

Painting

Impasto Technique

Impasto, a term that is used to cover a wide range of paint application techniques, deals primarily with the thickness of oil paints and the way these are applied to canvas or other painting surfaces. Texture--and the visual stimulation that thickly applied paint can bring to the viewer, not to mention the painter is the name of this game. So if you are experiencing a lull in your artwork or want to try something that might enliven and jumpstart your creativity, impasto may be the solution.

Artists have used impasto techniques for centuries to give extra dimension to their works. Monet used thickly applied underpainting in his works, especially the haystack and cathedral series. His mastery of the technique reflects a near vibration of the surface. The use of an irregular thickness of paint and the interaction on the surface of these textures draw in and hold the eye of the observer.

Rembrandt used impasto in his own personal way as a highlight rather than overt texture. His application was more to enhance an object or facial feature and to focus attention on that area of the painting. Other artists have used this occasional texturing technique to achieve the same result, and there is special excitement when this technique is done well.

The surface upon which you paint is part of this process. Many impasto artists like to work on a rigid substrate, such as specially surfaced Masonite--Claybord. Others use canvas that has multiple gesso layers. Masonite can be surfaced with repeated layers of gesso or actual oil paint. Both of these bases can be toned so that the textured surface adds an underglow of color.

Canvas should be stretched quite tightly, and the surface should be dampened so that it is as taut as possible. Remember that the thickly applied layers of paint will weigh heavily on the canvas. Improperly stretched canvas could allow movement of the substrate and thereby damage the finished work.

Whether you are using Masonite, other wood substrate, or canvas, creating a textured basis upon which to paint is the initial step in impasto. This is done, most often, without regard to specific placement of subjects. Produce this texture with the tool of your choice, creating a crosshatch of brush strokes of uneven, related sections. Your subject is then painted over this textural base.

Underpaint application can be a way to relax otherwise constricting or restricting painting habits. By applying this base paint in a more freeform and loose manner, with no attention to small details, you are able to concentrate on the large blocks or masses of color. It might also lead you into a more stylized expression in the finished work as well.

The tools used to apply the paint, or underpaint, can vary greatly. Many artists simply super-charge their paintbrushes and apply paint with the same type of stroke and motion that they use to create their smooth surfaced artworks. Some artists, having adopted the philosophy that the older a brush gets, the better it gets, consider application of paint - regardless of the situation - done with anything other than a brush a near sacrilegious action. Application with brushes can be as simple as rolling a paint-charged brush onto the painting surface to achieve a thick painted line. Repeated charging and dabbing the brush hairs against the surface can yield a mottled and highly textured surface. Multiple layers can be built up to create a super texture.

Other artists choose painting knives of various blade shapes and sizes to apply and control the thick super structure of their paintings. Once thought of as gadgets for trick effects, palette knives have proven themselves to be of real importance and value to any painter. Choose the blade length, width, and flexibility that give you the texture and result you want.

Texture is what you are trying to create, so you might want to leap right into unconventional tools--perhaps small spatulas or flat wood strips--to apply paint. Once the paint is in place, it might be desirable to create additional or unusual texture. Crushed foil, paper or plastic bags (though messy) can create most unusual surface variations. You should consider nothing sacred when it comes to texture application. If a sponge gives you the look you want, use it! If the edge of an eraser can be used to "shovel" the paint or gesso into the shapes and configurations you want, what is the harm?

In the strictest sense of the word, impasto can be created as the work progresses. In fact, that is the method of choice by most impasto purists. Control of the texture and degree of dimension to the surface can best be controlled as the work is developed. Different tools and brushes can be used throughout the process so that the exact texture is created in the exact place desired.

One important use of impasto is as a highlight or luminescent technique. A smooth surfaced work, with only moderate brush strokes visible, can come alive with a few simple, yet thickly applied highlight areas. This is especially true in paintings where there are many dark areas. The application of a sharply contrasting light spot can make the work spring to life.

But, whether a simple application of highlight, a moderate textural amplification, or a full-blown underpainting and over layers of paint, impasto is one method to generate visual interest in your paintings. And, although impasto is usually linked with oil, the same techniques can be applied to acrylic painting as well.