

The three biggest mistakes that artists make part 3:

VARNISHING TOO EARLY

The most important reason for varnishing your painting is to protect it from the environment in which it is hanging. No matter which room in a house the painting hangs (or even in a gallery), there is always dust, pollution, pollen, and other particulates that embed themselves into the picture surface over time. This will slowly dull and darken the painting, obscure fine details, and give it a dirty look.

It's impossible to properly clean a dirty (unvarnished) painting without removing some of the painting surface itself. If however the painting has been varnished, the varnish fills up a lot of the microscopic nooks and crannies found in dried paint, to reduce the number of hiding places for the dirt, and also provides a surface for the dust and grime to stick to instead of the paint layer.

Less dirt will stick to the painting, but when, over time, there has been a build-up, the varnish can be removed and replaced without affecting the painting surface.

There are a few added bonuses to varnishing an oil painting:

- Varnishing 'lifts' the colour and increases depth of colour.
- Varnishing also helps to even out a finished painting that has dried with varied matte and gloss patches, giving it a uniform sheen.
- Many varnishes come in matte or gloss or something in between, so by varnishing your painting you are able to raise or lower the final level of gloss that your finished work will have.
- Some varnishes offer UV protection

If you varnish an oil painting too soon, it will crack!

An oil painting that is varnished before it is completely dry will develop cracks because the varnish will dry before the oil paint does. As oil paint dries it moves slightly, and since the varnish is already dry it will begin to crack (similar to the fat over lean principle discussed in the previous edition).

The dry layer of varnish also prevents oxygen from getting to the underneath oil paint which is absolutely essential to the drying of the paint film. Without oxygen, the oil is incapable of forming all those nifty linkages that turn it into a highly durable layer. The paint layer will never fully dry, eventually proving unstable in a number of ways, which can cause sunken spots, and further cracking.

Where varnish has been applied too soon, a painting containing thicker layers of paint will develop larger cracks than a painting painted with thinner layers.

After about a week, most oil paintings are dry to the touch. This does not mean that they are completely dry! It takes an average oil painting six months to 1 year before it is dry enough to varnish.

Even the use of drying agents such as Drying Gel Medium, Liquin, Galkyd etc will not mean that you can varnish after a shorter amount of time.

Remember that these alkyd products will increase the time it takes for your oil painting to be touch dry, but they are unable to accelerate the full oxidation of the entire layer, and anything that gets in the way of the oxidation process is going to compromise the long-term stability of the painting



Well what must I do then?

In most cases, it is not reasonable for an artist to hold a painting for six months, let alone a year.

It is a good idea to always apply a retouch varnish to your painting once it is touch dry. A retouch varnish is a temporary varnish that offers protection to the surface of an oil painting and can be used before a painting is dry enough to receive a final varnish.

It is reduced with solvents and is much thinner than final varnish, allowing the paint to continue with its oxidation process.

Remember, a final varnish will still need to be applied after a suitable amount of time.

There are a few added bonuses to retouching an oil painting:

- Retouching 'lifts' the colour and increases depth of colour.
- Retouching also helps to even out a finished painting that has dried with varied matte and gloss patches, giving it a uniform sheen.
- Retouch varnish can actually be painted over once its dry, unlike final varnish. Since retouch varnish is not a complete layer, paint added over the varnish is able to penetrate through and bond to the paint under the incomplete varnish layer.
- Some varnishes offer UV protection

As a reputable painter you should apply a layer of retouching varnish to your painting before it is sold. Best practice would be to stick varnishing instructions to the back of the painting, or offer to apply the final varnish yourself when the time comes.

Buyer beware - if an artist does not know about proper varnish procedure, you may be dealing with an amateur who has not used archival techniques.

Don't be afraid to ask questions:

Any good art materials shop should be able to help you with all your technical questions relating to painting. Make use of their service and you will find that you will learn a great deal.

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The array of different varnishes out there is vast, from spray on to paint on, from oil-based to water-based, from retouch to final varnish, from gloss to matt, etc. Don't simply walk into your art shop and buy the first varnish you come across, rather spend some time asking the shop assistant about the properties of the varnish, and which one will suit your painting; about the different drying times and final appearance it will give to your painting.

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