

ENCAUSTIC 101

A Few Facts About Encaustic

- Encaustic is a beeswax-based paint that is kept molten on a heated palette. It is applied to a surface and reheated to fuse each layer of paint into a uniform enamel-like finish. The word encaustic comes from the Greek word *enkaustikos* meaning “to burn in,” which refers to the process of fusing the paint.
- This technique has been dated to as early as the 4th century B.C. Although wax may appear to be a fragile material, some encaustic paintings from A.D. 100-125 survive today in the form of head and shoulder wax portraits set into mummy casings in Greco-Roman Egypt.
- Encaustic has a long history, but it is as versatile as any 20th-century medium. It can be polished to a high gloss, modeled, sculpted, textured, and combined with collage materials. It cools immediately, so that there is no drying time, yet it can always be reworked.
- Encaustic is extremely durable because the beeswax/resin combination is impervious to moisture. It will not deteriorate, yellow, or darken. Encaustic paintings do not have to be varnished or protected by glass.
- Encaustic paint has no toxic fumes, nor does it require the use of solvents. As a result, a number of health hazards are reduced or eliminated completely.

The History of Encaustic

Encaustic painting was practiced by Greek artists as far back as the 5th century B.C. Most of our knowledge of this early use comes from the Roman historian Pliny, who wrote in the 1st century A.D. Pliny seems to have had very little direct knowledge about studio methods, so his account of techniques and materials is sketchy. According to Pliny, encaustic was used in a variety of applications: the painting of portraits and scenes of mythology on panels, the coloring of marble and terracotta, and work on ivory (probably the tinting of incised lines).

Wax is an excellent preservative and it was from this use that the art of encaustic painting developed. The Greeks applied coatings of wax and resin to weatherproof their ships. Pigmenting the wax gave rise to the decorating of warships; Homer mentions the painted ships of the Greek warriors who fought at Troy. The use of a rudimentary encaustic was therefore an ancient practice by the 5th century B.C. It is possible that at about that time the crude paint applied with tar brushes to the ships was refined for the art of painting on panels. Pliny mentions two artists who had in fact started out as ship painters.

The use of encaustic on panels rivaled the use of tempera, in what are the earliest known portable easel paintings. Tempera was a faster, cheaper process. Encaustic was a slow, difficult technique, 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 lifelike. Moreover, encaustic had far greater durability than tempera, which was vulnerable to moisture. Pliny refers to encaustic paintings several hundred years old in the possession of Roman aristocrats of his own time.

The ability of encaustic to both preserve and color gave it wide use on the stone work of both architecture and statuary. The white marble we see today in the monuments of Greek antiquity was once colored, probably delicately tinted like the figures on the Alexander sarcophagus in Istanbul. Pliny says that when the sculptor Praxiteles was asked which of his pieces he favored, he answered those “to which [the painter] Nicias had set his hand.” Decorative terracotta work on interiors was also painted with encaustic, a practice that was a forerunner to mosaic trim.



Perhaps the best known of all encaustic works are the Fayum funeral portraits painted in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. by Greek painters in Egypt. A significant Greek population had settled in Egypt following its conquest by Alexander, eventually adopting the customs of the Egyptians, including mummifying their dead. A portrait of the deceased, painted either in the prime of life or after death, was placed over the person's mummy as a memorial. Many of these pieces have survived to our own time, and their color has remained as fresh as any recently completed work.

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 the 12th century, but for the most part it became a lost art. The process was cumbersome and painstaking, and the cost of producing it was high. It was replaced by tempera, which was cheaper, faster, and easier to work.

In the 18th century encaustic painting was revived, initially by amateurs as a way of exploring the techniques of ancient painters. It was further explored in the 19th century to solve the problem of dampness faced by mural painters in northern climates. The success of these efforts were limited, and encaustic remained an obscure art form.

Today, the availability of portable electric heating implements and a wide variety of tools has made encaustic a far less daunting technique. This factor has created a resurgence of encaustic painting, and it is once again taking its place as a major artists' medium. Its effects, its visual and physical properties, and its range of textural and color possibilities make it eminently suitable for use in many different contemporary styles of painting that are not adequately served by the traditional oil-painting process.

-- Adapted from *The Artist's Handbook of Materials and Techniques* by Ralph Mayer