

# Encaustic History

Greek artists were painting with encaustic as long ago as the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The history of encaustic began in ancient Greece, where shipbuilders used beeswax and resin to seal the joints and waterproof the hulls of their vessels. Pigmenting the wax gave rise to the decorating of warships. It is possible that the crude painting of ships led to the refinement of painting pigmented wax onto panels, statues, ceramics, and architecture.

Pausias was a Greek painter of the 1<sup>st</sup> half of 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. He was celebrated for his decorative paintings, particularly in encaustic, a method which he is said to have invented. His most famous single work, *A Sacrifice*, containing an admirably foreshortened and modeled figure of a bull, was preserved until late Roman times in the portico of Pompey's temple in Rome.

Pliny the Elder, the Roman historian writer in the first century A.D. mentions encaustic in his book *Naturalis Historia*. He writes that encaustic was used in a variety of application: the painting of portraits and scenes of mythology on panels, the coloring of marble and terra cotta, and work on ivory. Pliny describes the process in which hot liquid colors were applied to the wall by means of heated irons. The use of encaustic on panel rivaled the use of tempera, which was a faster and cheaper process. Encaustic was a slow, difficult, but the paint could be built up in relief, and the wax gave a rich optical effect to the pigment. These characteristics made the finished work startlingly life-like. Pliny refers to encaustic paintings several hundred years old in possession of Roman aristocrats of his time. He also writes of Pausias and other encaustic painters like Aristeides, who may also be the inventor of encaustic, and Praxiteles who improved the technique.

In 79 B.C. the artists of Herculaneum and Pompeii were painting most of their murals with wax, using a process called wax emulsion or Punic wax. Pliny described the process as boiling beeswax with salt water and potassium carbonate, and then bleached by the sun, leaving the wax a paste consistency.

A large Greek population had established itself in Egypt, in the Faiyûm district, near Cairo following Alexander's conquest in 330 B.C. Greek influence in art and culture began to spread during the Hellenistic period. Also the Greeks were beginning to adapt to the customs of the Egyptians. This included the mummifying of their dead. An encaustic portrait was then placed

over the person's mummy memorial. Two cultures merged and created the famous Faiyûm funeral portraits in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D. Since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, archeologists have discovered over 600 portraits that have been found in the Egyptian mortuary temples. These portraits were remarkably preserved, testifying not only to the advanced skills of these ancient portrait artists, but also to the unique color qualities and durability of encaustic paints.

In the great period of economic instability that followed the decline of the Roman Empire, encaustic fell into disuse. Some work, particularly the painting of icons, was carried on as late as 12<sup>th</sup> century, but for the most part it was a lost art. The process was cumbersome and the cost of producing was high.

In 1503 Leonardo da Vinci was hired by the city of Florence to paint on a wall in the Palazzo Vecchio. After reading Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* Leonardo wanted to amaze the city of Florence by using the ancient encaustic technique. His attempt at encaustic fails, and his painting drips to the floor. He gave up.

The first full scale revival of encaustic was in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century after the remains of the murals of Herculaneum and Pompeii in 1738 and 1748.

It wasn't until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that encaustic use was truly revived. With the availability of electrical heating devices encaustic was much more accessible. In the 1920's Mexican muralist Diego Rivera began using encaustic. In the 1940's Karl Zerbe, head of Boston Museum School of Art at Cornell University, was very instrumental in the revival of encaustics. He is said to be the father of encaustics, however, Rifka Angel began experimenting with the medium a few years prior to Zerbe.

The history of contemporary encaustic begins with Jasper Johns who was using encaustic in the 1950's. After the 1958 other artists such as Lynda Benglis began using wax. In the 70's sculptor Nancy Graves and installation artist Michele Stuart also began adding wax into their work. Other famous artists who had tried their hand in encaustic are Pablo Picasso, James Ensor, Robert Delaunay, Antoine Pevsner, and Pedro Pruna.

In 1990's there were two ground-breaking encaustic exhibitions: *Contemporary Uses of Wax and Encaustic* in Calif. In 1992 and *Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in the America* in New Jersey in 1999. Today there are more encaustic artists and resources than ever before. Some of my encaustic idols are Canadian Tony Scherman, who does large scale portraiture, Martin Kline, who does sculptural paintings, and abstract painter Joanne Mattera.

## Bibliography

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