

Acrylics: History and Basic Information

What is Acrylic Paint?

Acrylic paint is created when a pigment is suspended in an acrylic polymer emulsion. The pigment is a granular solid while the acrylic polymer emulsion consists of a binder and a vehicle. The binder consists of a polymer that keeps the pigment in place after the paint dries and a vehicle, which is water. Once the paint dries, it becomes water-resistant because the vehicle evaporates. The dried paint can not be reworked at this state.

A Brief History of Acrylic Paint

German Chemist, Otto Rohm, created an acrylic resin in 1934. Soon afterwards, acrylic paint was developed. The paint was initially used on military vehicles and as house paint. Artists began requesting the paint between 1940s-1950s. An artist quality paint was developed in 1953.

With the beginning of the Mexican Muralism movement, painter like Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco began using acrylics because of their ease of use and durability. Pop Artists and Abstract Expressionists incorporated acrylics in their works in the 1960s. Some of these artists were David Hockney, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler.

Basics of Acrylic Painting

Acrylic paints are affordable, easy to use and clean, and are a durable medium. These qualities make acrylics popular. People choose acrylics because they dry fast and develop a strong layer once dried. The fast drying quality is both a positive and negative. Unlike oils, an artist does not have to wait months for paint layers to dry. Acrylic paints—with no addition of acrylic mediums—dries within 15–20 minutes. The same drying time may constrict to an artist who is working on fine details. Drying times are dependent upon thickness of paint; thin layers can dry in 10-12 minutes while thicker layers may need 20 minutes.

There are two types of acrylic paint:

- Student Grade Paint such as Amsterdam Acrylics typically has more binder compared to pigment. Because it has more binder, it is less expensive than professional quality paint. Student Grade acrylics will have a gel-like consistency that form soft peaks.
- Professional Grade Paint has more pigment than binder. Golden Heavy Body acrylics is one example of a professional/artist quality acrylic paint. Since it has more pigment in the mix, the price will be more expensive. Heavy body acrylics retain brushstrokes and have stiffer peaks when moving the paint around the surface.

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Painting Basics and Techniques

Acrylics can be used straight out of the tube. Over the course of a few minutes, the water in the paint will evaporate so is helpful to have a spray bottle nearby for misting.

Painting Surfaces

Acrylics work well on a number of surfaces because of their binding ability. Canvas panels, stretched canvases, canvas pads, and hardboards are typical surfaces used. Artists have been known to use watercolor paper. The 300 lb watercolor paper will give the work more durability. Artist may also apply gesso to the paper before use; some will gesso the front surface twice and the back once (again for durability).

Wood, metal, or glass are examples of other surfaces artists may use. Gesso or an acrylic primer will increase adhesion to the surface so it is advisable to apply a thin coat prior to painting. When working on wood, acrylic sizing such as GAC 100 will prevent Support Induced Discoloration (SID).

Painting Mediums

Artists have the ability to change the consistency, sheen or textural qualities of their paints. Some artists may use water to thin their paint for a watercolor effect. The amount of water used is debatable. Some artists say 25% can be added with no more than 50% used because the paint quality will break down. The concern is that the binder will be thinned out too much and the pigment will not create a stable film during the drying and not adhere to the surface adequately.

Golden gels, pastes and mediums will change the painting quality of acrylics. Because they are made of the same polymer, mixing these mediums into the paint will not effect the quality during drying time. Artists can give paint a matte, semi-gloss, or glossy sheen. The thickness of paint can be changed using regular, heavy, to extra heavy gels. Also, texture can be added when using pumice gel or glass bead gel.

References for Extra Reading

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Albright Art Facebook Live Presentation: Acrylic Presentation

<https://www.facebook.com/141264825912953/videos/1509035125802576>

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