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Does An Oil Painting Need To Be Varnished?

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 Jennifer Taylor (<https://craftsbliss.com/author/jennifer-taylor/>) -
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If you paint with oils, you know it can take many hours to complete a painting. It's hard work, and it takes a lot of care to perfect. And once you have completed it, you may wonder whether your painting needs varnished. We did the research and found answers for you.

While it isn't always necessary to varnish your painting, many artists and experts recommend it. The varnish is especially important if you want to protect your painting from the elements long term. But varnishing too early can cause serious damage to your artwork. For this and other reasons, some artists prefer not to varnish at all. Varnishing your oil painting provides many benefits, such as:

- **Adds a non-porous layer, making cleaning easier**
- **Removable in the future, in case it becomes dull or damaged**
- **Can alter your painting finish to a matte, satin, or gloss**
- **Increases color saturation**
- **Adds UV protection to painting**

There are many good reasons for varnish, and some good reasons you may choose not to. We dig into the pros and cons below, so please keep reading.

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To Varnish Or Not Varnish Your Oil Painting

If you have a finished painting that you've worked hard on, you might worry about what will happen to it over time. Dust, air pollutants, and UV light exposure may damage the painting surface. You still may not be sure varnish is right for your piece. You might worry about what will happen if varnishing doesn't turn out well.

The good news is that you can remove most modern varnishes later on. With the proper steps, they come off without damaging the underlying painting.

Pros Of Varnishing

Adds A Non-Porous Layer

Oil paints can be porous, even when completely cured. Pores allow dust and pollutants in the air to attach firmly onto and into the paint. Dusty pores make it difficult to clean without damaging the paint. The non-porous varnish is a smoother surface, making it much easier to clean away dust and debris.

Removable

Most varnishes are removable later on with the proper solvent. The ability to remove is good if varnish becomes dull, yellowed, scratched, cracked, or otherwise damaged. You can then add a new layer after removing the old layer if you choose.

There are different types of varnish, and some will require other methods to remove them. You can use turpentine to remove some dammar varnishes, like this one:

Winsor & Newton Dammar Varnish



(https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B007GD3H1S/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&creativeASIN=B007GD3H1S&linkCode=as2&tag=craftsbliss-20)

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You can remove many synthetic varnishes with odorless mineral spirits. One such varnish is this one:

Gamblin Gamvar Picture Varnish



(https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00BN9OREM/ref=as_li_tl?ie=UTF8&creativeASIN=B00BN9OREM&linkCode=as2&tag=craftsbliss-20)

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Make sure to research to make sure what works best with the varnish on your painting before removing it.

Alters Finish Of Painting

Varnish can even out the sheen of a painting that has areas that appear duller than others. Unevenness can happen for several reasons, one of which is because certain pigments will cure with a more matte finish than others. By applying a varnish over such a painting, you can balance it out.

This process can also alter the finish to your preferred aesthetic. You can change your finish to a matte, satin, or glossy finish by merely using the proper varnish.

Increases Color Saturation

Because some pigments have a different amount of oil, you can sometimes have certain hues that lose intensity as they dry. The use of mediums while painting can also cause this problem, as does painting on certain surfaces.

In these cases, a suitable varnish to the painting will help correct some of these problems. It can give the appearance of more saturation and vibrancy to your artwork.

Adds UV Protection

Ultraviolet light can cause damage to your oil paintings. It can change the color or brightness, and can even cause the paint to crack. Most varnishes will protect your artwork from UV light.

Cons Of Varnishing

Alters The Look

Altering the look is a pro, but it can also be a con. Some artists do not like the look that varnish gives a painting.

Ineffective At Evening Out The Finish

In some cases, applying varnish to a painting with an uneven finish can exaggerate the differences, not even them out.

Difficult

Some people find the process of applying varnish to be complicated. If done improperly, varnishing can give poor results.

Can Damage Painting

If applied too soon, varnish can permanently damage your painting. It can bind to the existing paint, causing problems if you try to remove it later on. It can cause cracking, wrinkling, or prevent the paint from ever thoroughly drying.

By waiting for the recommended 6-12 months for traditional varnishes, or until hard touch dry for some synthetics, you avoid many of these problems.

With the pros and cons considered, many artists recommend varnishing your painting. It will provide long-term protection, and it is unlikely to damage your artwork if done correctly.

What Happens If You Varnish An Oil Painting Too Early?

If you do not wait the appropriate amount of time before you varnish your oil painting, you can run into problems such as:

- Varnish can create a permanent bond with paints, making removal impossible without damaging the paint underneath.
- Cracking
- Wrinkling
- Prevents painting from properly drying

The most common recommendations are to wait 6-12 months before varnishing. If you absolutely must varnish sooner, you'll want to use a retouch varnish. You can apply retouch varnish much sooner during the drying process, but it is less permanent.

This video shows some of what happens if you varnish too soon, even on a very thin painting:

recommend their synthetic brushes. The critical factor seems to be using a good quality brush that you only use for varnishing, not one you also use with paint.

What Kind Of Varnish To Use On Oil Paintings?

When it comes to oil paintings, there are a couple of types of varnish that you need to consider.

- Retouch varnish: You can apply retouch varnish when a painting is touch-dry. It can be used between layers and painted over, and allows the paint to continue to dry. Retouch varnish will provide temporary protection to the painting and even out the finish.
- Final varnish: You apply final varnish after a painting has dried for several months. This varnish is much more concentrated and offers better protection. Final varnish prevents contaminants from penetrating the paint better than retouch varnish.

Both of these varnish types are available in satin, matte, or gloss finishes. They are also both available in natural or synthetic.

You can apply some synthetic final varnishes much sooner than natural varnish. Sometimes the natural varnishes, such as dammar or mastic, turn yellow over time. Synthetics claim to be non-yellowing.

Your choice of natural versus synthetic, and whether to go with gloss, matte, or satin will be mostly a matter of personal preference.

Can You Spray Varnish On A Wet Oil Painting?

It would be best if you didn't varnish a wet painting. Any form of varnishing on a wet oil painting may damage the paint. Manufacturers of spray varnish recommend waiting the same 6-12 months, as with brush-on varnish, for your final varnishing. Even for spray-on retouch varnish, you need to wait until the painting is dry to the touch.

Summary

Varnishing Too Soon - What happens? Experi...



What Brush Is Best To Varnish Oil Paintings?

A lot of artists recommend a high-quality natural bristle brush — often hog hair or horsehair. But if you look at the websites for varnish makers such as [Winsor & Newton](https://www.winsornewton.com/uk/education/guides/all-you-need-to-know-about-varnishing-paintings/)

(<https://www.winsornewton.com/uk/education/guides/all-you-need-to-know-about-varnishing-paintings/>) or [Gamblin](https://gamblincolors.com/gamvarvarnishbrush/)

(<https://gamblincolors.com/gamvarvarnishbrush/>), you see they



While many experts recommend varnishing, it isn't necessarily required for your painting. If you are happy with the appearance of your work and aren't concerned about protecting it from dust or UV damage in the decades to come, you might choose not to varnish. Some people do not like the look of varnish. In the end, it comes down to what you like and what your long-term plans are for the painting.

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