

# Oils

Oil paintings have a great mystique and, in the minds of many, the medium is somehow more prestigious than others. On top of that cachet, oils have a tactile pleasure no one can deny. Their pure colors, buttery consistency and distinct scent are a sensuous delight. Oils are well suited for any genre and for almost any style, from quickly executed *alla prima* to carefully controlled underpainting followed by glazing.

Oils' long drying time lets you create paintings with delicate blending, fine detail and textural affects. On the other hand, oils' long open time doesn't let you make corrections immediately by layering wet over dry paint.

Oil paints are made from pigments and a binder, traditionally linseed oil, which is pressed from flaxseeds. Oil and pigment were combined and used as early as the 12th century, but traditional egg tempera was far more popular. By the 15th century, Dutch painters adopted oil as their primary medium; it provided far more versatility than egg tempera.

The late 18th century heralded the beginning of shops dedicated to the manufacturing of art materials and related items. By the mid-19th century, paints went from being ground by hand and stored in animal bladders to being kept in collapsible tubes similar to the type in use today. The ease of working with paint stored in tubes spurred the movement to look to the outdoors as a source of inspiration.

## What is Mediapeda?

Mediapeda is an encyclopedia of art media. *The Artist's Magazine* profiled a different medium in each issue of 2009. You can find previous installments at [www.northlightshop.com](http://www.northlightshop.com).



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## What does “fat over lean” mean?

“Fat over lean” is a basic rule oil painters follow to prevent layers of paint from cracking as they dry. Fat paint has more oil in it; lean paint has less. Paint with more oil will dry more slowly and will be more flexible than paint with less oil. If a lean layer of paint is applied over a fat layer, the top layer will dry before the bottom layer. A lean layer atop a fat layer will crack because it will have dried and become less flexible than the fat layer beneath. To avoid this, you should use more thinner in the bottom layer and increase the oil content in each subsequent layer.

## What’s the difference between traditional oil paints and alkyd oils or water-miscible oils?

Alkyd oil paints use a synthetic resin binder instead of linseed oil; it dries faster but otherwise has the properties of traditional oils. Water-miscible oil paints are made with linseed and safflower oil that’s been modified so you can use water instead of solvent-based mediums.

## Do I need to use a medium when I paint with oils?

Manufacturers use formulas to produce a consistent product, and many artists use oil paints right from the tube, with perhaps a bit of linseed oil to make them

more workable. If you’re concerned about the health risk of using solvents, using linseed oil to thin your paint and clean your brushes is a good option. Note that using excessive amounts of oil can result in yellowing or darkening of your painting. But using various oils, solvents and resins will let you play with the paint’s flow, gloss and transparency.

## Should I varnish my finished painting?

Varnish protects your painting from dust and pollutants. I suggest using a conservation varnish that’s easily removable—this allows generations of conservators to clean the painting.

An oil painting must be completely dry before varnishing, which may take up to a year if the paint was applied thickly. Traditionally, varnish was made from damar gum crystals dissolved in turpentine—damar varnish tends to yellow with age, however. Solvar varnish is a good choice because it’s non-yellowing, durable and removable.

## Can I use oil sticks with oil paints?

Yes and no. Oil sticks are made with the same pigments as traditional oils, with drying oil and wax, but they never dry completely. Try using oil sticks to create highlights on a finished painting.

# Chemistry

The pigments used in oil paints are nearly the same as those in watercolors and acrylics. Oil paints come in two grades, student and professional, the primary difference being the concentration of pigment or in some cases the method of mixing pigment and binder.

The binder in oil paint must be a siccative, or drying, oil that will harden over time into a stable film. When paint made with linseed oil is exposed to air, it doesn’t dry by evaporation as watercolors and acrylics do. Instead, it oxidizes into a dry solid. The process can take days or weeks to form a surface film, and even longer for impasto layers to solidify.

Linseed oil is obtained from flaxseed, and additives are used to alter the paints’ drying time and gloss. A few other options, such as walnut and safflower oil, don’t yellow as much as they age. All of these oils require organic solvents such as turpentine or mineral spirits for dilution and cleanup.

## Cleanup

Wipe off brushes with rags to remove most of the paint; then use a brush cleaner or mild soap and warm water. Dry brushes by laying them flat. Take used solvents to a recycling center—never pour them down the sink.





