

Acrylic Painting – Fundamentals

The acrylic medium can be used on any surface, paper, canvass or board. I will be discussing using acrylics on gessoed boards. The techniques used for painting on paper are the same as those used for working with watercolor or gouache.

Support:

I use boards rather than flexible canvass for my work. The paint is less likely chip or crack and boards are less likely to be damaged during handling.

You will find boards made from natural pine or natural fiberboards. My preference is to use a fiberboard that has a smooth surface with no wood grain. Do your research and make sure the board you use has no oils, resins or formaldehyde. I like a thick board, no thinner than 3/8". It is a good idea to have the board coated on both sides to be certain the board is sealed, reducing the possibility of future warping. No less than 7 layers of sanded gesso need to be applied to create a surface ready for paint.

Gesso:

Modern acrylic "gesso" is a combination of calcium carbonate and an acrylic polymer binder. It is the ratio of calcium carbonate to acrylic binder that is critical. The more binder the less reactive to the paint the prepared surface will be. Titanium dioxide or titanium white is often added as the whitening agent, it also allows the "gesso" to remain flexible, necessary when gesso is used on a flexible surfaces such as canvas. Gesso can be colored with the addition of any acrylic paint.

Kaolin Clay:

In its natural state kaolin is a white, soft powder consisting principally of the mineral Kaolinite. It is often necessary to bleach the clay chemically to remove the iron pigment and to wash it with water to remove the other minerals in order to prepare kaolin for commercial use. Approximately 40 percent of the kaolin produced is used in the filling and coating of paper. In filling the kaolin is mixed with the cellulose fiber and forms an integral part of the paper sheet to give it body, color, opacity, and printability. In coating, the kaolin is mixed with a Polymer and applied to the paper or wood surface to give a sealed, smooth or textured surface that can be scored or painted.

Prepared Boards:

Gesso is applied to seal and prepare a surface to accept paint. But which gesso should be used? Do you do this yourself or simply buy pre-gessoed boards?

I buy boards already prepared, it is too time consuming to do the preparation process myself. It requires a minimum of 7 applications of gesso, with careful sanding between layers, for a board to be ready to accept paint. That said I have become very picky about the boards I buy. As with all art supplies it is important that you know what you need before buying. There are numerous companies making boards, with a variety of surfaces, textured or smooth, receptive or non-receptive. I will give you my opinion, but I strongly suggest doing some testing for yourself, here are a few examples.

- *Ampersand's Gessobord*: Thin fiberboard, gesso applied very evenly. Available in smooth and textured.
- *Ampersand's Claybord*: This fiberboard coated with Kaolin Clay. Mostly used for Scratchboard these boards do make an acceptable surface for paint. While somewhat absorbent I find the smooth surface too slick, and the textured surface annoying. I do not paint on Clay board.
- *Realgesso*: Fiber boards thin and only claims 'several' coats of gesso! Not tested personally.
- *Panelli A Gesso Panel*: Natural 'Pioppo' board. Gesso too thin the texture of the pine wood comes thru. Available in smooth and textured. Used to be my favourite but not anymore.
- *Art Boards Gesso Panel*. 3/8" fiber board, 7 layers of sanded gesso. Very high quality. My personal choice.

AVOID any that say they are perfect for 'students or amateurs'. You are only as good as your tools.

Liquid Gesso:

- *Goldens* and *Liquatex* gesso in my opinion these dry to create a slick, completely non receptive surface. I feel like I am painting on plastic.
- *HP* Gesso has a more absorbent surface when dry. It is OK.
- *Art Boards* gesso, a very finely prepared gesso which, when dry, creates a smooth vellum-like eggshell surface which is slightly absorbent. My preference.

Again there are many products available these are the ones I have tested.

Paints:

I am listing just one company's product because I have had the most experience with them, and am completely happy with the results.

M. Graham & Co.

Cadmium Yellow – yellow with a red bias.
Azo Yellow – yellow with a blue bias.
Cadmium Red Light– red with a yellow bias.
Quinacridone Rose – red with a blue bias.
Phthalocyanine Blue – blue with a yellow bias.
Ultramarine Blue – blue with a red bias.
Titanium White

Additional Paint Supplies:

Matte Medium
Gesso Manufactured by Art Boards

Brushes:

I am still testing brushes. I do not like bristle brushes, they are too stiff. I much prefer a softer brush with some spring to it.

At the moment I suggest the following brushes:

- *Raphael - 8404 #2*. A Kolinski sable brush, though not traditionally used for acrylics, I much prefer it when working on fine detail. It is a brush that feels familiar in my hand I have used them for years, I know exactly how they will behave. As my method of loading the brush with acrylics is similar to watercolor or gouache, I only load the tip of the brush pigment, there is no chance of the un-rinsed paint drying in the ferrule. The brush tip does wear down, but I am used to that, it does not happen any faster than when using gouache.
- Robert Simmons White Sable 785 #4. A good brush for applying base layers.
- *Creative Mark - Mural #40 White Nylon Flat*. A wide, soft brush I use for backgrounds.
- *Creative Mark – Polar Flo Wash-Mate 3"*. A wide, soft brush I use for big backgrounds. Not an inexpensive brush, but if taken care of it will last for years.

The Italian Art Store - 800 643 6440 - excellent prices on brushes

Merri Artist: www.merriartist.com – excellent price on acrylic paint

Art Board and gesso can be ordered directly from the manufacturer 800-546 7985