

Varnishing oil paintings

Not everyone chooses to varnish their oils. The benefits of applying a coat of varnish to an oil painting are to improve the appearance and unify the finish of a painting and get rid of 'sunken-in' areas; to make it easier to clean; and to provide a barrier to dust, pollutants, and physical damage.

Although varnish is essentially an easy and useful material to apply to your oil paintings, some pitfalls must be avoided. Below is a short summary of some steps you should take to avoid the common disappointing mistakes many artists have made. These comments are intended to provide useful information to our best ability, but are not to be considered complete and final instructions on varnishing paintings.

Liquid brush-on varnishes:

1. Liquid varnishes in jars may be concentrated, **requiring thinning**, otherwise being too thick to be brushed on. Dilute them just enough (typically 15-20%) to obtain a brushable liquid. When it feels right on the brush, it's ready to use.

2. Solvent-based varnishes **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 mineral 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 a small amount with the solvent for compatibility before diluting any quantity of your varnish.

Thin only as much varnish as needed for the job, and do it just when needed. Any thinned matte or satin varnish not used up will tend to settle hard and become very difficult to re-stir.

3. If a matte or satin finish is desired and you wish to apply more than two coats of varnish (two coats are adequate in most cases), then the first coat or

two should be **gloss** varnish. Matte or satin varnish should be used only for the **final coats** to avoid the possibility of a foggy appearance. Gloss varnish will not fog.

4. Do not varnish your oil paintings until the paint is fully dry. Oil paints require a long time to be fully dry, or cured, so to be safe, **wait at least six months**, or even a year. There have been many cases of oil paint being peeled or blistered by the turpentine, and this is usually attributed to the paint not being completely cured before being varnished. If the oil paint was applied very thickly, without driers, you might want to wait even longer.

5. A common mistake is **failure to mix thoroughly** matte and satin varnishes before applying. (Gloss varnish needs no mixing.) The result is a patchy or streaky finish. Matte and satin varnishes require thorough mixing, but to avoid generating bubbles that may remain on the painting, the mixing should be done by stirring *not* by shaking. Be careful not to create bubbles either by shaking the varnish or by overworking it during application. Adequate prior thinning will help any bubbles to break and disappear.

6. Never apply varnish in a humid room as this may cause 'bloom', a foggy appearance. Be sure the room is clean, dry, and free of dust.



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7. Do not **paint over** any varnish layer. Paints will not adhere well to most varnishes, and further, the paint layers will be lost if the varnish is to be removed for restoration. Varnish is for a final layer only.

8. **This is probably the most important tip—** **Make a test application** on a material similar to the piece you have painted before you apply the varnish to your painting. This test panel should also be dry. In this way you can see just what the effect will be 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 used a foam (sponge) brush to apply polymer varnish. The foam deteriorated during the application and left small particles imbedded in the varnish. On discovery the next day, the only remedy was to pains-takingly remove the entire film of varnish — a nasty job. **A good bristle or soft natural hair brush is best.** NB: On larger works such as a mural, a roller is also likely to cause bubbles.

10. Whenever possible, lay the newly-varnished work horizontally in a dust-free area to dry so that no runs occur.

Tips on the use of spray varnish

For best results:

- Spray over the work while it is horizontal.
- Start spray before the edge of the canvas, and stop after it, with the nozzle fully depressed.
- Apply two to three light coats, not one heavy coat.
- Work in a ventilated area as the spray is toxic.
- Spray with nozzle inverted to clear it when completed, to avoid clogging.
- Allow the work to dry standing vertically in warm clean area.

The following Golden **solvent-based acrylic-resin** varnishes are considered very good for oils (as well as acrylics):

- Golden MSA Varnish, gloss (with UV screen)
- Golden MSA Varnish, satin (with UV screen)
- Golden MSA Varnish, matte (with UV screen)

Gamblin's Gamvar is specifically designed by this company, which specializes in oil paint. This is an easy-to-use choice as you don't have to wait several months before varnishing. It can be scrubbed on, thereby coating any areas of impasto.

If you are not sure about any of these points, feel free to ask us. We would be delighted to assist you.

Acrylic painters, see separate tips sheet.



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