

Watercolour: How to Varnish

Imagine if a watercolour could be varnished like an acrylic or oil painting and framed without a mat or glass. The appeal is great — no more glare, no more cracked or broken glass, lighter to transport and easier to store. The good news: there are now a number of new products to help you. The bad news: this is an experimental, and somewhat controversial, process.

In fact, there are some in the watercolour field who disagree aesthetically with varnishing, claiming the results can no longer be called a watercolour. We explain it would simply be called an 'encapsulated watercolour.' Some artists have found that their encapsulated watercolours sell well. For your reference, here are some of the suggestions we have heard about. You can conduct your own experiments and decide how you want your watercolours presented.



Watercolour paper that is to be varnished needs a firm support beneath it. There are several suitable choices:

1. Ready-to-use watercolour boards (140-lb. watercolour paper mounted to mat boards) and watercolour canvases (Armadillo Art & Craft Bockingford Watercolour Paper; Fredrix Archival Watercolour Canvases).
2. Absorbent ground applied to canvas so that it will hold watercolours. Golden Absorbent Ground is an acrylic polymer used to prepare a gessoed canvas, birch panel or Masonite to create a more watercolour-receptive surface.
3. Watercolour paper mounted on board. Regular watercolour paper, even 300 lb. paper, must be mounted to a stiff backing board; thus, the painting can sit in a frame like an oil painting (no glass or mats are needed).
4. Masonite that is finished on both sides needs to be gessoed on the side receiving the paper.
5. Birch panels need no gesso; instead, watercolour paper can be directly mounted onto it.

Golden Regular Gloss Gel is an excellent brush-on adhesive to adhere regular watercolour paper to a rigid surface.

Tips for Varnishing Watercolours

Remember to photograph all artwork before varnishing or it may show a reflective sheen.

Apply varnish with an airbrush: You may use an airbrush to apply isolation coats and varnish. Any airbrush will work, using a wide spray pattern. Aztec Single Action Airbrush kits come with compressed air in cans and are easy for novices to use. The air compressor must be adjusted to 35 to 45 psi. **Note:** Always wear a chemical spray mask while varnishing, and mount an exhaust fan in a window.

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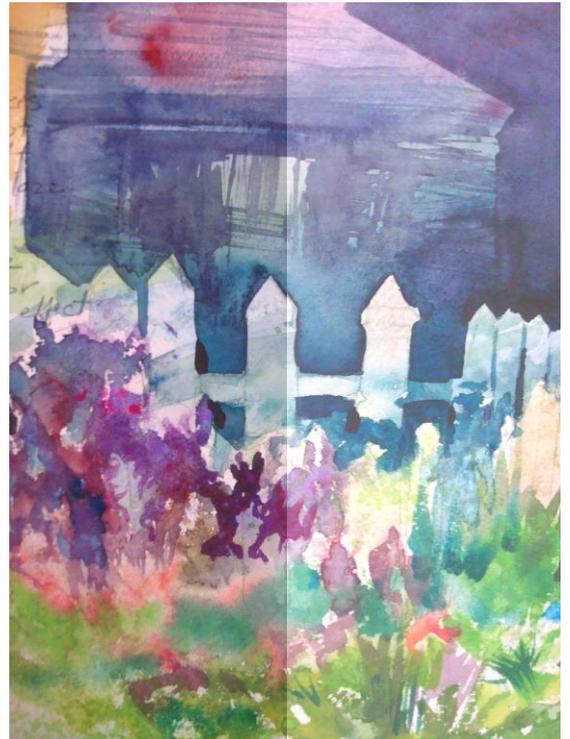
1. Apply an isolation coat. Its purpose is to seal the watercolour so that subsequent layers of varnishing do not disturb your painting. It is wise to take a careful approach at this stage so that nothing is smudged or marked. Spray two coats of Golden GAC 500 diluted with Golden Airbrush Medium. This will protect the original watercolour. It acts like an acrylic sealer that keeps the varnish from touching the original, and allows the varnish to be removed later on if needed. Keep the airbrush about 6-8" away from the original. Let each coat dry thoroughly at least 1/2 hour.
2. Apply the varnish. Golden Polymer Varnish UVLS is a concentrated, water-based varnish (available in gloss, satin, or matte). It should be mixed 50/50 with the Golden Airbrush Extender to run more smoothly through the airbrush. UVLS stands for 'ultraviolet light stabilizer,' which will help protect your watercolour from fading. Ideally, you should use 6 to 8 coats of the final varnish. Let each coat dry thoroughly.

Because the polymer varnish requires extra care and may permanently bond with the GAC 500 (which is also water based), Golden MSA (Mineral Solvent Acrylic) Varnish is preferred by some artists. It is easier to remove from the acrylic isolation coat using Stevenson painting solvent. Golden MSA Varnish UVLS also comes in a ready-to-use spray can. Simply apply 8 to 10 coats to your rigidly mounted watercolour and you will be able to frame it without using glass.

Another popular use for the versatile MSA Varnish is protecting prints, laser prints, inkjet copies and other reproductions.

WARNING: Don't rush the coats of varnish. The mounted paper can become too damp and it will bubble or warp. Let each coat dry for at least a 1/2 hour. Humidity is a factor. Touch the paper, and if it is cold or cool let it continue to dry. (Another note of caution for painters who scrub out areas and damage the paper: this can really show up when you varnish, especially in dark areas of the painting.)

Allow the varnish to dry (cure) overnight before framing.



Gloss Varnish can make colours look richer.

All MSA Varnishes have UltraViolet Light Filters and Stabilizers (UVLS) providing archival protection reducing light damage.