

Commissions - Choosing your paint medium

You've decided you would like to commission your own painting, now you need to decide the finer detail, including what medium to choose and what "support" it should be painted on. This guide explains the differences between watercolour, oil and acrylic paints and some of the considerations you will need to make.

Watercolour

These are generally the least expensive of the three paints. They are water-soluble and mostly used to paint on a paper-based support, so tend to be used for smaller paintings, though papers are available in widths up to 60 inches (1.5 metres). Because they are quite transparent work is usually created by building up a series of translucent layers, around areas of preserved white paper. These paintings are quick drying and can be colourful and detailed but tend toward a muted, softened appearance.

They are traditionally framed under glass with a matte surround in order to protect the painting from humidity changes and to prevent it from coming into direct contact with the glass and developing moisture spots. There is a risk of some fading over time and particularly with prolonged exposure to sunlight.

Notable watercolourists: J.M.W. Turner, John Singer Sargeant

Oils

These paints are oil based and provide a permanent, rich and almost luminous finish. They are effectively used to demonstrate great detail, textures and contrasts between light and dark and are mostly used on either stretched canvas or wood panels. They tend to be slow drying, though they don't really dry at all but harden in contact with the air. This means the painting process can be slower due to the need for layers to "dry" to the touch before the next is applied (they can take up to 12 months to feel fully dry).

Oil paintings are traditionally varnished and framed without glass or matte surround, however framing techniques allow for the inclusion of an inner frame to create the effect of a matte. Because the oil content may rise to the paint surface oil paintings can take on a slightly dull appearance and over time can be prone to yellowing.

Notable oil painters: Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Claude Monet

Acrylics

These are water based synthetic paints, which are quick to use as they are fast drying. They are very vibrant in colour and so versatile that they can be thinned and used in the fluid style of watercolour paint on paper, or used as a thicker paint to achieve the depth and detail of oil paints on a stretched canvas or wooden panel support. These paints are of archival quality and as such they are prone to very little deterioration in colour quality, however they have only existed for approximately 50 years, so have not yet stood the test of time.

Because they are water resistant once dry they are usually treated as an oil painting when framed i.e. they do not need glass or a mat, unless used on paper.

Notable acrylic painters: Andy Warhol, Mark Rothko,

Wooden panel vs. canvas

There is much debate about the benefits of wooden board over stretched canvas, when selecting an oil or acrylic painting.

Canvas

This is generally perceived to be the best support for painting and is usually made from cotton or linen and stretched over a frame to provide a taut surface on which to paint. Because the fabric is porous it can expand and contract slightly with changes in humidity and in extreme circumstances this can damage the painted surface, causing paint to crack and/or flake.

Canvas paintings supplied "Gallery wrapped" have no visible staple fixings and are usually supplied as a box canvas with painted sides so they can be hung without the need for a frame.

Wooden panels

These can be made from a variety of materials, ranging from hardwood veneers to hardboard, MDF or plywood. They can be primed in a similar way to canvas and panels can be "cradled" i.e. mounted on a rigid frame, to prevent warping and produce a rigid painting surface that leaves paint less prone to flex and cracking.

Without proper preparation however there is a risk that natural wood oils can leech into the paint and cause discolouring and of course very large paintings can become extremely heavy if painted on wooden panels.

Still not sure? Please ask me for further advice.