

OIL PAINTING by Gaior Roberts



These are photos of raw pigments. Pigments are mixed with a variety of oils but linseed or safflower oils are the most common oils used in our modern paint. Oil paint was adopted by artists in the early Renaissance and quickly became the medium of choice for painters because of its ease of blending the paints into smooth and flowing areas of color. Prior to oil paint, artists used Egg Tempera which dried instantly and was extremely difficult to blend, as in a sky that started darker at the top of the canvas and gradually became lighter as it neared the horizon. Because oil paint stays wet for longer periods of time blending the paint, or working “wet into wet” produced results that the artists of the Renaissance were looking for in their work.

The paint tube was invented in 1841 and this invention changed the way artists approached their work. Renoir said “Without paint in tubes, Impressionism would never have happened.” Prior to the paint tube there were various ways artists could store small quantities of paint, but they were clumsy and difficult to carry around, so working “en plein air” was impossible if you had to lug around your paint in glass jars, or pig bladders.

The chemistry of oil paint is extremely interesting, although quite a complex subject! There have been many failed paintings over the centuries, due to the fact that oil paintings have a tendency to crack if there is too much oil laid on in the early layers. The “fat over lean” rule is something artists are taught early on in art school. The idea is to make your early layers very thin, without the addition of extra oil. One beautiful method of painting is to make glazes of paint, building successive layers of paint using very thin paint, diluted with oil. This method of painting must adhere to the “fat over lean” rule, otherwise the canvas will surely crack. As artists and chemists continued to experiment with oil paint new methods were invented. The Impressionists used very little glazing in their paintings, preferring to use paint applied in thick dabs of color while earlier painters smoothed out their strokes so there were no brush marks.

Our modern tube paints contain a variety of other ingredients, beside oil and pigment. Purists tend to feel that these additives can cause problems many years later, and will only use the finest paint. Unfortunately the finest paint is also the most expensive. These additives also cause cheap paint to make unreliable color mixtures, so that a red and yellow make a muddy orange, rather than a vibrant clear orange. There are a few inexpensive brands of paint on the market that will mix fairly well: Georgian Rowney paints are quite nice and a new brand called SoHo works well, and comes in very small tubes that are extremely affordable. Most artists prefer to use mid-range or expensive paint, as they have been thoroughly tested for lightfastness and will stand the test of time. One of the most expensive brands on the market is Old Holland and their paints are wonderful but way out of my price range. A mid-priced paint I like very much is Rembrandt Oils. Most paint manufacturers today have several lines of paint; one for professional artists and one for students. Most painters grow weary of trying to get satisfactory mixes from inferior paints and graduate to the professional level of paint rather quickly.

Light will damage any painting. Pigments that are not lightfast will fade quickly and over the centuries most of these “fugitive” pigments have been identified and avoided in oil paint. Paint manufacturers have devised a system of letting us know the lightfast quality of each pigment and it is usually placed on the tube itself, in the form of a number or lettering system that rates the paint from totally lightfast to not lightfast at all. Most of our modern pigments are lightfast and quite safe to use although a few are less stable in light, such as Alizarin Crimson. Knowing the less lightfast colors will allow us to avoid the excessive use of those colors in our work, insuring that they will last at least for our children’s lifetime and probably for our grandchildren’s or longer if care is taken.

Pigments are derived from several sources, mostly mineral and vegetable. But a few pigments have derived from animals, such as red cochineal from a beetle, and purple from the murex shell giving the ancient Greeks their Royal Purple togas, and cochineal is still used by dyers, and by the cosmetics industry. You didn’t know that your lipstick color came from a beetle, did you? Other colors come from plants, such as saffron and indigo, but these colors are not stable in oil paint and so mostly we find our pigments today come from chemical bases that are made in laboratories or from minerals and heavy metals that are mined and further processed to obtain colors. The more expensive paint tubes contain cadmium, lead, and cobalt. Many people are afraid of the toxicity of oil paint, and it is a valid concern. Lead is not used in oil paint very much these days, and cadmium and cobalt are so expensive alternative synthetic colors have been invented to replace these pigments. If you have a tube of inexpensive cadmium red, it is very likely that it contains no cadmium at all, and will often be called “cadmium red hue”, which is artistspeak for a pigment that resembles cadmium red but isn’t. Only small amounts of solvent need be used in oil painting, mostly for brush washing and a wipe of the palette, but it is always necessary to heed the advice that you should always wash your hands after painting, never eat, smoke, or use paint in unventilated spaces and never put your brushes in your mouth!

Artists have long sought the perfect medium for making their paints flow better, glaze better, and dry faster. There are many oils that artists use for these purposes: stand oil, oil varnish mixes, various oils mixed with resins and gums, sun thickened linseed oil, poppyseed oil, walnut oil, and so on. Today many artists are happy with Liquin, which is a mixture containing alkyd resin which improves the brushability of oil paint, as well as making them dry faster. Unlike many oil painters, I use no additives or oils in my paint, preferring the raw paint as it comes from the tube, and only add linseed oil to paint that has thickened to the consistency of peanut butter.

Oils are traditionally done on canvas or linen fabric that has been primed and sized to isolate the paint from the fabric. Wood panels as well as a variety of hardboards and plyboards are available for oil painters. Paper is not a good support because the oil in the paint tends to damage the fibers in the paper, but some artists have worked on cardboard, papers of all kinds and they have lasted for a long time.

All sorts of brushes are used with oil paint, and the type of hair and the style of the brush is usually about the artist’s choice and how the paint will be applied to the support. Oil paint can be applied thickly with a variety of palette or painting knives, or applied in thin glazes thinned with oils or turps, with a dry brush scrub called scumbling, in tiny strokes, blended so no brush marks show, or in virtuoso and flamboyant strokes of thick paint, like in a Van Gogh.

All subject matter is explored in oil paint; landscapes, portraits, abstracts, quick studies, and huge formal murals. It is a very versatile medium that, when properly applied, can withstand the test of time, become amazingly luminous, and can be worked anywhere the artist chooses.