

All You Ever Wanted to Know About Varnish

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The painting is finished and now it is time to varnish. This strikes terror in the heart of many painters as varnish is a chemical process that can be difficult to control. Follow the guidelines outlined in the article and eliminate the fear of varnish!

What is varnish?

Varnish is a transparent, hard, protective finish. After being applied, the ingredients in varnishes either harden either through evaporation or through chemical change. Resin varnishes “dry” by evaporation of the solvent and harden almost immediately upon drying. Acrylic and waterborne varnishes “dry” upon evaporation of the water but experience an extended curing period. Oil, polyurethane, and epoxy varnishes remain liquid even after evaporation of the solvent but quickly begin to cure, undergoing successive stages from liquid or syrupy, to tacky or sticky, to dry gummy, to “dry to the touch”, to hard. Heat and humidity play a very large role in the drying and curing times of varnishes. In classic varnish the cure rate depends on the type of oil used and, to some extent, on the ratio of oil to resin. The drying and curing time of all varnishes may be sped up by exposure to an energy source such as sunlight, ultraviolet light, or heat.

In the art world, varnishes offer dust-resistance and a harder surface than bare paint – they sometimes have the benefit of ultraviolet light resistors, which help protect artwork from fading in exposure to light.

Varnishes seem to cause a great deal of trouble during the painting process. The problems range from streaks, impurities to cloudiness. This article should help with these difficulties. The supplies vary based on the type of project.

What are the types of varnishes?

Spar Varnish

Spar varnish (also called *marine varnish*) is high quality, waterproof, and sunlight-resistant varnish named for its use on ship or boat spars and other woodwork where a glossy finish is desired.

Polyurethane

Polyurethane varnishes are typically hard and durable coatings. They are popular for hardwood floors but are considered by some to be difficult or unsuitable for finishing furniture or other detailed pieces.

Shellac

Shellac is a very widely used resin varnish that is alcohol soluble. The source of shellac resin is a brittle or flaky secretion of the female lac insect, *Kerria lacca*, found in the forests of Assam and Thailand and harvested from the bark of the trees where she deposits it to provide a sticky hold on the trunk. Shellac is the basis of French polish, which for centuries has been the preferred finish for fine furniture.

Lacquer

The word *lacquer* refers to quick-drying, solvent-based varnishes or paints. Although their names may be similarly derived, lacquer is not the same as *shellac* and is not dissolved in alcohol. Lacquer is dissolved in lacquer thinner, which is a highly-flammable solvent.

Acrylic

Acrylic varnishes are typically water-based with the highest degree of clarity of all finishes. They show little or no color. Acrylics have the advantage of water clean-up and lack of solvent fumes, but typically do not penetrate into wood as well as oils. They sometimes lack the brushability and self-leveling qualities of solvent-based varnishes. Generally they have good UV-resistance.

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Application

What is the process? First, your painting should be chemically dry. Oils (depending on thickness) could be up to 6 months while Genesis Oils and Acrylics are dry either instantly or after the water evaporates. Wipe your painting down with a damp cloth to remove surface impurities. Try to varnish on a low humidity day.

If using water-based varnish, mix the varnish by rolling the bottle of varnish on a flat surface. Do not shake as this adds air bubbles. Dip a large oval brush into the varnish but do not allow the brush to touch the rim of the bottle as this rim is full of impurities. After the dripping has stopped, take the brush over to the surface. Apply the varnish horizontally across the painting. Repeat once the first layer is dry except pull the brush vertically over the piece. Repeat until desired finish is achieved.

If you are using Final Coat brand of varnish, it can be applied with a staining pad as it is self leveling. It can be applied with a brush but takes longer due to the thin nature of the varnish. At times, the varnish over the oil will appear to resist and separate. This is no reason to panic. Let this application dry and then apply another application of varnish. The second will fill in the missed areas. Do not panic; do not try to remove the first layer of varnish! Depending on the type of finish you prefer, you should apply 8-10 coat minimum of the Final Coat. Build your layers of varnish with a clear coating such as Final Coat or Right Step JW Etc Gloss. If you try to build many layers with a matte varnish, it will appear cloudy. Finish with a matte varnish to cut the shine.

If an acrylic spray on varnish is preferred, Liberty and Deco Art Acrylic Varnish are the tried and true tested acrylic varnishes. Krylon Damar, Krylon Satin and Matte varnishes are excellent oil based spray on.

The acrylic spray on varnishes can be used over Genesis Heat set oils or acrylics. The oil based varnishes work well over oils or acrylics.

To spray on a varnish, shake the can for a minute or two to distribute the drying ingredients. Start spraying away from the surface. Bring the spray over to the surface and spray in small circles moving to a new area once the sprayed area appears wet. When the varnish is dry to the touch, add another layer.

Store painting under a box while when varnishing to keep impurities from the wet finish. Keep painting level to avoid drips and runs.

After the protective layers of varnish is added, it is time to wet sand. The goal of wet sanding is to remove impurities in the varnish. It should not be performed over an unprotected painting. Sprinkle the painting with water that contains a trace of dishwashing soap. With 1500 grit wet/dry sandpaper or Super Film

After the piece has been adequately varnished (at least three coats of varnish) it is time to wax. The advantage of waxing is two fold: it adds a layer of mellow luster that varnish cannot. Secondly, if the piece becomes dirty through use or environmental effects, the wax is easily removed taking the dirt with it. Remove wax with turpentine or paint thinner.

The waxing process is as follows: Take a tablespoon of JW wax or clear shoe polish and put it on a palette. Then fill a small piece of 1000 grit steel wool with the wax. Apply the wax to the painting with pressure. Allow the wax to dry until it appears milky. Buff it out with a soft cloth or lamb's wool. If the wax won't move, it is not ready to be buffed. More layers of wax may be added but only the first layer is applied with the steel wool. Subsequent applications are applied with a soft cloth.

To varnish large pieces, use a roller brush to apply the varnish and a Faux Finish Blender to smooth the varnish.

How do you clean a painting that has been varnished?

Using a gentle soap and water solution, such as Ivory soap; wipe with a soft cloth using very little pressure. It might be best to test on a small portion of the painting before doing the entire surface. Another approach would be to moisten a small piece of Houston Art Frame Super Film and repeatedly glide it over the dirty areas until they disappear. Since the varnish has cured this isn't as risky as it sounds. Don't dig through the protective varnish so use care and go slowly. If the painting had been waxed, just remove the wax as discussed previously.

Before using any untested varnish, test in an inconspicuous area. Watch for the lifting of paint, resist (except where noted with Final Coat), crazing (little cracks), peeling or any undesirable reaction. After the varnish has cured, check the result. If the result is pleasing then continue to build coats until the desired finish is achieved.

For recommended Varnishes visit our website at
www.kingslan.com