

IMPASTO

Thick, opaque paint applied heavily with a brush or knife is called impasto. The paint is laid on thickly, usually with short, staccato movements of the brush, so that it stands away from the support and creates a rugged surface.

Because impasto requires paint of a thick, buttery consistency, its use is limited to oils and acrylics, and, to a certain extent, gouache. An egg tempera painting can be built up of many thin layers, but bold, heavily-loaded strokes are impossible with this medium because the adhesive power in the egg binder is sufficient to make only thin layers stick.

If desired, an entire painting can be built up with heavy impastos to create a lively and energetic surface. For this reason, impasto often goes hand in hand with the *ALLA PRIMA* method of painting, because thick paint and rapid brushstrokes allow the picture to be built up quickly and in a spontaneous manner.

Van Gogh (1853-90) is perhaps the greatest exponent of the expressive use of impasto; he often squeezed the paint straight from the tube onto the canvas, "sculpting" it into swirling lines and strokes, which conveyed the intensity of his feeling for his subject.

Impasto can also be used in combination with *GLAZING* to produce passages of great richness and depth. Titian (c1487-1576) and Rembrandt (1606-69) painted their shadows with thin, dark glazes to make them recede, while modeling the highlights on skin, fabric and jewelry with thick impasto. These small, raised areas catch the light and appear especially brilliant.

When glazing over impasto you must use a drying agent in the impasto, such as a cobalt dryer.

They are not easy to obtain unless

you use alkyds or an alkyd-based medium. Finally, an impastoed passage that is perfectly dry can be painted over with a transparent glaze which sinks into the crevices in the paint and accentuates the rough texture. This technique is useful for rendering a subject such as wood, bark, or rough stone.

When building up heavily textured impastos, brushwork is all-important. If the pigment is pushed and prodded too much, the freshness and sparkle of the colors will diminish; think carefully about the position and shape of each stroke beforehand, then apply it with confidence, and leave it alone.

Oil

If thick layers of paint are applied on top of each other, the different speeds of drying out between layers can cause cracking. It is essential that you allow each layer to dry out before applying the next. (A thick stroke of oil paint can take six months to dry unless a drying agent is added to it.)



Impasto with a Brush • Oil

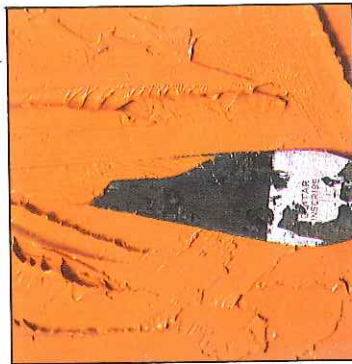
1 Some pigments have a higher oil content than others; too much oil makes it difficult to achieve a highly textured brushstroke. To prepare the paint, squeeze it out onto a sheet of blotting paper and leave it for a few minutes. The blotting paper absorbs any excess oil so that the paint has a stiffer consistency which is more suitable for impasto painting.



2 Remove the paint from the blotting paper and mix it up on the palette, adding just enough turpentine to make it malleable.

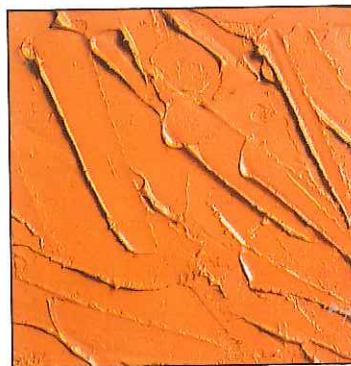


3 Here the artist loads a No. 4 flat bristle brush with paint and applies it thickly to the canvas, using short, heavy strokes applied in different directions. Always resist the temptation to go back over the strokes — apply the paint with deft movements and, once it is applied, do not touch it again. The paint should be thick enough to retain the marks of the brush. A heavy impasto can take days or even weeks to dry properly, so leave the canvas in a dust-free place. When it is dry, apply a glaze of a contrasting color if desired.



Impasto with a Knife

1 A painting knife is an excellent tool for creating a heavy impasto. Here the artist uses the knife to mix the paint on the palette. He then spreads it thickly onto the canvas in broad, textured ridges.



2 The finished effect. With a painting knife, you can "sculpt" the paint into exciting swirls and ridges. However, do not be tempted to overwork the paint — it will quickly lose its vibrancy and become "dead."

Acrylic

Impastos are made more quickly and easily with acrylic paints than with oils — not only do they dry much faster, they also dry without cracking, even when applied very thickly. The pigment can be squeezed directly onto the canvas, or it can be mixed first with an equal amount of gel medium to thicken it.

Texture paste, which is colorless, extremely thick, and very fast-drying, can be applied to the surface and then painted over with acrylics. This method is not recommended, however, because texture paste does not handle in the same way as paint and the finished effect lacks spontaneity. However, if the paste is mixed with the paint the effect will be that of thick oil paint.



Impasto • Acrylic

1 Acrylic paint can be used straight from the tube, undiluted. Alternatively, mix tube color and gel medium in equal proportions. The result is a thick, pasty consistency which lends itself to rugged brushwork.



2 Use a knife or a stiff bristle brush to spread the paint on the canvas. The adhesive and quick-drying properties of acrylics mean that they can be used thickly, without fear of cracking, and will dry in a few hours.