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ASK THE EXPERTS

Exposed Gesso on an Oil Painting



Ask the Experts: “My paintings are done in oils, but there are large areas of white acrylic gesso which I like to leave unpainted. Is there any reason to worry about how this will age? Will it cause problems later if the painting needs to be cleaned?”

A: While we can't speak to how a conservation professional would treat your artwork, we consider the instance of some exposed acrylic ground on an oil painting to be "within tolerances" and not a malpractice. Many, many artists include passages that are very sparsely covered or completely exposed.

Especially if that approach is helping you achieve a specific visual effect, we don't think you should

change course solely based on concern for future cleanings. Since exposed acrylic primer is more receptive to dust and contaminants, we think you might want to consider using a picture varnish that is appropriate for both oils and acrylics. This varnish should be one where resin and solvent content can be determined, so you can include this information with the painting, along with a general description which explains the surface is acrylic dispersion primer and oil paint.

Documenting the materials used and sequence of application goes a long way toward ensuring the permanence of your work, and it's a great service to the collector as well. If you include that information with the finished piece, a qualified conservation specialist will know what to do from there.