through to the back
- Heavy enough to avoid sagging under the weight of paint
- Strong enough to resist tearing when stretched
- Receptive to sizing and primer; will not repel treatments
- Durable over time; will not degrade
- Free from dyes and treatments that could migrate into paint

Strength and weight are significant in determining how well fabric performs when stretched, primed, and painted. The weight of canvas is graded by ounces per square yard, and the lightest weight artist’s canvas is usually 10

ounces. Most common fabrics are much lighter than that. For stretched canvases larger than sketch size, fabric weight needs to be sufficient to bear primer and paint without sagging.

Stain resistant treatments, permanent-press sizings and flame retardants could all potentially make some fabrics less receptive to priming. Artist’s canvas has a rougher surface than most general-purpose fabrics, which might be too smooth to achieve optimal adhesion with a painting ground. Wearable fabrics may be conditioned to make them softer, in a way that reduces strength



Denim may meet the weight standard for artist’s canvas, but the dye isn’t colorfast, and twill weave could be problematic

Artist’s canvas usually has a natural, untreated color, either cream-colored cotton or warm gray linen. Color treatments applied to general-purpose fabrics may change the working properties of the cloth. If color isn’t lightfast, it could fade over time with exposure to light, or unstable colorants may migrate into the primer or paint.

Even if a particular cloth is too light for stretchers, it might be possible to use it as a painting surface with durable results. Fabrics that are too light or porous to stretch, but which are otherwise suitable, can often be mounted to hardboard, plywood or aluminum panels. Gloss Acrylic Gel Medium is an excellent adhesive for mounting fabric to panel. Many artists prefer light canvas or muslin for covering panels because lightweight fabric imposes less stress through shrinkage.