

Acrylic: An Introduction

Here are answers to some frequently asked questions to help get you started.



1. **Why choose acrylics?** The best reason to choose any painting medium is that you have an affinity for it: you have seen it at work, admire it, and want to use it. Acrylic paint is remarkably diverse in its applications and results. Because there are so many surfaces on which you can work, so many effects you can get, so many methods you can try, acrylic paint is a great choice for the artist who likes to explore and experiment.
2. **What is acrylic paint?** It is a permanent water-media paint made of pigment suspended in acrylic polymer emulsion. It is, in other words, plastic! Being a water media, it cleans up easily with water, and water can be added to the paint to thin it, as with watercolours. Like watercolour, it dries fast. Unlike watercolour, acrylic paint can be mixed with a wide range of specially created mediums to remarkable effect.
3. **Are acrylics difficult?** An often-expressed opinion says that acrylics are the easiest of the three major painting mediums (acrylics, oils, watercolours). Acrylic paint is more flexible than oil paint, and can be used on a wider range of supports, including raw canvas. In fact, acrylic doesn't need a support: use it on a plastic surface and peel it off when it is dry. An acrylic painter need not observe the same strict painting practices as other painters and can experiment in a number of ways not open to watercolourists or oil painters. The difficulty of acrylic paint may simply lie in making the best use of the paint itself.
4. **Are acrylics expensive?** As with other paints, the student grade of acrylics is less expensive than the professional grade – and has less pure pigment, thereby making for less vibrantly coloured paintings. Also, some pigments, like cadmiums, are expensive, but closely matched substitutions are available. Without mediums, acrylic paints are less exciting to use. Mediums extend the paint, as does water, but with a variety of desirable results that differ considerably from water's simple thinning of the paint. Therefore, you will want to consider adding the cost of some mediums to the cost of paints.
5. **What is needed to make an acrylic painting, besides acrylic paint?** Feel free to paint on canvas, primed or raw, stretched or unstretched; on other fabric; on wood, on almost anything, and use brushes, with synthetic fibres or palette knives, or fingers, or pour the paint on – versatility is the hallmark of acrylic painting. You can embed things into your paint, print textures, create strings of paint, make mounds of it, make skins of it....It is worthwhile to do some research on acrylic paint or take a short introductory class on the many ways it can be used. Learning to use acrylic mediums will only enhance your painting experience and lead to new discoveries.

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6. *How important are mediums to acrylic painting?* Mediums for acrylic paints range for those that thin the paint, making it more like watercolour, to those that thicken it to oil-paint consistency, as well as those that texturize the paint so that it resembles plaster or that modify the colour. Some add gloss, others matte the paint. Each acrylic paint company has at least one, and sometimes a great many, mediums, each with a special purpose. Aside from their use with acrylic paints some mediums, such as gels, are used in image transfers and in multimedia projects. You are not exploring acrylic paint if you are not exploring mediums.
7. *Are there any drawbacks to acrylics?* Acrylic paints cannot carry the same pigment load as oil paint, and some painters prefer oils for that reason. Acrylic paint dries quickly, but additives can be used to retard the drying process. The Golden Open line stays workable for longer than other acrylics, and is a soft, blendable paint, making it desirable for some styles of painting to which regular acrylic is not suited.
8. *How versatile are acrylics?* Acrylic paint is so versatile you can do more than paint with it. You can sculpt with it, cut it and shape it. It is durable. Likewise acrylic mediums are used in many contexts. Mixed media works can benefit from the use of acrylic paints and mediums. Acrylic skins can be used as a ground for printing images.
9. *What about technique?* Acrylic paint is fairly new, having first been marketed in the 1950's. No centuries-long tradition is attached to acrylic painting, leaving the painter free to choose any style that suits. Traditional painting in a number of genres and styles can be convincingly imitated, but, equally, new innovative projects are possible. You are the artist – you decide!
10. *Should acrylic paintings be varnished?* After an acrylic painting is thoroughly dry, let's say six months from completion, a removable varnish can be applied to give the surface coherence and to protect from dust and dirt. Many painters question the need for varnishing, because they mistakenly think of a very glossy finish; varnish, however, can be matte or semi-gloss as well as gloss. It is a matter of preference.

