

# Oil Painting Mediums

*Some of the most common questions that we get asked at the Italian Artshop revolve around mediums. The word 'medium' seems to cause great confusion among artists, from beginners to experienced painters.*

The word 'medium' has 3 different meanings when it comes to painting:

1) Medium can refer to the type of paint used by an artist, such as oil paint or watercolour paint. e.g. "My medium of choice is acrylics, but I also paint a little in oils".

2) Medium is sometimes used to refer to the actual binder in paints (acrylic resin for acrylics, oil for oil paints, gum Arabic for watercolour paints etc).

3) The word medium also describes any substance added to paint in order to alter the consistency and other qualities of paint. In this article we are using the term 'mediums' to refer to these oil painting additives.

Once we understand that we are talking about painting additives, and oil painting additives for the purpose of this article, there is still a second reason for confusion - the sheer number of painting mediums and recipes out there.

Because 'medium' refers to pretty much any substance (or mixture of substances) that one can add to oil paint, when somebody tells you that they are using a medium, it doesn't really tell you much information at all.

A painting medium primarily extends the oil paint without losing too much of the colour intensity. Adding turpentine to oil paint will extend it, but it will also make the mixture

'wishy-washy' and 'watered down'. Adding a painting medium will make the paint more fluid, but will still help to retain a lot of the colour intensity. Of course you don't have to use a medium when painting in oils, you can paint very successfully using the paint directly from the tube. It just limits your options when it comes to technique and the final look of the painting.

Extending the oil paint is just the first thing a painting medium does.

- It alters the consistency of the paint- it can be thick and stiff to help with impasto and palette knife work, or fluid for expressive painting and glazing.
- A painting medium can alter the speed at which the oil paint dries- speeding up the drying time so that you can apply the next layer, or slowing it down if you prefer to work wet on wet
- A painting medium can also alter other qualities of oil paint, effecting both the transparency/opacity and the final look of the dry paint from gloss to matte.

Once you know what effect you want from your painting medium, it's much easier to make sure you buy the right 'ready to use' one, or buy the right ingredients to mix your own. In order to do this you need to know the properties of the available ingredients. These are some of the more common ingredients used, found at all good art shops:

INGREDIENT	PROPERTIES	DRYING TIME
<b>Linseed Oil (drying oil)</b>	Let's start with this one because after turpentine it's probably the best known of the oil painting mediums and is the most commonly used oil in South Africa. Linseed oil is made from the seeds of the flax plant. It is used universally as a stand-alone medium for oil paint or can be mixed with other ingredients to achieve a custom medium. It enhances the gloss, transparency and flow of oil paint and dries relatively faster than most drying oils. Remember that linseed oil yellows over time and not all linseed oil is created equal! Cheaper linseed oil is refined using harsh chemicals that interfere with the painting process and tend to yellow much faster. Make sure always you use a good quality oil.	3 - 5 days
<b>Stand Oil (drying oil)</b>	Stand oil is generated by heating linseed oil near 300 °C for a few days in the complete absence of air. It is thicker than linseed oil and is slower drying (can stay tacky for quite some time). It's an ideal ingredient for a glazing medium because it leaves a gloss-like finish which does not show brush strokes. Stand oil does yellow over time, but not to the same extent as linseed oil.	4 - 6 days

INGREDIENT	PROPERTIES	DRYING TIME
<b>Poppy seed Oil (drying oil)</b>	Poppy oil is a very pale oil, more transparent and far less likely to yellow than linseed and stand oil, so it is often used for whites and light colours. It gives oil paint a consistency similar to soft butter. Poppy oil takes longer to dry than linseed and stand oil, making it ideal for working wet on wet.	5 - 7 days
<b>Walnut Oil (drying oil)</b>	As it yellows less than linseed and stand oil (but more than safflower oil) Walnut oil is often used for whites and light colours. Walnut oil is faster drying than poppy oil but slower than linseed and stand oil.	4 - 5 days
<b>Safflower Oil (drying oil)</b>	Safflower oil has similar characteristics to poppy oil, but dries a bit faster.	5 - 6 days
<b>Dammar varnish (resin)</b>	This is a great ingredient for painting mediums as it adds gloss and transparency to oil paint. Dammar also enhances the brilliance of oil colours. It dries quickly, but for some artists it can get tacky too quickly. It can be brittle when dry so should be used sparingly.	Fast drying (depends on the amount of Turps added)
<b>Venetian (or Venice) Turpentine (resin)</b>	Derived from European larch trees, this resin has the consistency of honey and adds a unique lustre and gloss to glazes while enhancing the brilliance of oil colours. Some artists prefer it to dammar varnish because it doesn't get tacky as quickly. Venetian Turpentine is often used combined with Stand Oil when a perfectly smooth, flat, gloss finish is desired.	Slow drying
<b>Oil of Spike Lavender</b>	This solvent has similar properties to that of genuine turpentine, but is more powerful. It improves adhesion to the lower layers of paint which can be important when painting in many layers. Dries more slowly than turpentine. Because of its strong solvent power, it needs to be used sparingly to avoid the softening of underneath paint layers.	
<b>Copal (resin)</b>	Copal is the name given to a diverse group of fossilized tree resins found mostly in Africa. Adding copal varnish directly to oil paints makes them very fluid, much like syrup, so that they behave like enamels, becoming smooth and fast-drying. With copal-thinned oils it is possible to produce effects ranging from transparent brushy textures to striking drips and drops. Can darken with age.	
<b>Cobalt Drier</b>	Cobalt drier accelerates the drying of oil paint and is a traditional ingredient in oil mediums. This is an ingredient for those more experienced with painting mediums, as it needs to be used sparingly.	
<b>Alkyd Resin</b>	Alkyd resin (such as Liquin, Galkyd, and Maimeri Drying Gel Medium) accelerates drying time and increases the transparency of oil colours.	
<b>Other driers</b>	There are other driers also available on the market that can also be added to your painting medium to speed up the drying time. White drier and Courtrai drier are examples.	
<b>Beeswax</b>	Typically beeswax used as an additive for oil paints has been bleached in sunlight, which also renders it odourless. Beeswax gives oil paints a more satin/matte finish while shortening the drying time and adding body.	

