



## Artists' Attitudes Toward Art Materials #08

The history of oil paint making is 500 years old so I am not surprised that so much confusion has accumulated. I hear too much myth and magic when artists describe how they choose materials. Making 150 antique oil colors for the Smithsonian Institution showed me that painters today can choose to use art materials that would indeed make the Old Masters envious or they can choose to use junk. I suggest you only select art materials based on how the material or collection of materials contributes to creating your images. As you change the materials, you change the image.

### "The medium is the message."

Knowing more about my materials does not make me a better painter. Using the technical information does. This is why Gamblin Artists Colors Co. is committed to sharing correct and useful information with other painters.

**SUPPORTS** have different surface characteristics. If you want a flat enamel-like finish, start with a panel that has no texture. Panels are also good if you want the impasto of the paint to be at its maximum. Then the "landscape" of the paint will not be influenced by the texture of fabric. On the other hand, the texture of a fabric support can be useful for creating a subtle surface that diffuses the light falling on a picture. I suggest you choose to use linen or canvas based on the surface you prefer for painting. Neither linen nor cotton canvas will last as long as paint. Both will have to be relined in about 100 years so there is no "archival" advantage to using linen. Select fabrics that are not made with or sized with chemicals (anti-fungicides or preservatives, for examples).

**GROUND**s also have unique working properties. The question is how does the absorbency of the ground affect the painting surface. Paintings made with thick paint layers or with much resin medium are not influenced much by grounds. Paintings made with thin glaze layers are more influenced by grounds. Absorbent grounds, like [traditional \(true\) gesso](#) or acrylic gesso, pull oil from the initial paint layers making the surface matte. The more absorbent the ground the more matte the surface. Oil or [alkyd grounds](#) are non absorbent. Non absorbent grounds will leave all the oil in the paint layers so the colors of the painting are more saturated and brighter. If you choose to paint only on a SIZE like [PVA](#), apply size to both sides of the fabric, especially if the fabric is not tightly woven. Remember, regardless of how you paint, craftsmanship in preparing surfaces is as important today as it ever was.

**PAINT LAYERS** are obviously the most important element for developing your images. How do you put together your palette of colors? Have you appropriated someone else's palette or do you use a unique palette that reflects the artist that you are? By building your palette using the concepts of the [MINERAL COLORS & MODERN COLORS](#), you can use the characteristics of color intensity - the more muted mineral colors make colors of the natural

world and modern colors are more high key. You can use colors that make your images OPAQUE or TRANSPARENT. The physical characteristics of the colors influence color mixing, and determine the qualities of light reflected from your paintings. (For more information on the characteristics of oil colors, see [Artists Materials](#).)

**MEDIUMS** are confusing. Artists tend to focus on the materials (damar, [cold pressed oil](#), [refined oil](#), [alkyd](#), [stand oil](#), Venice turpentine, [solvent](#), etc.) rather than on the properties of the materials and the painterly effects they are working to achieve, including degree of gloss, balance between opacity and transparency, thickness of layers. Mediums have a few primary physical properties: viscosities, dry times, solvent evaporation rates, tack, and strengths of solids. I recommend artists think about the effects in terms of physical properties and then build a medium. Discard historical standards or romantic ideas. For example, it is not true that most Old Masters used varnish in their paint layers. In truth they had to use far less medium than we do today because oil paints ground by hand are thin. Artists' oil paints today are much stiffer so mediums are more important. For most of us, painting mediums can be concocted from a few components. The simpler, the better. Consider how to [reduce solvent exposure in your studio](#) by using mediums that are not made from turpentine.

**VARNISHES** Varnishing is an aesthetic decision. Many completed paintings have uneven surfaces—glossy in some areas and matte in others. A final coating will unify that surface. Gloss is produced by a resin varnish. For a matte finish, use a wax varnish. A low molecular weight varnish like [Gamvar](#) or dammar will also saturate colors to their fullest. I do not mean to imply that all paintings should have a final coating. The primary concern is how the painting looks. For some artists, their work looks best without a varnish.

This newsletter is intended to begin discussion among painters. By defining the layers of a painting, my intention is to help you sort out your own attitudes. Are your attitudes toward your materials useful or in your way?

If you have any further questions about artists' attitudes towards art materials, please feel free to [contact](#) us.

Sincerely,

Robert Gamblin



**Thank you very much for your interest in our Gamblin Studio Notes.**

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