

Practice -- The Art of Selecting Cave Walls to Canvas

Contributed by Darrell Crow
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As a new oil painting artist, I quickly discovered the great need for alternative painting surfaces. I like using canvas, but mind you, one canvas is not all that expensive, but feeding a new insatiable habit with two, three or even four canvases a day can add up. Man has been in the great search for practice painting surfaces ever since he started doodling on cave walls. Unfortunately, cave walls are in short supply and they're really, really expensive these days.

{bot_wrgoogle}So what's an artist to do? What are our alternatives? What can I use for practice? What should I use for a final painting project?

So let's just take up with the cave walls and come forward a few years. Oil is a soft and fatty substance. So the requirement is that the painting surface must be harder than oil. The short of it all, you can paint on anything so long as it is harder than oil. You are limited only by your imagination. With that said, you want to use a surface that won't change with the weather (warp) or corrode from the use of oils, solvents and medium. What good does it do, to paint grandma and grandpa and watch the work warp in three months?

Seasoned wood, masonite, canvas board or illustration boards just to name a few, are rigid and great to use as painting surfaces. They used to be the primary painting surfaces until about 500 years ago when canvas was discovered. The most commonly used painting surface today is canvas which must be correctly mounted on a set of stretcher bars which ensures that the entire surface is taut. A good canvas is equally tight and firm throughout. This gives canvas its peculiar feel that's softer and bouncier than wood, cave walls or other rigid surfaces.

As each of us develops our skills and craftsmanship, we get used to the properties of our painting surfaces. We rely on it. We may try many surfaces, but we settle down on what we generally like and become comfortable.

Canvas is popular because its light, rigid, yet elastic at the same time. Canvas can be made from sackcloth (burlap), cotton (most popular), synthetic, a combination of materials or even smooth linen. The texture of the surface of the canvas are rated the their smoothness, known as "tooth." The coarser the surface, the more 'tooth' it is said to have. Canvas are available as economy (rough with lots of tooth), medium, fine (portrait smooth) and smooth linen. Each cloth can be constructed to any quality level. Linen is considered to be the best in quality and therefore sports the heftier price.

A "primed" canvas is one that has been covered with a solid layer of substance that protects the canvas cloth from rotting away because of the

acidity and harshness of oils and mediums. In a nutshell, an unprimed canvas will dissolve over the long term from the acidity inherent in oil paints. The next time you're shopping, look at the canvas label. It should mention whether or not the canvas is primed. If there's no mention, than safely assume the canvas is not primed.

Canvases are typically primed with one of the following:

1. Thinned glue that does not affect the color of the canvas. Canvas are typically labeled as either single or double primed, meaning coats of application. The canvas must dry before the next coat is applied. Double primed application is best.
2. A compound of rabbit skin glue and Spanish white or chalk.
3. Acrylic gesso.

It is normal practice for manufacturers to label their canvas as primed, materials used, degree of material mix if any, texture and quality.

As a guideline, think of it in these terms.

1. Economy is great for practice and giving away.
2. Reserve fine for those prized masterpieces.
3. If you're getting paid, go fine. You can do your studies on rough, but for the final masterpiece, make sure its fine.

Wood is an excellent painting surface, however solid wood surfaces are seldom used anymore. Chipboard, made of wood chips and glue pressed tightly is becoming popular. Masonite and plywood are also ideal surfaces for painting since they resist warping and climate changes.

One idea is to take a sheet of masonite rough it up with sandpaper, and then coat with a thin layer of a primer. (I typically use acrylic or gesso). I'll take a 4'x8' sheet of masonite, prime it, then saw it right down the 8' foot center. Each half would then be sawed again at 18" intervals. This provides you eight (8) 18" x 24" wooden painting boards to use.

The only problem with the above approach is the hard surface. But if you like hard, this is an excellent tip for securing inexpensive painting surfaces.

If you're a die hard canvas person, let me introduce you to canvasette papers. This is canvas paper. In general, papers are unsuitable surfaces for oil painting, because they just simply absorb the oils. However, canvas paper is a very thick paper especially prepared for oils. I therefore use it for practicing. It cuts costs to well under a buck each. I buy a pad of 16"x20" canvas paper and mount them onto a 16"x20" canvas with masking tape or

thumbtacks. I paint my heart out, toss or give away and move right onto the next session. I love this approach as I retain the look and feel of canvas throughout my practice session.

A third method is purchasing an economy 24" x 36" canvas and a wallpaper scraper. Paint until you drop, scrape the paint off with the wallpaper scraper, clean with thinner and you're ready to go again. You can always divide your canvas into four equally sized panels with masking tape on the 24" x 36" canvas.

I love the thought of one day creating a masterpiece on cave walls that'll be gazed upon for centuries. Until you're ready for your very own cave wall, try one of these alternative painting surfaces as you learn to paint and let me know how you fare.

About The Author

Darrell Crow is fast becoming one of America's favorite oil painting instructor. With his step-by-step instructions, anyone can learn to oil paint. Guaranteed. Get a free sample of his 2-hour comprehensive Basic Technique of Oil Painting Water video at <http://www.darrellcrow.com/videos>. Darrell's formal education was in Journalism with little emphasis in art. Darrell had a great career as a journalist and then later as a high technology marketing professional. Just 15 years ago, Darrell began to study art under Jessie Martin, Bob Ross, Robert Warren, Gary Jenkins, Lynn Pittard, Joyce Ortner, Dorothy Dent, Bill Blackman and others. Darrell's studies of the Hudson River Valley School of Artists like Church and Bierstadt further developed his artistic abilities