

GOUACHE G-WHAT? A MODERN SUBSTITUTE FOR PERIOD PAINTS

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I put this information together because there seemed to be no one good place to learn about gouache. Even when I took a college illustration course we were told very little about how gouache works. This is based on things I've read in books, on lists, and from my own experience.

What Is Gouache?

Gouache is like watercolor paint in that gum arabic is used as the binder and pigments provide the color. Whereas the white of the paper provides the light for watercolors, the brilliance of gouache comes from the pigment. Some brands of gouache use chalk to make the paint opaque; the better brands use more pigment.

Gouache is often used by illustrators because it has such a velvety smooth surface that it reproduces well. Because many commercial works only have to last until they are photographed, the artists are not concerned about permanence of the paint. Some unique colors were created that have a very low permanence. On Windsor & Newton paints, AA means very permanent, B a little less permanent, etc. Always check the permanence of the tubes of paint you buy.

Kinds of Gouache

There are many different brands of gouache. The ones that I have been able to find most often are Windsor & Newton and Daler-Rowney, both of which I like to use. Other highly rated brands mentioned in Rob Howard's *Gouache for Illustration* are Holbein, Schmincke, Da Vinci, and Turner. (He didn't like Daler-Rowney, oh well.) Different brands of gouache can be safely mixed together.

There are several brands of "student-grade" gouache. Remember, you get what you pay for. I started with what my college bookstore had—Pebeo gouache from France. It was okay. The colors seemed to be somewhat muted by the addition of white, and the texture was a lot rougher. Savoir Faire and Reeves are two other student-grade brands.

Acrylic gouache uses acrylic as a binder instead of gum arabic. Because of this it dries quickly and cannot be rewetted. It has been observed that because of this, acrylic gouache is in this more like egg tempera. To my eye, the colors of acrylic gouache are more plastic looking. However, the finished surface of acrylic is much more durable. It is a good substitute when painting something that will be handled, like a box or a wax tablet. I have used Jo Sonja acrylic gouache. I've seen it at Art Mart and Michaels. Gold acrylic gouache cannot be burnished.

According to Windsor & Newton's Web site, you can make their regular gouache water resistant by adding small amounts of their Acrylic Matte Medium.

Where to Find It

Gouache is easier to find than it was just 10 years ago. I've found it at art supplies stores like Art Mart, Dick Blick, and at university bookstores. I even bought some in an auction on e-Bay.

How to Use It

When fresh out of the tube, gouache is much thicker than you need it. Add water a drop at a time until you like the consistency. (Like heavy cream.) Dispensing water with a bulb syringe (one of those bulb things moms use to clean baby noses) is useful.

When you open a new tube, a little clear liquid comes out. That is not necessarily the binder settling out. Glycerin is used to fill the last space in a tube and keep the paint from drying out. Discard the clear liquid.

I've read that one should use distilled water rather than tap water. I guess it depends on the minerals in your water supply. I also read that it's a good idea to use one jar of water for cleaning brushes and one for wetting your paint.

Special Qualities

- Rehydrates—dried up gouache in a palette can be rewetted and used again. If the surface of repeatedly dried gouache becomes chalky, the surface of the finished painting will be chalky and more likely to smudge. Adding a drop of gum arabic will extend its life. Too much will make it shiny and more sticky.
- Putting wet gouache in an airtight container to keep it moist can lead to smelly biology experiments.
- If applied too thickly, gouache can crack and flake off.
- If applied thinly, it can be used like ink. In other words, you can use red gouache instead of red ink.
- The color can shift dramatically as the paint dries. Usually it gets lighter.
- Don't tip your brush with your mouth. Modern commercial gouache is not supposed to be toxic. But if you ever plan on working with ground pigments, it would be wise to start practicing safe habits now.
- Permanent white and titanium white are more opaque and are good for doing whitework and highlights.
- Zinc white is more transparent and better for mixing colors. Also it does not diminish the colorfastness of the colors it's mixed with.

Like Medieval Tempera

Over the past couple years, I have had an opportunity to see several period manuscripts. The rich matte colors of gouache are very similar to the appearance of many of them. That being said, there is no hard and fast rule that says every paint used was opaque. In early period manuscripts the paint looks thinner, more transparent. Is this wear, chemical changes, or what the artist intended?

