

CHOOSING OIL PAINTING MEDIUMS

Oil paint is little more than microscopic, solid particles of colour (pigment) evenly suspended in a transparent liquid oil medium (the vehicle). Of the two components the pigment remains constant, while the vehicle is subject to change — and these variations make oil paints behave in different ways. The substances that cause these changes are called modifiers, more commonly known as mediums.

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Alkyd Gels and Mediums:

Alkyd mediums accelerate drying time and increase the transparency of oil colours. These attributes make them good glazing mediums and give oils a lustrous, jewel-like quality with a stronger, longer-lasting paint film. Alkyd mediums become smooth and translucent when worked.



Beeswax:

Beeswax in the honeycomb form is familiar to everyone. When the honey is extracted, a crude yellow wax is left that can be melted and filtered. When yellow beeswax is melted, formed into thin sheets, and bleached by sunlight, it becomes white. The bleaching process also raises the melting point of the wax. Because it is odourless, bleached white beeswax is the recommended choice for most techniques calling for wax ingredients; it is the binder for encaustic paints. Its melting point is around 63° C (145° F). Beeswax cuts the glossy quality of oil paints, giving them a more satin finish while extending the drying time of the paints, making them workable for longer.

Copal:

Copal is the name given to a diverse group of fossilized tree resins found mostly in Africa; the clearest is Congo copal. Copal resin makes an extremely hard varnish second only to amber in toughness. For centuries it was used as the exterior varnish for the decks and wooden spars of sailing ships, a fact that attests to its resistance to moisture. Copal is not recommended today as a final varnish because it is irreversible, no solvent can remove it. But this insolubility and toughness are something of an advantage in a painting medium. Adding copal varnish directly to oil paints makes them very fluid, much like syrup, so that they behave like enamels, becoming smooth, fast-drying and nonbuckling. With copal-thinned oils it is possible to produce effects ranging from transparent brushy textures to striking drips and drops.

Cobalt Drier and Japan Drier:

Both Cobalt and Japan Drier are traditional painting mediums which should only be used by those well experienced in their use. They are used in very small quantities to decrease the drying time of oil paints and alter the finish of the paint. A drier accelerates or initiates the drying of an oil paint or oil by promoting oxidation and will wrinkle the paint film if too much is used. "Top driers" which cause the surface of a film to dry before the interior, can be most harmful to paint films. "Through driers" can cause the whole film to dry at once, and so are safer. Cobalt Drier speeds the drying time of oils and Japan Drier speeds drying time, improves flow and increases gloss. Toxicity Rating: Highly toxic — Use with extreme care.

Linseed Oil:

Linseed oil is the most widely used of the drying oils. It is pressed from the seeds of the flax plant, the same plant that is the source of linen fibers. It can be processed into a variety of forms useful to artists. Its advantages are that it is a good film former — giving tough, resilient paint films, and it is compatible with a

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huge number of colorants. Its disadvantages include yellowing and embrittlement which occur with age and exposure to light, and an apparent darkening of the paint film when it is stored in the dark (an effect reversed by re-exposure to light). These factors are largely unavoidable.

Cold Pressed Linseed Oil:

Made by crushing the flax seed under great pressure, this is the variety of linseed oil considered to be the most pure and desirable for making oil paints. Its colour ranges from a pale strawlike yellow to a deeper, golden yellow. It dries comparatively fast. Cold-pressed linseed oil was at one time the oil normally used by commercial paint makers for artists' paints. Because of the high cost and low yield of cold pressing however, refined steam-pressed linseed oil has largely replaced it.



mediums. It yellows less than other forms of linseed oil and has good leveling properties. Its film gives a smooth, enamel-like surface without brushmarks.

Poppyseed Oil:

Poppyseed oil is extracted from the seed of *papaver somniferum*, the poppy plant. It is a pale, nearly colorless oil that is also used in making artists' whites and light-colored paints (especially the pale blues). Poppyseed oil dries rather slowly and some sources claim that it is susceptible to cracking. It slows drying time with good colour retention.

NOTES:

Stand Oil:

A partially polymerized but unoxidized linseed oil made by heating the oil to about 300° C (570° F) in the absence of oxygen. Stand oil is also called heat-bodied oil. It is not a good binder because it is too viscous, but it is an excellent addition to painting and glazing



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