Now that we understand some of the more common ingredients used in painting mediums and how each may affect your painting, here are some recipes to try out:

#### Basic Medium:

- 1 part Damar varnish
- 1 part linseed oil
- 1 part genuine turpentine

This is a perfect general medium. Can be used for most techniques and is great for glazing. You can also substitute the linseed oil for stand oil. This will alter the feel of the medium and is a personal choice.

#### Glazing Medium:

- 2 parts stand oil
- 2 parts Damar varnish
- 1 part Venice turpentine
- 1 part genuine turpentine (add more if you find this too thick)

Both stand oil and Venice turpentine are fairly self-levelling, so this medium will not show brush marks as much as the basic medium and will give your painting a smoother look. Thanks to the jewel-like properties of the Venice turpentine, this medium gives your oil painting a stained glass look. It's perfect for glazing and will allow you to create soft, diffused highlights (think of Vermeer's 'Girl with the red hat' and 'Study of a Young Girl').

#### Impasto medium:

- 5 parts Beeswax paste
- 1 part Damar varnish
- 1 part Stand oil
- Turpentine to thin if needed

This medium mixes perfectly with oil paint to achieve a buttery consistency and helps with the drying time, especially in the case of impasto painting.

The beeswax paste can be mixed directly with your oil paints (if you want it thicker for palette knife work) without the addition of the Damar varnish, stand oil and turpentine-it depends on your personal preference.

Use beeswax sparingly on flexible surfaces. If you are painting on a stretched canvas which is very flexible then it is advisable to add the stand oil. You can also try to add some alkyd resin to this medium to speed up the drying time and lessen the matte effect.

#### Slow drying medium:

- 1 part Stand Oil (can also use half stand oil and half walnut oil to extend drying time even further)
- 1 part Venice Turpentine
- 1 part Oil Of Spike Lavender

Very similar to the glazing medium, but slower drying due to the oil of spike lavender and the walnut oil.

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*A medium is going to do one or more of six things: It will make the paint thinner or thicker, more glossy or more matte, and either dry faster or dry slower.*

Once you've found a medium that works for you, it's useful to mix a larger quantity in a bottle and use it over a few months (no more than 6 months) rather than make a fresh batch every time you paint.

There are 3 main ways to apply your painting medium:

- Probably the most common method is to dip your brush into the medium as you are mixing colours on your palette, thus mixing the medium directly into the paint that you are just about to apply to the canvas.

- Paint a thin layer of medium directly onto the canvas and then paint into it. This is great for blending, but be careful not to overwork.

- Dip the tip of your loaded brush into the medium just before each stroke is applied to the canvas.

Painting mediums become far less daunting once we understand how each of the ingredients affects the paint. Visit your local art shop and enquire about the different ingredients and mediums available, they should be able to help you with the perfect recipe for your needs.

Sometimes you are just looking for a certain feel, and other times you are trying to create a certain effect using your painting medium. Whatever the case, remember that it all comes down to personal preference. Experiment with different mediums and have fun with them, hopefully you will discover a wonderful mixture that works perfectly for you.

### TIPS FROM The Guru

#### TIPS:

- Use your painting mediums sparingly and try not to add more than 20% medium to 80% paint, except when glazing.
- Always remember the cardinal 'fat over lean' rule when painting in oils.
- Remember that the drying time of your oil paints is not only dependent on the painting medium you use, but can also be influenced by the brand of paints and the actual pigments used. The drying times mentioned in this article are just guidelines. Certain pigments (like zinc white and most blacks) are slow drying, and others (like umbers and siennas) are fast drying.
- You can add drying agents (like alkyd resin or white drier) in small amounts to any painting medium to speed up the drying time.



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