Ways to Make Gouache More Medieval

Ultramarine—put a little metallic gouache in it to simulate the sparkle of lapis. Too much gold can change the color of ultramarine and make it head toward green. A drop of gold in yellow gouache might make it look more like orpiment, but I haven't tried this.

With period pigments, lead white did not react well with the copper commonly used for green. “Whitework” on green is often done with yellow paint

Since egg tempera dries so fast and is not re-wettable, medieval artists had to paint in small hatch strokes. Each stroke is a slightly different color that adds up to the intended color and shading

Gold gouache can be burnished to smooth out its appearance. Like gold leaf, gold gouache should be done before any other colors are applied (but after calligraphy). Mix it to a consistency like heavy cream and apply it to the paper so that it looks like mercury sitting on the surface. I find it useful to put a fat drop of gold in an area and pull it with the brush into nooks and crannies. When the gold is completely dry, carefully rub it with a smooth stone or glass piece. A piece of glassine paper between the gold and the burnisher will protect both surfaces. (The transparent envelopes that postage stamps come in are made from glassine paper.) Sometimes you have to do a second layer of gold to get good coverage. Acrylic gold gouache is too flexible to be burnished.

What Colors to Buy

This is a highly individual. If money is an issue, buy a cheap student set and add a tube or two of a high-quality brand as you can. If you plan on working on scrolls from several periods and regions, I recommend buying a spectrum red, blue, and yellow, and black and white so you can mix the shades you need for each project.

For late-period scrolls, I used an awful lot of ultramarine, madder carmine, Windsor green, titanium white, and yellow ochre. I hardly ever use black paint

For early-period scrolls, especially Celtic: aquamarine, indigo blue, rose, bright yellow.

From Windsor & Newton’s site: three designated primary colors: primary yellow, primary blue, and primary red. If using a six-color mixing system we would recommend lemon yellow, permanent yellow deep, Winsor blue, ultramarine, scarlet lake, and alizarin crimson.

Here's another list: ultramarine, cadmium yellow pale, alizarin crimson, zinc white, olive green, jet black, vandyke brown, and gold.

And another: cadmium red pale, cadmium yellow deep, ultramarine blue, zinc white, lamp black, purple lake, and middle green.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Howard, Rob. *Gouache for Illustration: Materials, Techniques, and Studio Secrets for Today’s Fine Artist and Illustrator*. Watson-Guption: New York, 1993. ISBN 0-8230-21-65-3. A wonderful book. All the basics of gouache plus a great deal of color theory. Unfortunately, it is out of print. Amazon.com found one for me but it took a while. Another book by Rob Howard, called *The Illustrator’s Bible*, has only a few pages about gouache.

Mayer, Ralph. *The Artist’s Handbook of Materials and Techniques*. Viking: 1991 (5th edition). The bible for all visual artists. However, only a few pages are dedicated to gouache.

Metzger, Phil. *The North Light Artist's Guide to Materials and Techniques*. North Light Books: Cincinnati, Ohio, 1996. ISBN 0-89134-675-9&-9. This is a great book. Chapter seven gives a good basic description of gouache as well as egg tempera. It has lots of pictures and references and, best of all, it is in print and widely available.

A good basic description of gouache

<http://www.theblueprinter.com/artcolony/gouache.htm>

Daniel Smith Artist Materials technical leaflet about gouache.

<http://www.danielsmith.com/leaflet-gouache.html>

Windsor Newton's Q & A about gouache.

<http://www.winsornewton.com/Main/Sitesections/EncycloSctn/CommonQuestions/commqstnsetgouache.html>

This site has a good comparison between student and professional grade gouache.

<http://www.artpaper.com/TrueBlue/teckwc2.html>

Cyber-Scriptorium: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2963/>

A Scribes Bibliography: <http://www.thibault.org/sca/scribe/biblio.html>

Dscriptorium: <http://www.byu.edu/~hurlbut/dscriptorium/dscriptorium.html>

Medieval Manuscript Leaves: <http://wally2.rit.edu/cary/manuscripts/index.html>

Texts, Manuscripts, & Paleography: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/hot/mss.html>

This is my mnemonic for how to spell gouache

"All the vowels except 'i' and no 's' "