



Preparing a good ground

Many artists get confused about the act of priming and the different products available on the market for this integral part of support preparation. It's not surprising since terms like 'gesso' and 'oil primer' can have more than one definition, and to further complicate the matter, the word gesso is often incorrectly used as a generic term to describe the act of priming a canvas.

In this article I will try to explain the importance of using a good primer, as well as the different options available to the artist. There are many different products available and many for specific use on a certain type of painting support. For the purposes of this article I am focusing mainly on canvas as a painting support. As with so many factors when it comes to painting, there are different schools of thought on the subject of priming, each with their own merits. In this article I will express the opinions that we at The Italian Artshop have developed from years of study, research and experience.

FIRSTLY, WHAT IS A PRIMER?

A primer is something that is applied to your support to give a suitable ground for your painting. Once dry, the primer separates the paint from the canvas and also gives you a surface that is desirable for painting. Painting directly onto your canvas may not give you the correct absorbency or feel, and depending on the support, may not give you enough adhesion.

When painting with oil paints, priming (and the quality of the primer) is of the utmost importance. This is because if the oil from your paint comes into contact with raw canvas, it can rot and deteriorate the fibres over time.

WHAT IS A SIZE?

A size is applied before priming with an oil or alkyd based primer to protect the fibres of the canvas from the rotting effects of the oil and fill in the holes in the canvas weave. Think of it as a pre-primer. There is no need for sizing when using acrylic based primers. It is the acid in linseed and other oils that can be detrimental to the canvas fibres, which is why you need to isolate the canvas from oil based primers.

Traditional sizes are made from animal hide glue, rabbit skin glue is the most commonly used and is available from all good art material shops. One of the problems with rabbit skin glue is that it is hygroscopic, which means that it absorbs excess moisture from the atmosphere causing it to expand. When the humidity drops, the glue casts off the excess moisture and contracts. This can lead to cracking of the paint layers on top.

A good alternative would be to use a quality acrylic resin. It

is cheaper, fast drying, and applied straight from the jar (hide glue is typically sold in pellet form and needs to be dissolved in water). Acrylic resin becomes water insoluble when dry, so there is far less swelling and contraction - speak to your local art supply store for more info on the best acrylic resin to use as a size.

One can safely paint directly onto a correctly acrylic sized canvas, though most artists prefer working on a white, smoother ground, hence the need for a primer. Remember that Oils become increasingly transparent over time and an opaque white primed surface will reflect back the maximum light. Raw canvas can also be very rough.

PRIMERS:

There are three main primers available on the market today, all of which are applied directly from the jar/tin using a brush: **1) OIL-BASED PRIMER** (only for oil painting). This is basically an oil paint formula of pigment and oil, but with the oil content kept as low as possible. It is not widely available or widely used because of the high cost, long drying time and the fact that it is imperative to apply a layer of sizing underneath the primer.

Oil based primers have also been known to become brittle over time, which can cause cracking especially on flexible supports such as canvas. For this reason we do not recommend this type of primer.

Oil based primers containing lead white pigment (instead of titanium white and/or zinc white) tends to be the most flexible and far less likely to crack, however it is very expensive and because of the hazardous nature of the pigment, very difficult to get hold of.

2) GESSO (for oil or acrylic painting). Gesso seems to cause the most confusion amongst artists, and this is because you get traditional gesso and modern gesso:

TRADITIONAL GESSO is made by adding powdered chalk, calcium or gypsum to a size, usually rabbit skin glue. It is very rarely used these days because of its lack of flexibility and poor longevity on canvas. Traditional gesso is rather like

a plaster and was designed to be use on rigid surfaces. It should never be used on canvas.

MODERN GESSO, also called acrylic gesso or acrylic primer, consists of clear acrylic resin, pigment, and an inert absorbent filler. Acrylic gesso (which you will find in all art shops today) is great for paper, canvas and panels, and the best part is that it can be applied directly onto raw canvas without the need for a size. This is because a good quality acrylic gesso provides enough isolation between the fibres of the canvas and the future layers of paint. Due to the size of particles found in acrylic gesso it dries to a slightly gritty surface which can be lightly sanded to get a smoother effect.

3) ALKYD PRIMERS (can be used for acrylic painting but designed for oils). Also known as oil painting primers since they have by large replaced traditional oil primers (creating even more confusion!). An alkyd primer is made with a special alkyd resin and designed as a primer for oil paints. Although a relatively new product for artists, alkyd primers have almost completely replaced the traditional oil primers because they do not crack and are designed to remain more flexible over time, giving them better longevity. Alkyd primers are non-absorbent and will allow oil paints to dry glossier and more vibrant

Alkyd primers are thinned with turpentine and it is recommended to apply a thin coat followed by a thicker one once the first has properly dried. The drying time will be brand specific, but usually about 2 days between layers. We believe that alkyd primer is the best primer for use with oil painting because it is easy to use, relatively fast drying, and most importantly, has a compatible molecular structure for the binding of oil paints to the surface. Whether you need to size your canvas before using an alkyd primer depends on the brand as some do not contain linseed oil. Check with your art store before you purchase any primer.

Priming is the act of preparing a support for painting; either the two step method using a size and an oil primer or the more modern one step acrylic method.

