



ENCAUSTIC PROCESS

Encaustic is a beeswax-based paint kept molten on a heated palette. It is applied to a rigid surface and reheated to fuse the paint into a uniform, enamel-like finish. This ancient painting technique dates back over 2,000 years to the Greeks, who originally used it to decorate and waterproof ships. The word encaustic comes from the Greek enkaustikos, meaning “to burn in”—a reference to the process of fusing each layer of wax with heat. This bonding is essential to ensure the layers become one cohesive sheet, preventing the wax from separating or flaking.

Encaustic paint is composed of natural beeswax, damar resin, and pigment. I use the finest materials: U.S. pharmaceutical-grade beeswax, No. 1 Singapore damar crystals (a tree resin that adds hardness and sheen), and artist-grade pigments. The resulting paint can be polished to a high gloss, sculpted, carved, textured, or combined with collage elements like paper, string, or natural materials. Encaustic offers endless creative possibilities.

Because beeswax is somewhat fragile on its own, encaustic must be applied to a rigid, supportive surface. Suitable substrates include braced wood panels (such as lauan, birch, pine, or Masonite), plywood, ceramics, or stone. Paper or canvas may be used if properly mounted to a solid backing. A proper ground must be absorbent and wax-friendly. I have used traditional rabbit-skin gesso (a mix of glue, whiting, and pigment applied warm), R&F Encaustic Gesso, or simply coat the panel with encaustic medium. Avoid acrylic gesso, as it creates a sealed surface the wax cannot properly bond with, eventually causing the painting to delaminate or slide off the support.

One of the most captivating qualities of encaustic is its luminosity. The translucent layers of pigmented wax allow light to pass through and reflect,



giving the painting a radiant, inner glow. This depth and light cannot be replicated with any other medium.

I use a range of heating tools including an R&F Encaustic aluminum palette or an electric pancake griddle with digital thermometers to precisely maintain wax temperatures. Wax melts around 165°F, but begins to smoke and release harmful fumes above 250°F, including Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) such as formaldehyde. For safety, I maintain proper ventilation in the studio and never allow the wax to overheat. Respirators cannot protect against all wax vapors—safe studio practice is essential. Notably, famed encaustic painter Karl Zerbe had to stop painting in the 1950s due to complications from inhaling wax fumes without proper precautions.

To apply and manipulate the wax, I use heat guns, irons, heated pens, and a torch. Because the wax cools and solidifies within seconds of leaving the heat source, it must be applied quickly. Once cooled, the surface has a lustrous, durable finish—but it remains workable and can be reactivated, revised, or layered at any time. This dynamic of heat and cool, control and unpredictability, makes encaustic uniquely exciting. Like any complex medium, trial and error is the path to mastery.

Finished encaustic paintings are stable between 40–120°F. Warm weather may soften the wax slightly, but it won't damage the painting. If a painting appears hazy or dull due to humidity or temperature shifts, a gentle buffing with a soft cloth will restore its shine. Encaustic paintings are exceptionally durable—as evidenced by the Fayum mummy portraits from Egypt, which are still intact after over 2,000 years. Beeswax is naturally moisture-resistant, mildew- and fungus-resistant, and repels insects. Unlike oil paints, wax contains no solvents, so it won't yellow or darken over time - leaving the artwork as vibrant as the day it was created.