From top to bottom: Art Alternatives Gallery stretched canvas, Art Alternatives clear-gesso linen artist canvas, Ampersand Gessobord Museum Series panel and Fredrix oil-primed linen.

## Must-have tools

**Brushes:** There are two basic considerations when selecting brushes: the shape and the fibers. Although there are many different types and shapes of brushes, the most useful and versatile are rounds, flats, brights and filberts. Round brushes have round, pointed tips and are good for linear strokes. Flats and brights are square-ended, chisel-shaped brushes that are good for rectangular strokes. Brights have shorter hairs than flats. Filberts have flat, oval-shaped tips that can make linear strokes and broader strokes. Because of their versatility, filberts are the real workhorses in your brush holder.

Brushes can be composed of animal hair and/or synthetic fibers. Animal hair such as hog bristle has a natural springiness that's hard to duplicate. Hog bristle is the most popular animal hair for oil painting brushes; it's stiffer than sable or squirrel hair and well-suited for holding thick paint. Synthetic brushes might not have quite the same stiffness or carrying capacity of bristle brushes, but they're easier to clean, and they hold up well to solvents and repeated cleanings.

**Supports:** The most popular surface for oil painters is canvas stretched on a light, wooden frame. Canvas must be primed or the oil in the paint will harm the fabric.

- **hand-stretched canvas:** economical but tedious; good for customized sizes
- **pre-stretched canvas:** saves time, but avoid cheap, low-quality canvases
- **canvas on panel:** practical for small studies
- **hardboard:** primed panels are ready to use
- **wood:** must be primed; creates very smooth surface

**Palette:** The time-honored oil painting palette is the oval or kidney-shaped wooden board with a thumbhole, and there's an undeniable romance about holding a palette laden with paint. You should season a wooden palette by rubbing it with linseed oil several weeks before using it. Other options are palette paper, enameled butcher trays or glass slabs.

**Easel:** You need a rigid stand to support the canvas or panel. A studio easel can be a substantial affair, but an outdoor (French or box) easel can be light and portable.

**Containers:** with lids for solvents and mediums, and a jar for brush cleaner

**Palette knife:** for mixing colors on the palette

**Painting knife:** for applying paint to the painting surface

**Rags or paper towels:** for wiping brushes and general cleanup

### Tips

- Don't overmix colors—it makes them muddy and dull.
- Limit the colors on your palette to a dozen or fewer and learn to make the most of them; having too many colors to choose from is confusing.
- Keep two containers of solvent: one exclusively for diluting paint and one for cleaning brushes.
- Student-grade paint and materials are OK for initial efforts, but you should move on to better quality materials as you develop your technique.
- Using a toned ground makes judging values easier than when you use a stark white surface.

# Techniques

**Alla prima:** Paint directly on the canvas without an underpainting, finishing quickly.

**Impasto:** Apply a thick layer of paint that retains the textures of the brush or painting knife.


**Knife painting:** Use a painting knife to apply a textured layer of paint. The lack of precise control gives knife painting a freshness that's hard to achieve with a brush.

**Toned ground:** Working on a tinted surface adds color contrast to the subsequent layers of paint.

**Underpainting:** Start a painting with thin, quick-drying paint (such as burnt ochre and turpentine) to block in main shapes and tonal values before adding surface colors and detail.

**Glazing:** Apply a translucent layer of color over dry paint; use a glazing medium to increase transparency and flow. Patience is required.

**Scumbling:** Apply a broken layer of paint over dry or semidry paint, allowing the bottom color to peek through. Make sure to observe the “fat over lean” rule here.

**Drybrush:** Paint lightly over a textured surface with a brush bearing only a small amount of paint. 



## Safety

Many of the traditional pigments used in oil paint are potentially dangerous, in particular, some that contain lead, cadmium and cobalt. Materials that bear the CL (Caution Label) seal of the Art & Creative Materials Institute (ACMI) should be used with care and according to instructions.

Solvents such as turpentine and mineral spirits evaporate at room temperature so you must work in an area with good ventilation. Solvents are flammable and shouldn't be used near open flames; keep them in closed containers with lids until you use them.

Don't eat, drink or smoke when painting. Don't spray oil paint unless you're in a room with excellent ventilation and are wearing an appropriate mask. Consider using a hand-protecting cream, and wash your hands well after painting.

■ **Greg Albert**, author of *The Simple Secret to Better Painting* (North Light Books), lives in Cincinnati, Ohio.



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