A size prevents oil in a primer from interacting with the fibres of a canvas.

A primer provides a porous surface for the paint to adhere to and also adds an extra layer of isolation between the canvas fibres and the oil in your paint.

WHICH PRIMER IS BEST FOR ME?

If you are painting in acrylics your decision is very easy: an artist quality acrylic gesso is the only primer recommended for acrylics (no sizing required).

When it comes to oil painting there are a few more decisions to be made. The first is a controversial one and although everyone has their own opinion, there is no definitive proof to back up either side of the argument 'should you paint oil on top of acrylic'.

The main argument here is that over time the bond between the acrylic gesso primer and the oil paint can become compromised because an oil film becomes harder and more rigid over time and the acrylic primer remains too flexible.

However, recent research suggests that the large particle size in today's acrylic gesso primers provides a surface which gives sufficient adhesion for the paint film. Acrylic gesso has been in use for sixty years with far fewer problems being reported than with oil based primers, and many oil painters prefer this primer over others because of its convenience.

If you believe that oil should be painted on top of oil and you don't mind a longer drying time or using turpentine, then you should be using an alkyd primer. Alkyd primers are generally a little more expensive than acrylic gesso, but priming is an incredibly important stage in your painting process and not the time to cut costs.

The second factor to consider is your personal taste: how rough or smooth, and the level of absorbency you desire. Acrylic gesso is typically more absorbent and rougher than alkyd primer. The majority of oil artists need a surface that is not too absorbent, so that you can easily 'rub out' or 'wipe away' during the underpainting. This is a popular technique whereby the initial wash of colour is applied, and then the lighter values are established by wiping it away. A canvas that is too absorbent will not wipe away properly as the paint will be sucked into the primer immediately.



WHAT ABOUT READY PRIMED CANVASES AVAILABLE AT MOST ART SHOPS?

Most ready-made canvases are typically primed with an acrylic gesso (universal primer) which makes them suitable for both oil and acrylic painting. Be aware that not all ready-made canvases are made using a good quality primer. More often than not it is a good idea to add an extra coat of primer to ensure that you have a good long lasting ground on to which to paint your master piece, especially if you are using oil paints.

A poorly primed canvas may absorb too much or too little oil, or can absorb the oil unevenly, leaving you with dull patches in your finished work. An inferior primer may also leave tiny pinholes of un-primed surface that will allow the oil in the paint to penetrate and rot the canvas over time. An extra coat of primer will also give you a smoother surface to work with. Some of the very cheap ranges often use a top coat of sealant, giving you a shiny slippery surface which completely defeats the purpose of the gesso. Often you will find that the paint slides around on this type of canvas and can sometimes even slip off as if the primer is repelling the paint! The bottom line is that we do not recommend that

you buy cheap ready-made canvases, and if you do, it is advisable to apply your own coat of primer before you paint. But why spend money of good quality paints if your canvases may deteriorate anyway or cause your painting to crack?

WHAT NOT TO USE

Your canvas and primer are the foundation of your painting and should be of the best quality possible. All primers, but especially acrylic gesso can vary greatly in quality. Try to avoid cheap student quality gesso and especially house paint! A poor quality acrylic gesso will often have excessive fillers and not enough acrylic binder (this is a cost cutting technique), which gives you a primer that will not be long lasting and that will be too absorbent and cause cracking in oil paintings.

Yes, an artist quality acrylic gesso will cost more than a student one, but that is because the artist quality version will be made with a better quality resin, more pigment, and higher opacity and covering power so that it will go further.

WHEN PRIMING ALWAYS REMEMBER:

- Never buy a primer without consulting your local art shop. Different brands require different usage in terms of how thin the layers should be and how many layers need to be applied.
- Never prime your canvas in a hurry. Even acrylic gesso's need a good amount of drying time and its always safer to give them an extra week or so more than what the manufacturer recommends.
- If you are sizing your canvas first, make sure that your initial layer is thinned down so that it coats all the fibres instead of just sitting on top of the canvas.
- If you are using rabbit skin glue, loosen the canvas on the stretcher first (it will tighten as the size dries). If it is too tight to begin with, it could tear as it dries and becomes too taught.

HARDWARE STORE PVA AND HOUSE PAINT.

Often used by decorators and house painters, PVA (poly vinyl acetate) is made from a different acrylic binder to that of artists acrylic gesso.

PVA is never recommended as a primer because it becomes brittle with age and disintegrates over time. It is especially to be avoided on stretched canvas because once it becomes brittle it loses it's adhesion on flexible supports when they move. PVA is designed for use of rigid surfaces like walls and wood and doesn't handle flexible supports well at all.

The addition of other chemicals and inferior pigments is another reason not to use this product. Certain chemicals can leach through to the surface of your painting over time, causing irreversible staining. PVA typically has a life span of about 5-20 years depending on quality, which is why you have to repaint your house every so often.

Think about it, if PVA was a good primer for an art work, why is it not available from any reputable brand of art materials and not found in any good art shop. We do not recommend the use of PVA or any house paint in your paintings

CONCLUSION:

Always use the best quality primer you can get! Other than quality, it is a very personal choice, so we suggest that you try some of the different options available before settling on one. Make use of your local art store; ask about the different options available and what would suit you best.

WIN!

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