



THE THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES THAT ARTISTS MAKE

As long as a few basic rules are respected, oil paint gives the painter a myriad of techniques and modes of operation at his/her disposal; from beautiful glazes to impasto work. Yes, oils tend to yellow over time affecting the colours, and yes, they can develop cracks when improperly applied, but all mediums have their inherent problems. Of far more concern should be the fact that many artists aren't even aware that cracking can occur in an oil painting! Often this is because it can take some time for the cracks to appear and by then the painting has already been sold and the artist is blissfully unaware of what may be happening to it! In this 3 part series we will be discussing the 3 biggest mistakes that oil painters make:

- 1) Too much solvent
- 2) Not sticking to the 'fat over lean' rule
- 3) Varnishing too soon

The essence of oil paint is the thin coating of oil on each particle of pigment. It provides not only the vehicle to move and bind the pigments to a surface; but it is also what gives it its luminosity, depth, versatility, and unsurpassed brilliance. This coating consists of a "drying" oil such as linseed oil. The oil dries through oxidation (a chemical reaction between the oxygen in the air and the oil) and not through evaporation. This oxidation process creates a remarkably durable and flexible paint film. If you understand the nature of the oil, it is an easily mastered medium.

USING TOO MUCH SOLVENT:

What is a solvent:
The pigments in an oil paint are not dissolved in the oil, but rather they are suspended in oil. Some examples of the suspension are linseed oil, poppy oil, safflower oil and walnut oil. The pigment is bound together with the oil, and a solvent is needed to thin the traditional oil paints.

Genuine turpentine is one of the most well-known solvents for oil painting, but there are many others.

GENUINE TURPENTINE (also known as gum turpentine, oil of turpentine, and distilled turpentine) is the traditional solvent used in oil painting. It is a natural product distilled from pine trees. It blends beautifully with oil based paints when thinning is required and will clean and protect expensive paint brushes much better than mineral spirit. Genuine turpentine can be absorbed through the skin, and releases harmful vapours.

MINERAL TURPENTINE (also known as white spirits or mineral spirits) is a petroleum derived solvent that is not as good a solvent for oil paint as genuine turpentine, and is also slower drying. Generally the mineral turpentine available at hardware stores is of very poor quality and not very refined. It is not absorbed through the skin, but still releases dangerous vapours

ODOURLESS MINERAL SPIRITS (also known as odourless turpentine, odourless white spirits or odourless mineral turpentine, odourless thinners) is a petroleum derived solvent that has a moderate evaporation rate and little to no odour. Odourless mineral spirits is not absorbed through the



skin, and the harmful volatiles (toxic aromatic hydrocarbons) have been removed, to make it a much healthier alternative to turpentine.

More and more artists are finding that they have developed sensitivities, allergies and reactions to the solvents used in oil painting. Skin contact with turpentine can cause drying of the skin, dermatitis and skin allergies, while inhalation can lead to dizziness, headaches, drowsiness, nausea, fatigue, loss of concentration and respiratory irritation.

In short, odourless mineral spirit is a mineral turpentine that has been further refined to remove the more toxic aromatic compounds, and is recommended for oil painting as a healthier option to genuine turpentine.

One should be a bit more discriminating when using a solvent as an ingredient in a painting medium. It is a good idea to avoid the cheaper, bulk quantities of solvents sold in hardware stores, because they are usually not pure enough for mixing into oil paint for fine art work.

Always use a pure solvent especially suited for artists, as these do not leave any residue after evaporating from the pigment film.

Why is using too much solvent a bad thing?

Very few artists realise that a large part of the cost of a tube of paint is actually for the labour required to mix the pigment and the oil- to properly coat each pigment particle. This is a laborious process, and one that requires a certain skill level. A solvent will thin the paint film, spreading the pigment particles and oils farther apart on the surface of the ground, weakening the bond and speeding the drying time.

Adding too much solvent to one's paint will weaken the paint film by effectively stripping the protective coating of oil off the pigment particles, which can cause the paint particles to fall off in a powder.

Solvents thin the oil colour by diluting the oil (which is why the more correct term for solvents in this case is actually dilutents). If too much is used, there will be insufficient oil remaining to bind the pigment. A matt or uneven finish will

appear on the painting, it will be more brittle in structure, and the work will be susceptible to scuffing and damage.

The best way to avoid over thinning is to add varying proportions of oils to turpentine to turn it into a 'medium'. A medium is simply a pre-mixed blend of a drying oil, possibly a resin, and possibly a solvent, which is added to the oil paint, to facilitate handling, and/or enable transparency of layers, and/or increase the gloss and enhance the colour intensity of the paint.

Finding the perfect balance for every stage of your painting - enough solvent for thinning and enough oil to maintain the integrity of the paint - can take some practice.

In the beginning of your painting you will generally need a more 'turpsy' layer for your under painting and initial drawings. Next, a more viscous layer is needed for the over painting which is heavier with oil (and contains less solvent). This method also follows the 'fat over lean' rule (which will be discussed in the following issue), and gives a foundation for the construction of the painting to avoid cracking.

Labelling on solvent bottles can be misleading, especially since solvents go by many different names. Be sure to ask your local art shop about the different solvent options and which is most suitable for you. Art shops shouldn't just be there to provide you with products, but also to inform you about the use of those products and answer any questions that you may have.

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