

Encaustics: Getting Started

Encaustic is composed of natural beeswax and pigment; damar resin is most often added, sometimes other waxes or oil paint, too. Molten encaustic is applied to a surface and fused by applying even heat to create a lustrous, enamel effect. The waxy, semi-translucent natural colour of beeswax imparts an exquisite visual property. Encaustic can be created in thick layers for appealing tactile effects. It is very durable, since wax is impervious to moisture, and over time will retain all the freshness of a newly finished work.

The history of encaustic includes paintings on the sides of Greek and Roman ships, Pompeian frescos, as well as the Egyptian Fayum portraits on sarcophagi (100-300 AD). Many of these paintings still exist and have held up beautifully over time. Although its history goes back more than 3000 years, encaustic is so versatile that, in recent times, it has achieved popularity as an unusual alternative to oil and acrylic paints. In the 1950s, for example, modern master Jasper Johns used the medium to create his iconic flag and target paintings.



What has particularly attracted modern painters, whether they work in contemporary or traditional styles, is the spontaneity and variety with which encaustic can be used. This traditional medium has increased in popularity at The Paint Spot, too. By popular demand, we stock R&F Encaustics and Enkaustikos Hot Cakes and Hot Sticks, as well as waxes, encaustic gesso and boards, and a variety of encaustic tools.

The process of working with encaustics is personal and experimental. It may consist of brushing or pouring on countless layers of wax, or scraping away or carving into the wax, inscribing text or marks, as well as painting with oil paints or oil bars, drawing or transferring marks or images on top of the layers. (Charcoal transfers work very well, capturing the artist's gesture and the characteristic texture of charcoal, without smudging.) Encaustic can be laid on in delicately thin glazes or super thick encrusted impastos. Images can be placed between the layers of wax. Its adhesive qualities make it an excellent collage medium to which can be added foils, paper, glitter, string, or found objects, for example.

A mixture of common and specialist supplies can be used in encaustic painting. Electric griddles and frying pans can serve as palettes; a specially designed encaustic palette is also available from R&F. A hot palette provides a platform on which to keep knives and brushes warm and ready to use. Colours can be melted directly on the palette, but is it better to keep them separated in cups such a muffin tins. Only natural hair brushes should be used: synthetic brushes will melt. Palette knives, carving knives, razors, spatulas, scrapers, modeling tools, dental tools, etching tools, electric irons (or Encaustic Art brand encaustic irons), and found objects can all be used to create distinctive marks. We also have R&F heated spatulas with temperature regulators and interchangeable tips.

Encaustics are best used on a rigid support, such as a wood or heavy card. Rag museum board, heavy printmaking paper, watercolour paper or raw canvas can be used if mounted onto a rigid support. Do not use acrylic gesso or oil primer. These grounds are not porous enough for the purpose. If the support itself is porous, and you like the color of it, no

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ground is necessary. You may want to apply a coat of plain beeswax first so your first layer of colour does not totally soak into the support.

Encaustic paintings are completely safe under normal temperatures. Only direct heat or temperatures in excess of 130°C may begin to soften the wax. Indirect sunlight is acceptable, but, of course, direct sunlight is not ideal for paintings of any medium. Encaustics can be gently cleaned with a soft cloth such as cotton.

The surface quality of encaustic paint can be left rough and matte or worked to a semi-gloss or lustrous high-gloss, enamel-like finish. Encaustic paint cools in minutes, which means additional layers can be added almost immediately. Once the surface has cooled, the paint has reached a permanent finish. A process called fusing finishes an encaustic painting. Use a heat-gun to melt together and unify each layer. A finished encaustic painting can be buffed for a more polished look. But the painting can also be revised and reworked at any time – whether seconds later or years later.

Tip: Oil painters may simply be interested in Gamblin's Cold Wax Medium; when added to oil paint, it creates an encaustic effect. It is also useful as a final, protective layer on oil paintings. Without buffing, it looks quite matte, with buffing, it becomes satin.

Excellent books on this topic are in stock. Check our workshop listings for upcoming encaustic classes.