



Comments on True Gesso and Oil Painting

By Eric Thomson

A number of clients use the panels for oils. Since I developed them for egg-tempera it came as some surprise that oil painters would be interested in them and I had to learn how to think about that.

My first advice is to look up what Ralph Mayer says about it in his Artist's Handbook. He discusses how true gesso is too absorbent for oils and may leach the oil from the paint film, rendering it weak and under-bound. Cracking and bad adhesion might then result. But of course historically oil painters have used true gesso successfully. The key is to size it to be less absorbent. Mayer recommends thin shellac, thin damar or liquid rabbitskin glue applied over the finished surface. I find that shellac and damar are very obvious on the surface: they yellow it and leave an uneven residue. Glue is the least noticeable and leaves a matte, only slightly yellowed surface. You can also control it well, using multiple coats which dry quickly to yield a more and more sealed surface. I also like the fact that oils and rabbitskin glue are such historically reliable partners, as for instance when we oil-prime glue-sized linen. However, the surface may be somewhat slick for individual taste.

Basically any method that will tend to seal the surface, while being compatible with oils, should work. I have clients who employ a fourth method that works well. They tone the surface with washes of oil paint well-thinned with their painting medium of choice. This has the effect of sealing it with no worries that the film is building up a layer that might be fragile. Some use toned washes but white would work fine too. After one or two thorough applications, the later oil layers are nicely isolated to the top. The key is that the washes are thin enough to completely absorb into the surface and then are allowed to set up. It might take some experimenting to find the point where the gesso is sealed.

The test for any sealed surface is to lay an impasto stroke of oil on it, then put another stroke on something non-absorbent like a glass palette. Compare the two after 12 hours: the stroke on the glass should be virtually fresh and the stroke on the panel should be similar. If the latter has gone completely matte and looks like it's lost its oil, the panel is still perhaps too absorbent.

One might ask why go to the trouble? Oil painters have plenty of choices, unlike egg-tempera artists. I've wondered this myself but the surface can be quite conducive to oils, with a subtle texture and receptivity that suits many techniques well, while being quite distinct in handling from the various canvas choices.

The glue treatment is quite simple and True Gesso sells a rabbitskin glue (at a good price) that is much more easily solvent in water than glues that are sold by art supply stores (some of which are actually hoof and horsehide glue). The oil-wash method works well but naturally should be done in the studio.

