

Protecting an Oil Pastel painting

-by Ann Tucker

An issue that most Oil Pastellists think about early in their exploration of the Oil Pastel is: what to do when the piece is finished.

Does it need to be protected?

Should it be varnished?

The answer to whether or not the painting needs protection is a very emphatic YES!

Unfortunately, that is the last easy answer on the subject.

There are a variety of ways to protect your oil pastel work. Each of those methods has plenty of people who love it, and people who have had horrible, disastrous experiences and would never try it again.

I will discuss four methods of protecting oil pastel work:

1. **framing under glass,**
2. **protective paper,**
3. **acrylic gel medium and**
4. **spray fixative.**



Painting by Rebecca McConnell

A truly safe way to protect your painting is to put it under a mat and glass (or acrylic). If you put your oil pastel work under glass, you need a way of spacing it off of the glass to prevent the glass from sticking to the work or pushing the oil pastel around. A mat is used as a spacer. Another way to get that needed space is a product by Frametek that holds the glass up off the surface of the artwork. This is a strip that fits around the edge of the glass. Since both glass and acrylic panels can come in slightly varying thickness, this method sometimes works nicely and other times it can be a problem to make it stay in place while you are trying to assemble everything into the frame. Once framed, the Frametek spacer does not move and is a nice way to keep the size of the frame down.

Whether using a mat or spacer, framing has two disadvantages for me. One, it gets expensive. Two, if I framed every oil pastel piece I worked on, I would run out of storage space. So I use framing only on special pieces.

For unfinished pieces or pieces that I'm not fond of but don't want to throw away, I wrap the painting with protective paper and take the paper to the back of the painting. I also use this method if I need to transport a painting. Protective paper is any non-stick paper. I use Freezer Paper which is a paper with plastic on one side and found in the grocery store with the other types of food wrap. Other artists use wax paper or glassine.

Oil Pastel Primer

For paintings that I want to hang inexpensively. I use a light coat of brushed on acrylic gel medium (AGM). Then put the painting in a mat with a hard backing board and hang using a plate hanger. The AGM goes on opaque but dries clear. However, you can see the texture of the brushstrokes used to apply the AGM.

I have had both good and bad experiences with acrylic gel medium. The bad experience I had with it was when I tried to put more pastel over a painting coated with the AGM. When I rubbed on the pastel stick, the coating rubbed off as if it were Rubber Cement and took some layers of pigment with it. The artwork could not be saved. And yet I still use this on some paintings. Why? Because I find that AGM is good where I need protection from dust and any light accidental touch.

Another method of protecting oil pastel paintings is with a spray fixative. Sennelier puts out a spray fixative made especially for oil pastels. Member Rebecca McConnell, Texas, USA, has been using this product.

Here is what Becky has to say about it:

I've been using the Sennelier Oil Pastel spray fixative about a year, as long as I've been using Oil Pastels. I use it on everything that I want to preserve and have framed a couple of paintings without glass, using just the fixative. Both of these were egg tempera with Oil Pastel on RealGesso panels.

As far as using the Sennelier fixative, I'm very careful to ensure that the nozzle is clear before I apply it to my painting, usually testing it on paper, especially if it's been awhile since I've "fixed" anything. I'll usually spray several pieces at a time, making sure that I get even smooth coverage. To clear the nozzle, I've done all the usual tricks - warm water on the nozzle, spraying upside down a few squirts after I'm through fixing so that nothing remains in the nozzle, etc. If I use water, I'm careful to get all the water off, before use the fixative. I didn't find any instructions on doing these things, but I'm concerned about pooling on my paintings, especially if I haven't used the spray in several weeks.

It does leave a very shiny finish to your painting and I would not use it on anything other than Sennelier Oil Pastels, without being very careful to test thoroughly on any other brands. I think ideally one should varnish over the fixative, but I have yet to test that out. I fix everything that I want to save, as I'm too disorganized to mess with glasseine or waxed paper!

I would use this product with caution, until one is very comfortable, as I have heard some unfavorable comments. This has not been my experience, however.

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Becky has an example of an Oil Pastel without fixative (on the left) and with fixative (on the right). You can see the gloss finish on the “fixed” one catch the camera light.



As I said in the beginning of this article, each of these methods has people who have had good experiences with them and people who have had bad experiences with them. Because we are still exploring what we can do with oil pastels and how they can be used, there are no rules.

The best advice is to test some of these methods (and others you may have heard of) on scrap paintings. And hopefully, you will find a method that works for you.

Additional reading and resources:

FrameTek

<http://www.frametek.com/HTML/Articles/pastel.html>

For more discussions on protecting a finished oil pastel, go to the Oil Pastel Studio in WetCanvas.com and do a search with the key words “varnish” and “fixative”.