

Varnishing acrylic paintings

Not everyone chooses to varnish their acrylics. The benefits of applying a coat of varnish to an acrylic painting are: to improve the appearance of, and unify the finish of the work; to make it easier to clean; to provide a barrier to dust, pollutants, and physical damage.

Although acrylic varnishes are essentially easy materials to apply, there are pitfalls to avoid. Below is an abbreviated summary of some of the steps you should take to avoid problems many artists have experienced, to their disappointment. These comments are intended to provide useful information to our best ability, but are not to be considered complete instructions on varnishing paintings.

1. Use products which are labelled as varnish, rather than mediums/gels. There are significant drawbacks to using medium in place of varnish: the coating will remain slightly tacky when dry and therefore actually attract and hold dust; and it is not reversible (removable) as a varnish should be.
2. Most acrylic varnishes are somewhat concentrated, and require thinning for use- they are like honey, too thick to be brushed on. Dilute them just enough (typically 15-20%) to obtain a brushable liquid.
3. MSA Varnish (solvent-based) cannot be thinned with one of the odourless solvents. These mild solvents are very good for other uses in the studio, but are too weak for thinning mediums and varnishes. Use only one of the full-strength solvents or artist-grade turpentine (distilled or rectified). Even some solvents not labelled as odourless are actually too weak for this use and may cause milkiness or increase the thickness of the mixture. Test for compatibility before diluting any quantity of your MSA varnish. Thin only as much varnish as is needed for the job, and do so just before using it. Any thinned matte or satin varnish not used will tend to settle hard and become very difficult to re-stir.
4. If a matte or satin finish is desired and you wish to apply more than 1 coat of varnish (two coats are adequate in most cases), the first coat(s) should be made with gloss varnish. Only in the final coat should matte or satin varnish be used, to avoid the possibility of a foggy appearance.
5. Be sure to allow sufficient time for the paint to dry before varnishing so as not to impede further drying, and to avoid 'bloom' from the still-present moisture. Other defects can be caused by too-early varnishing. For thin layers this will be 2 weeks and for very thick paint layers, you may have to wait 2 months. A dry surface does not necessarily mean the paint is thoroughly dry.
6. The most common mistake is failure to mix matte and satin varnishes thoroughly before applying. The result is a patchy or streaky finish. Matte and satin varnishes require complete mixing. But to avoid generating bubbles, which may remain on the painting after drying, the mixing should be done by stirring, not shaking. Be careful not to create bubbles, either by shaking the varnish or by overworking the application. Also, proper thinning of the varnish will help the bubbles to break and disappear.



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7. Never paint over a varnish layer. Paints will not adhere well to varnish, and the paint layers will be lost when the varnish is removed for restoration. Varnish is to be a final layer only.

8. It is always important to make a test application on a material similar to the piece you have painted, before you apply the varnish to your painting. In this way you can see just what the effect will look like before you commit yourself. If a miscalculation is made, make it here.

9. Be certain that the brush or other tool you use to apply the varnish will hold up to such use. We know an artist who followed the teacher's advice and used a foam (sponge) brush to apply polymer varnish. The foam deteriorated during the application and left particles of the foam imbedded in the varnish. The only remedy was to painstakingly remove the entire film of varnish — a nasty job. Use good bristle or soft natural hair brush.

10. A seldom-considered step, highly recommended for acrylics (a step unavailable to oil painters), is the application of an isolation coat of soft gel before varnishing. This offers a barrier coat over the paint for protection during removal of the varnish. Soft gel (gloss) is the only gel for this use as it has excellent clarity and good brushability with little foaming. Dilute 2:1 gel to water.

11. Whenever possible, lay the newly-varnished work flat (horizontal) in a dust-free area to dry so that no runs occur. Apply an aerosol varnish to the work also in a horizontal position.

12. We are often asked about coverage of the varnishes. You should expect to cover 400 to 800 square feet with each gallon of (diluted) varnish.

This wide range represents the many variables encountered in painting varnish onto a wall, such as wall texture, viscosity or thickness, method of application, wastage, evaporation rate and more. If you are not sure about any of these points, please feel free to ask us. We are able to assist.

GOLDEN has excellent information on the use and application of its varnishes.

These are the 'brush-on' acrylic varnishes available at The Paint Spot:

- Golden Polymer Varnish, gloss (water-based)
- Golden Polymer Varnish, satin (water-based)
- Golden Polymer Varnish, matte (water-based)
- Golden MSA Varnish, gloss (solvent-based)
- Golden MSA Varnish, satin (solvent-based)
- Golden MSA Varnish, matte (solvent-based)
- Stevenson Polymer Varnish, gloss (water-based)
- Stevenson Polymer Varnish, matte (dries to a satin finish)
- Tri-Art Topcoat, in gloss or matte

Spray varnishes are also available for oil and acrylic paintings, including Golden's Aerosol MSA Varnishes.

About using spray varnish

For best results

- Start spray before the edge of the canvas, and stop after it, with the nozzle fully depressed
- Apply 2-3 light coats, not 1 heavy coat
- Lay canvas horizontal to spray
- Spray in a ventilated area as the spray is toxic
- Spray with nozzle inverted to clear it when completed, to avoid clogging
- Let the work dry standing upright in warm, clean area.



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