



Fayum Funeral Portrait

Encaustic Painting

Encaustic is the oldest known painting medium. The word comes from the ancient Greek word *encaustikos*, meaning "to burn in or heat." From the writings of the Roman historian Pliny, the Greeks practiced it during the 5th century B.C.

Wax, a prime ingredient of encaustic paint, is an excellent preservative of materials. Greek shipbuilders used it to caulk and waterproof the hulls of their ships. Eventually, they began adding pigment and used it to decorate their warships. They also used encaustic on the stonework of architecture and marble statues. The only surviving and best-known encaustic works from ancient times are the Fayum funeral portraits by Greek painters living in Egypt. To this day, the color has remained fresh due to the protection of the wax.

By the Middle Ages, encaustic had become a lost art, having been replaced by tempera painting. Tempera was cheaper, faster, and easier to use. Encaustic was slow and labor-intensive but more durable. During the 18th and 19th centuries, painters attempted to rediscover the art of encaustic. It wasn't until the twentieth century and the advent of electrical appliances that it became practical for artists to employ the medium once again.

The encaustic medium consists of molten beeswax and damar resin (derived from tree sap). Added to the medium is dry pigment offering a vast array of colors. Beeswax is the oldest known pigment binder (the agent that binds the ingredients together as paint). The wax gives the pigment a beautiful richness and sheen. This paint is melted onto a hot electric palette and applied in layers. Additional heat binds each layer to the one before. Once the layers are fused and allowed to harden on a firm support, the painting meets archival standards.

While encaustic paintings are archivally sound, as with all fine art, they demand a certain amount of care. With most people, the biggest fear is that an encaustic painting might melt, which only happens in extreme temperatures over 150° Fahrenheit. Hot days may soften the paint but will cause no real damage. The most conservative and the safest temperature range for encaustic is between 40° and 110° Fahrenheit.

As with any fine art piece, an encaustic should not be hung in direct sunlight or near a heat source. Encaustic is very stable and is not affected by moisture, mildew, or fungus. If needed, clean by wiping gently with a soft, dry cloth, do not use solvents. If handled correctly, encaustic paintings will remain as fresh as the day made.

-Sandra Quinn