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ASK THE EXPERTS

Old Acrylic Medium: Can You Tell By The Smell?



Ask the Experts: "I opened an old container of acrylic medium (10+ years), and it is really smelly. I used some on a canvas anyway, and had to leave the room until the odor went away. My studio mates and I have used this jar more than a few times, and in the grand scheme it's not a big deal if I have to throw it out, but I want to ask: Is it normal for acrylics to get this smelly? I thought they would last basically forever if you keep them capped. Also, should I be worried about the art that I've done with this jar might have problems on down the line?"

A: The shelf life for unopened acrylic mediums stored in optimal conditions is generally more than a year, but once opened, antimicrobial components can lose potency. Also, spores can be introduced by brushes and other implements. In any case, while artists do keep opened acrylic jars around for a long time, often with acceptable results, we would not guarantee (or necessarily expect) years of stable storage with open containers used frequently in a shared studio.

The antimicrobial environment in a previously opened jar can be boosted by applying a light spray of original Lysol disinfectant to the paint or medium surface before capping. Any visibly moldy paint should be removed first, and the remainder should be used promptly. (This practice was recommended by one of our paint chemists. The active ingredient in Lysol is a common additive for latex paints, and won't hurt the product at all.)

Based on your description, we think the smelly jar should be discarded. Going forward, to keep shared acrylic jars in good shape long-term, avoid dipping brushes directly into jars that will be recapped for later use. Use clean plastic spoons to dispense the product, and avoid leaving rinse water out for long periods of time.

If the medium looks like it has a normal consistency and formed a good film, we don't think you need to worry about finished art that was executed using the affected product. If you want to further investigate, however, you can test film integrity by painting a layer of medium on a sheet of mylar, wait for it to dry and flex the sample. If the dry sample resists cracking and detachment, it's a good indication that, despite the odor, the product has retained its normal performance.