

Acrylic: Tips for Beginners

An Introduction to Acrylics

Acrylics are notably fast-drying, permanent, and versatile. First marketed in the 1950's, acrylic paints continue to be popular because they are adaptable, convenient and economical. Technically, these water-soluble paints are pigment in acrylic polymer emulsion—plastic—meaning they are different in composition from either oil paint or watercolour, and have their own properties.

Acrylics are used for canvas, wood, or paper painting (with or without acrylic gesso), decorative art, airbrushing, screen printing and fabric painting; almost any non-greasy or degreased surface will take acrylic paint. Heavy-body or fluid, acrylic comes in a very wide range of colours, container sizes, and there are a number of brands available.

Artists are able to customize the appearance and working properties of acrylic colour by adding gels or mediums. Shine levels can range from matte, satin or gloss. The texture of paint can be water-thin to thick-impasto (and everything in between). Transparent or opaque is another option. Even drying times can be somewhat controlled. As you can see, acrylics go well beyond mimicking oil and watercolour: they offer a distinct, enormously versatile means of creating visual art.



Old Master technique uses many layers of transparent, thin glazes to create glowing paintings. Gloss makes dark colours appear richer.



Impressionistic technique uses opaque layers painted on top of each. Here we have used matte (non-shiny colours) so there are no reflections but colours appear brighter and less rich.



Acrylics can be used like watercolours on paper but they are not re-wettable. This technique is often used for under-paintings.



Use gels to thicken acrylics for palette knife or for impasto brush strokes. More texture often means less detail.

There is a wide selection of gels, mediums and speciality acrylic paints to afford the artists diversity and novelty. Do not be intimidated we are here to help you.



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Several quick distinguishing points about acrylics:

- They can be matte, semi-gloss, or gloss, depending on the brand, or on the medium with which they are mixed.
- *Fluid* acrylics more obviously resemble watercolours, *heavy body* resemble oils.
Like watercolour, either can be thinned with water (never more than 50%) but, unlike watercolour, they do not rewet. Like oil paint, both can be made thick, juicy, and impasto, or layered in fine glazes. Unlike oil paint, they dry quickly and will not yellow with age.
- Tools used for acrylic application include brushes, palette knives and silicon blades and wedges. They can also be sponged, poured, dripped and thrown. Air brushes are also available.
- Dry acrylic paint is flexible. In fact, acrylic 'skins' can be created by pouring or layering the paint onto a surface from which it can be easily removed, such as a sheet of plastic. The skins can be shaped and carved.
- An ever-growing number of *mediums*, including fluids, pastes, and gels, modify their behaviour and appearance. The key to getting acrylic paint to perform at its utmost capability is mediums and gels.
- Acrylic mediums and gels can be used independently of paint. For example, objects can be imbedded or impressed into gels, among a myriad other project possibilities.
- Mixed media art can use acrylic paints advantageously: drawing materials like charcoal, pastel and ink can be applied over or under paint, while any number of materials can be added into it—sand, glitter, objects.
- Acrylic paint will dry to the touch in 1 - 5 hours, depending on its thickness, and will become tough and permanent after about a month.
- Acrylic paintings can be varnished (with Polymer Varnish or MSA Varnish) after a suitable drying period.
- Acrylic is used in making printing and writing inks, gouache, markers and spray paint; these have similar properties to acrylic paint.



Making your paints last longer and go further:

Although acrylics can be used straight from the container or thinned with water, mediums are invaluable in exploiting the versatility of acrylic paint. Moreover, they will keep the paint film strong and lustrous, where water can tend to weaken it. Both gels and mediums can be added to artist colours to make a larger volume of paint.



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Using acrylics

Paint may be applied with a dampened brush, kept damp or cleaned with water while in use. Palette knives are useful for applying paint, as well. A range of plastic palette knives is useful. A plastic palette allows for the easy removal of paint film or skin when dry. Sta-Wet palettes will help keep paint wet between uses.

Alternatively to plastic or Sta-Wet palettes for mixing colours, you might use glass sheets or disposable paper. Other ways of extending the palette time (open time) of your acrylics during use are by adding retarder or Golden Acrylic Glazing Liquid, or by spraying your work and palette with a mist of water. A humidified room will also help them dry more slowly.



Additional Information Brushes, silicon blades and wedges, palette knives

If you are painting with acrylics on canvas or board, for example, you will most likely want to acquire a range of brushes. We can show you a range of brushes from small to large in flat or round shapes. If painting detail is important to you, choose the smaller sizes. For broad expressive strokes, use large brushes. We would be happy to explain what the other shapes will do for you, such as filberts and brights. We have a preference for synthetics - one of the reasons is the ability to rejuvenate synthetics when they get bent by dipping them very briefly into boiling water. (This will not help if it has a paint build-up in it. Very dried-on paint can be removed with Windex.) Another advantage is their long life and durability.

There are other tools to consider, too, such as various blades and wedges in silicon, metal or plastic. Serrated edges, angled blades and other such shapes are well worth considering for the range of marks they will make. Try moving two colours into one another with a spatula shape, or combing one colour over another with a serrated palette knife.

Easels

We have many types to choose from, depending on your needs. The most economical is a tabletop easel, used to paint while sitting. For the home studio, and for working on larger pieces, consider a floor easel. These are available in many sizes and prices. If you need an easel for classes or painting outdoors, portable easels are available, too.

Several of our acrylic brands are Canadian: Pebeo, Stevenson, and Tri-Art. Tri-Art is a professional-grade product, available at a reasonable price. Tri-Art makes both thick-bodied, high-viscosity acrylic and liquid acrylic, as well as acrylic mediums, gels, additives and gessos. Tri-Art makes a student-grade acrylic called Rheotech. Golden is our top line, with heavy body, liquid and Open lines ('Open' are slower drying). Like Tri-Art, Golden offers a very wide range of gels, mediums, and additives for you to explore.



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Colour Mixing

Beginning painters should feel free to experiment with their colours and their paint. In colour mixing, the 3 primary colours, red, yellow and blue, can be mixed to obtain many other colours including purple, orange and green, and even a nice range of browns, greys and blacks. For example, try Crimson Red with a touch of Ultramarine Blue and see the glorious purples they make. Or try Azo Red and Phthalo Blue for a more subdued purple. For some brilliant greens, use a pinch of Phthalo Blue with Hansa Yellow. Other similar primaries will give you variations on green. A suggested palette of about 12 colours can be used to mix, to produce virtually any colour you may desire. A colour wheel is a handy way to look at what combinations to try. For more information, colour mixing guides are available in our book department.

Workshops

To learn more about the versatility of acrylics, we recommend you attend one of our introductory workshops. Hands-on experience, as provided by our knowledgeable instructors, is great for learning about the unique ways you can use acrylics.

We hold other workshops on different specific topics such as painting with light and colour, abstract acrylic painting, and mixed-media collaging, the last of which makes use of many acrylic products, including paints, mediums and gels. Check our workshop schedule and register early.



Successful colour mixing is incremental additions of a dark colour to a light colour. Experiment with your palette to discover that different versions of primary hues will mix different secondary colours.

For more information on Acrylics visit the Advice Library on our website.



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