

Notes on the Different Mediums

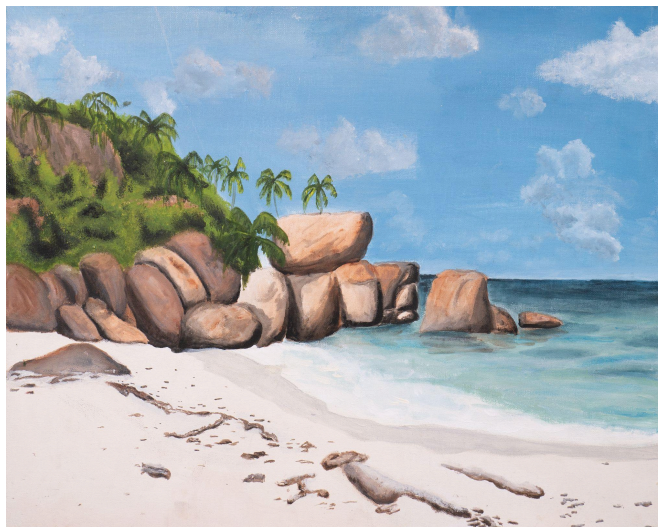
The following are some notes on the different traditional mediums.

Keep in mind, most of the information I publish can be applied broadly across all mediums. Color, composition, edge, value: they mean the same in oil painting as they do in acrylics, watercolors, or other mediums. The main differences are the techniques you use to apply paint and the medium's strengths and limitations.

Acrylics

- Colors can dry slightly darker than they appear when wet. This is most noticeable with lighter colors such as yellow.
- Paint dries fast. Not as suitable for wet-on-wet techniques.
- Be careful about using cheap acrylic paints. You won't have a good time with them. (This applies to all mediums, but even more so with acrylics.)
- You can slow the drying time with a retarder medium or a stay-wet palette.
- Can be heavily watered down and used like watercolor, or used straight from the tube for thick, opaque color.
- Easy to clean up and gentle on brushes compared to oils. I used to leave my brushes soaking in water between sessions.

I used acrylics when I first picked up painting as a child. I moved to oils in my early 20s and haven't looked back since.



Dan Scott, Childhood Painting (Acrylic)

Watercolors

- Typically work from light to dark, leaving the highlights until last.
- White paper is usually exposed to act as highlights.
- The value range is lighter in general due to the translucent paint.
- Colors typically dry lighter than they appear wet.
- Can use dabs of undiluted, opaque color for bursts of saturation, highlights, or dark accents. Joseph Zbukvic does this in his paintings of wet streets with a few dabs of vivid red for lights.
- Generally requires a more delicate touch and has less room for error. It's not an easy medium to work with! Beginners often start with watercolors, but I would suggest going with the other options first.
- You can combine watercolor with gouache, pencils, or pens to create some interesting combinations.



Jane Peterson, Orchard in Blossom, c.1918 (Watercolor and Gouache)



John Singer Sargent, Brook Among the Rocks, 1907 (Watercolor)



Georgia O'Keeffe, Canyon with Crows, 1917 (Watercolor)

Oils

- Perhaps the most versatile medium.
- Paint dries slowly, making it suitable for wet-on-wet techniques.
- Can combine wet-on-wet techniques with wet-on-dry for a dynamic finish.
- Some colors have archival issues (alizarin crimson is prone to cracking and changing color over time).
- Can manipulate the paint with mediums and solvents. Linseed oil will make the paint “fatter” and slower drying. Solvent will thin the paint and make it faster drying. You can combine linseed oil with solvent to give you something in between. I personally don’t use linseed oil as I don’t find it adds anything to the way I paint. I just use odorless solvent plus paint straight from the tube. I usually start a painting with paint plus a generous amount of solvent to create thin washes of color. Then I gradually move to paint straight from the tube.
- Always paint fat over lean. That is, don’t finish a painting with thin washes of paint plus solvent. It will crack. This rule is more applicable for those using a layering approach, where they paint one layer, wait for it to mostly dry, then paint another layer, and so on. It’s not as much of an issue if you paint alla prima (wet-on-wet).



