

Encaustic Process and Info

Encaustic is a beeswax based paint that is kept molten on a heated palette. It is applied to a surface and reheated to fuse the paint into a uniform enamel-like finish. The ancient Greeks developed encaustic over 2,000 years ago. The word encaustic derives from the Greek word *enkaustikos*, meaning “to heat” or “to burn”. The wax layers of an encaustic painting need to be “burned in”. This simply means fusing the layers of wax together with heat to ensure that the different layers of wax are bonded together and will not flake apart.

Encaustic paint is simply beeswax, resin, and pigment. I use the finest ingredients; U.S. Pharmaceutical Grade Beeswax that is mixed with No. 1 Singapore Damar Resin and pigments. Due to the characteristics of beeswax paint the surface can be polished to a high gloss for a luminous effect, or the wax can be modeled, sculpted, textured, and combined with collage material.

Because wax is a fragile material it needs to be adhered to a sturdy and rigid support or substrate. The substrate supports the ground, the surface on which you paint. These supports can be woods such as lauan panels, pine, Masonite, or plywood that should be braced to prevent warping. You can also use heavy printmaking papers and canvas with a support beneath it. Ceramics and stone also work well with encaustic. The ground must adhere well to the support while accepting the paint with the right degree of absorbency. In the past I used traditional rabbit-skin gesso (*rabbit-skin glue, whiting, and titanium pigment powder applied warm to a support*) as a ground for the substrate. Today I use a specialized encaustic gesso from R&F Encaustics. I also use simply beeswax to prime the boards. DO NOT USE ACRYLIC GESSO. Wax needs a porous surface to adhere to and acrylic gesso completely seals the support. Over time your wax painting will slide off its support or substrate

One of the joys of encaustic is its luminosity. Layers of pigmented wax deliver color in a way no other medium can, for as light passes through those layers and is reflected back up to the surface, the painting is actually illuminated from within.

I use a variety of heating tools, such as an electric skillet to keep the waxes at 180-200°F. Wax begins to melt at 165°F and begins to smoke and become toxic at 250°F. I have a proper ventilation system. No respirator will protect you from the formaldehyde and other carcinogenic vapors that are produced when the beeswax begins to break down. Famous encaustic painter

Karl Zerbe of the 40's and 50's had to stop painting with encaustic because he had emphysema and the wax vapors were life threatening because he did not use proper safety precautions.

To melt the wax I use pancake griddles with digital thermometers to know the exact temperature of the wax at all times. I also use a heat gun, an iron, a heated palette knife, and a mini torch to manipulate the wax once it is on the surface. Because the wax begins to solidify once it leaves its heat source it must be placed quickly and the painting cools within minutes. Once the surface has cooled, encaustic paints present a permanent lustrous enamel appearance, yet the painting can be revised and reworked at any time. The process of heating and cooling sets up a dynamic of chaos and control unlike that of any other painting medium. Trial and error is the only road to proficiency.

An encaustic paint film is stable in a temperature range of approximately 40-120°F. Very hot days can soften the wax somewhat, but will cause no real damage. If dulling occurs, the surfaces can be buffed when the painting is cool. A painting will become dull or haze over with temperature and humidity shifts. The painting should always be shiny. Encaustic paints are perhaps the most durable form of painting, evidenced by the Faiyûm mummy portraits in Egypt, which have survived over 2000 years without cracking, flaking, or fading. Wax has several inherent qualities that allow it to withstand the test of time: it is a natural adhesive; it is moisture resistant, mildew and fungus resistant, and unappetizing to insects. Wax paint also does not contain solvents or oils so they will not darken or yellow with age. Leaving the painting as fresh as the day it was painted.