

Why Varnish your Oil, Acrylic & Watercolor Paintings?

Every artist has their own favorite techniques for the final coat of their painting. In spite of all the available instructional literature, I am frequently asked to explain what one needs to know about varnishing their own paintings. The following is a short how-to course on the subject and makes no attempt to delve into the varnish history, its alchemy process or to answer questions about archivalness. These are matters endlessly debated among artists, manufacturers and the “archival police.”

Since You've Asked . . .

A liquid varnish is the final transparent coat applied over your painting to protect the paint surface from damage such as scuffing, humidity, dirt and air pollutants. Additionally, a layer of this varnish gives the painting an overall, uniform gloss or matte finish, adding a depth and vividness to your colors. For me, it makes the painting pop with brilliance!

For artists, there are two types of varnishes: The first is the traditional natural Damar oil varnish. Applied with a wide brush, natural Damar varnish has been the traditional varnish for oil painters. It has a minimum gloss finish and resists yellowing. Also known as a picture varnish, it is applied over the completely dried oil painting – typically one to two years later, two months later for alkyds, one week later for acrylics. It is an oil, so mineral spirits or turpentine is used for cleanup.

The second type is the contemporary, water soluble, synthetic polymer varnish for acrylic paintings. It is ideal because there is no oil odor, will not yellow, and it is water cleanup. It is a tough, yet flexible varnish medium. And later, for any reason, this varnish can be removed by using ammonia. Take note that some acrylic mediums, such as gel mediums, retarder mediums, and binder mediums are not varnishes and should not be used as a final varnish, mainly because it cannot be removed later.

Varnishing Oil Paintings

Dull spots may show on your oil painting as a result of several things, namely thinned out canvas primers, extra rough canvas texture or oils not evenly mixed with your

oil mediums. You can mix your own varnish finish. Every artist has their favorite recipe in obtaining an even, final finish. Traditionally, I dilute four parts Damar varnish with one part pure gum turpentine and a few drops of honey-like stand oil to slow down the setting of the varnish. After brushing on a thin layer, let completely dry. Apply a second thin layer as a final coat.

Varnishing Aquamedia Paintings

Despite popular belief, it is still a good idea to varnish acrylic paintings with a professional acrylic transparent varnish. Again, I don't recommend using gloss or matte mediums in lieu of a final varnish. The acrylic medium will attract dirt, but more importantly cannot be removed at a later time for cleaning. However, I recommend seeking out a water-thinnable, transparent UV acrylic varnish. Look for professional brand names, such as Holbein, Lascaux, Golden or Daniel Smith. These UV varnishes are highly adhesive, transparent, scratch-resistant, light fast and waterproof. The added ultraviolet inhibitor also stabilizes and protects the colors from fading. In my studio I use Minwax Waterbased Polycrylic Varnish, available in most hardware or home-supply stores.

They are tricky to apply so read the label. These varnishes have a tendency to foam up or dry in a hazy white film when brushed or rolled on haphazardly. I recommend using a soft wide brush and controlled even strokes. To insure the finish will dry clear, avoid back brushing or scumbling. Gloss, semi-gloss or matte finish are your choices when purchasing acrylic varnish.

Should you Varnish a Watercolor Painting?

Traditionally speaking, It is not necessary. For me though, it's a personal choice. I prefer the visual impact of varnish over all my paintings, including watercolor paintings. When I decide to varnish my watercolor painting, I do not apply a water soluble polymer varnish directly on my watercolors because it re-wets and dissolves the paint. Instead, I'll brush on an oil-based varnish or a Golden Varnish spray. . . **provided I have previously primed**

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my watercolor paper with an acrylic gesso. This pre-gesso preparation process seals the paper from absorbing the paint and varnish. Keep in mind this technique is a nontraditional way of preparing a watercolor painting. In other words, the paint remains and dries on the top gesso surface. When the painting has dried, I apply an oil varnish.

For “conservation advocates,” please also know that you can varnish traditionally executed watercolor paintings (ungessoed) by applying a spray sealing fixative to the finished painting. Golden manufactures a UV Archival Mineral Spirit Acrylic Varnish Spray. To seal the painting and prevent re-wetting, spray several light coats of fixative, letting dry a few minutes between each spray. Afterwards you can safely, but carefully brush on an aqueous varnish of your choice.

And here's yet another type of finish you might try: Dorland's Wax. Like waxing your car, buff the wax on the dried painting and follow their instructions, resulting in a soft, satin finish.

In summary, remember that *acrylic mediums* are added to your paints as a binder and to alter viscosity; not as a final varnish coat. Instead, use a *picture varnish* for oil paintings, using your favorite Damar varnish recipe. For all else, use an acrylic transparent UV varnish.

Try all these products. You will soon discover the appropriate varnish that fits your style and needs.



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