



Opus Art Supplies • Resources for the Creative Individual

Surface Preparation

Unprepared painting supports should be primed before paint can be applied otherwise they are too absorbent. The size, gesso, or painting ground, is the first (prime) layer of paint to be put on the support in order to isolate the support from subsequent layers of paint. This first layer makes the support more receptive to paint and ensures longevity.

ACRYLIC GESSO:

Today, acrylic gesso is the most commonly used primer for either oil or acrylic paints. Acrylic gesso is not a true gesso but is generally referred to as such. It is the best ground for use with acrylic paints, as both ground and paint are flexible when dry and contain polymer binders that allows for good adhesion. Acrylic gesso can also be used as a ground for oil paints but it is recommended that at least 3–4 coats of gesso be applied to the painting surface to ensure the oil does not leach through. Some conservationists, however, would argue that acrylic gesso is not an ideal ground for oil paints due to the inflexibility of fully cured oils over more flexible acrylic grounds.

Nevertheless, acrylic gesso is the most convenient ground available and is widely used by many artists for both mediums. It is a great all-purpose primer that will stick to almost any surface that is free of oil, grease or dirt. It dries quickly to a very strong and flexible finish and will not crack or become brittle. Acrylic gesso is nontoxic, safe and easy to use.



TRADITIONAL OIL PAINTING GESSO:

True gesso is the traditional ground for oil painting. It is essentially a white painting ground made from a mixture of chalk, white pigment, glue, and water. True gesso is best applied to a rigid surface such as an unfinished wood or masonite panel as it is generally too brittle for fabric supports.

To make traditional gesso, the ingredients are mixed in a double boiler over low heat. The glue serves as a binder to create a smooth, easily spread gesso, which is free of bubbles. Once ready, the gesso can be applied to the support



in successive coats at right angles to one another. The final coat must be sanded to remove the brush strokes and then left to cure for at least two weeks. When oil paint is eventually applied to the surface the gesso is very absorbent. This means that the ground and the paint will make a good bond. If high absorbency is not desired, a highly diluted coat of varnish can be applied over the gesso before you begin painting.

OIL-BASED PAINTING GROUNDS:

Oil-based painting grounds are ideal for both wood and fabric supports. If you are using a wood or masonite panel to paint on you can apply the oil - based ground directly. If you are using a fabric painting support, however, you must size the fabric with Rabbit Skin Glue or PVA (polyvinyl acetate) first.



Oil ground is a solid coat of white oil paint specially formulated to act as a ground upon which subsequent layers of oil colour will adhere. Oil grounds are usually thinned with mineral spirits or turpentine to the consistency of heavy shaving cream. The ground must be thin enough to work thoroughly into the weave of the

canvas without leaving pronounced brushstrokes but still be thick enough to maintain the integrity of the ground. The oil ground should be applied after the PVA size has dried for at least 24 hours. One to two coats are usually enough. The oil ground must cure for at least two weeks.

RABBIT SKIN GLUE VS. CONTEMPORARY SIZE

The function of sizing is to coat the raw fibers of the painting support to prevent oil from causing rot. It serves as an isolating layer when using fabric supports. Size is traditionally made from a mixture of water and dried Rabbit Skin glue, which is heated in a double boiler over low heat. However, Rabbit Skin Glue is hydroscopic which means it absorbs moisture from the air and expands and contracts over time. This quality could lead to the paint film cracking and as such we recommend using the contemporary alternatives.



Both Gamblin's PVA (polyvinyl acetate) Size and Golden's GAC 400 & 100 are excellent sizing agents and are used to seal the fabric supports before oil-based grounds or acrylic gesso is applied. Generally, 3 coats of sizing should be applied to any cotton or linen canvas, and even wood panels.

When using Golden's GAC, apply one coat of GAC 400 to stiffen the canvas fibers and then apply two coats of GAC 100. This will help seal the canvas fibers and prevents any moisture from the acrylic gesso or paint mediums from rising and causing support-induced discoloration. Support induced discoloration is when contaminants or compounds in a substrate are extracted when water-



based media dries. When it dries these compounds are drawn into the paint causing the colours to change and drastically affects the final outcome. This is why applying a size is important when using acrylic gesso and is equally important if using oil based mediums as they hold moisture for longer periods of time.



Watch and Learn! Check out the following Opus How-To Video for more information on the techniques highlighted in this handout:

- Surface Preparation: Sizing & Gesso

opusartsupplies.com/surfaceprep

OPUS ART SUPPLIES

Vancouver: 1360 Johnston St, Granville Is., 604-736-7028

North Vancouver: 119 - 949 3rd St W, 604-904-0447

Langley: 5501-204 St, 604-533-0601

Victoria: 512 Herald St, 250-386-8133 or 1-800-524-6555

Kelowna: 1357 Ellis St, 250-763-3616 or 1-800-814-8885

Downtown Vancouver, 100-207 W Hastings St, 604-678-