

ACRYLIC PAINTING by Gainor Roberts



The photo above shows a *small* sampling of acrylic gear. Acrylics are manufactured by many paint companies, Liquitex, Golden, Basics, SoHo, Galleria, Daniel Smith, and so on. The paints come in a number of formulas with names like *Fluid Acrylics* (suitable for glazing), *Open Acrylics* (designed to stay wet longer), *Heavy Body Acrylics* (yielding thick impasto strokes) and of course the old fashioned regular acrylics in tubes that many painters favor.

After sorting out the paints the artist is confronted with a multitude of mediums to add to the paint: varnishes come satin, matte, gloss, and various gels and retarders that make the paint flow, or stay wet longer. There are also many additives to acrylic paint that can build up an area on a painting like modeling paste that can be sanded, carved and painted over creating interesting effects. Sand, mica, pearl iridescent colors, and odd things such as pasta and rice are available for the experimenters in Acrylic painting. The possibilities are endless.

Acrylic paints as we know them today began to be marketed as artist materials in the early 1960s. The binder for acrylics is basically plastic, a polymer resin that is mixed with the pigments used in all paint. Like Oils and Watercolors, the quality of Acrylic paint is based on the quality of the pigments, binders, and fillers. To insure proper color mixing, stick with well known and moderate prices rather than cheap paint. Acrylics are water based. Clean up is easy with soap and water, but it is imperative that clean up be done immediately or else the acrylic is there for good. It does not remove easily from tools and canvases.

The many techniques artists have derived for working with acrylics are endless, and they can be made to produce exquisitely fine work as well as wild abstract paintings. Thinned with water, acrylics can imitate watercolors, but in working acrylics the artist will find that the washed layers will dry very fast and be impenetrable so lifting and over washing techniques are generally not successful in acrylic painting. The acrylic painter can glaze in backgrounds and easily paint on top of that to create the landscape on top, adding lights and darks without worrying about keeping the paper white.

Because acrylics dry extremely fast they can be worked over without the under layers mixing into the wet paint. Artists love to be able to layer their paint creating instant opaque sections to the painting, or thinned with water or mediums to create glazes of color that won't lift when worked over with another glaze. Some artists glaze their paintings with 10-15 layers of thin paint to achieve the desired effect. Any technique can be transferred to Acrylic paints, realist, surrealist, impressionist, abstract expressionist, and so on. Many craft and industrial applications are designed for acrylics like small sculpture projects and faux wall paintings, murals, and sign painting.

Keep in mind that when experimenting with Acrylics you will have numerous surfaces to work on, stretched canvas, various panels, papers, and boards as well as fabrics. Acrylics need to be applied to acrylic gesso surfaces to insure good bonding except, of course when painting on fabrics.

It is said that acrylic paintings done in the 1960s have survived without any cracking, fading, or yellowing; these are the downside of oil paintings that are not applied correctly. Some conservators say acrylic paintings won't be archival, but evidence is mounting that acrylic paintings are completely archival and will withstand the test of time, perhaps better than most other media.

Acrylic paintings are very often used for mixed media techniques where the painting includes other media such as ink or pastel. The clear mediums are sometimes used as "glue" for collages, and varnishes and sprays can enhance the final look of the painting to make it glossy, matte, or satin, depending on the effect the artist wants.

Palettes:

There are a number of palettes available for the acrylic painter, designed to keep the paints wet longer. Many painters don't bother trying to save their paints from session to session, and work on prepared paper palettes that are available from suppliers. Many acrylic artists like the butcher tray to work on, while others prefer a glass plate that can be cleaned of dried paint with a razor scraper. Baking parchment paper is sometimes used as a palette, and even plastic coated dinner plates are used. More expensive lidded boxes are on the market, some of which are designed to take wet sponges and papers to keep the humidity high inside the box. I know one acrylic painter who's palette is a length of aluminum foil. I would hate the reflectivity of that surface but you can get used to anything, I guess! I have found that when mixing a large quantity of paint for a background of one of my abstract paintings I can store the leftover in a small tightly lidded plastic container, and is useful for later touchups if the paint chips on the edges in transit. Trying to mix the same color at a later time would never work as acrylics often appear slightly changed when dry.

Brushes:

Acrylics are hard on brushes so many art suppliers have lines of brushes available for that medium alone. The paint may be applied in many styles, thick or thin, as mentioned above, and the right brush will be a matter of experimentation. Many artists like bristle brushes, like an oil brush. Some like the synthetic nylon brushes that are available in abundance in the art stores. WASH your brushes frequently. Dried paint in a brush will render it useless very quickly. Some artists have devised ways to keep their brushes under water during a painting session to prevent the paint from drying. Always wash with soap and water after the painting session when working with acrylics.

Techniques:

Many artists will give the whole canvas a wash of color before starting the painting. In acrylics, white can be painted over darks, and several layers can be added to intensify the white. In watercolor preserving whites is important, and in some oil painting techniques the white canvas is preserved for the rendering of highlights. This alone gives the artist a great flexibility for establishing tonal values in a painting, much like working in the classical style where the artist always worked on a toned canvas. Working the paint, "wet-in-wet" is not terribly easy in acrylics, so adding retarders and gel mediums allows the painter to blend areas. Some artists blend these areas with a cotton swab of special blending brushes. Other tools include rubber tipped tools that smear and remove paint, palette knives apply thick strokes, and paint may be easily splattered, sprayed, or sponged onto the canvas or board. You can apply paper tape to make straight lines on a painting, much like masking off parts of a wall.

Clean Up:

Acrylics are thought to be less toxic than oils, but the pigments are the toxic part of the paint, while oils require solvents for clean up acrylics can clean up with water. How responsible we will be about the environment depends on how much we are painting, and the accumulation of paint and water. Small quantities of acrylic water may be safely poured down the sink. Larger quantities of acrylic painting water may be left to evaporate in a bucket and poured off into a drain, or into the ground, while the accumulated gunk should be disposed of in the trash. Left over paints are better disposed of in the trash rather than cleaned up in the sink, and disposable paper palettes are very convenient for this purpose.

Gainor Roberts 34730 Sturgeon Loop, Zephyrhills, FL 33541
gainor@tampabay.rr.com

813 469-1641
www.gainor.biz