Ester Almqvist, The Sawmill, 1914 (Oil)



Dan Scott, New Zealand, Autumn Colors, 2026 (Oil)

Pastels

- It's a dry medium, so that limits the range of techniques. But this also makes it more versatile in terms of where you can work. Pastels are great for sketches on location.
- Relies more on weaving distinct colors together than blending. Therefore, may need a wider range of colors to start with.
- While it is a dry medium, it can be liquidized, especially if you use high-quality pastels.
- You can apply a rough background, then using alcohol or water, it can turn the pastel pigment into paint (this can provide a great underpainting). Or, scrape pastel from the stick into a small tub and add a little water. This will give you a small amount of thick pigment to apply with a brush or flick onto your canvas.
- If using liquid with your pastels, make sure the paper or board handles liquid so it doesn't buckle.
- Pastels retain their fresh color over centuries as they are not subjected to chemicals such as solvents, varnishes and mediums which can cause oil paintings to yellow and crack over time.
- All of the highest-quality soft pastels have a high pigment load, excellent lightfastness, and feel soft and buttery when applied to paper. They are generally made in stick form with either square or rounded ends, and can be used on their side to create soft painterly strokes, or on their edges for more linear strokes.
- Pastels can be layered over wet or dry underpaintings. Optical blending of colors is achieved by layering colors, which creates a unique luminosity that is not found in other mediums.
- For inspiration, check out Claude Monet's pastels. Most people know about his oils, but he also used pastels from time to time. Leonardo da Vinci, Renoir, Mary Cassatt, and, Edgar Degas.

“For the Impressionists, pastel offered a medium well suited to recording the sudden excitement of visual sensations, the fresh colours of nature and fleeting effects of light. The fragility of its texture corresponded to the evanescence of sense perceptions: Manet, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro, Renoir, Guillaumin, Caillebotte.” Genevieve Monnier, [Pastels from the 16th to the 20th Century](#)



Claude Monet, Nightfall, c.1865 (Pastel)



Eva Gonzales, The Milliner, c.1877 (Gouache, Pastel)

Gouache

- It's a flexible medium. You can use it as you would watercolor, with thin washes of color. You can lean into its opaque qualities, using tiling and solid colors. You can use dry-brush techniques or fine detail work.
- It's lightweight, portable, and quick to set up, making it ideal for painting whilst traveling and plein air work.
- It handles well for small-scale works. Oils and acrylics can feel a bit cumbersome here.
- It reactivates with water. This is particularly helpful for edge manipulation. You can run a wet brush along a hard edge to soften it, even if the paint has dried. You cannot do this with other mediums.
- It dries fast, which can be a pro or a con depending on what you're trying to do. You can stretch out the drying time by spritzing the page and your palette with water.
- It's a relatively inexpensive medium, particularly compared to oils.
- Most artists seem to work from dark to light. Whereas with watercolor, artists tend to work light to dark.
- You can preserve the white paper as your highlights, as you would with watercolor. Or you could use white gouache paint.
- Small gouache studies are a good way to quickly test if a composition is going to work. If it works as a small study, it will probably work as a large painting.
- Gouache is a good bridge medium from drawing to oils. If you want to try oils but are not confident enough, give gouache a go first.
- You can combine gouache and watercolor to get the best of both worlds. Start with thin watercolor washes, then finish with punchy, opaque gouache strokes. Anders Zorn often did this.



Vincent van Gogh, Oise at Auvers, 1890 (Gouache)



Mary Cassatt, Portrait of the Artist, 1878 (Gouache)

Water-Soluble Oils

Note: I am yet to try this medium, hoping to soon and can give some notes when I do. But in the meantime, a student of Draw Paint Academy has provided me with the following information.

- The best feature so far is definitely the EASY cleanup. Just soap and water.
- One thing I've discovered is that you shouldn't rely on water alone as a medium; I tried that with poor results. I have since purchased water-soluble thinners, linseed oil, and quick-drying mediums from the manufacturers, which work much better.
- I have been a little disappointed with the available colors. I'm currently using Holbein Duo Aqua, which includes many "hue" colors that I didn't typically use with my traditional Gamblin oils. However, this might just be a matter of getting used to mixing them.

Thanks for Reading!

Hope you found this helpful. If I have missed anything, feel free to email and I'll add it to the list.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Scott'.

Dan Scott
Draw Paint Academy