

Varnishes and Fixatives... Oh, My!

Sarah Beckett
Product Research Director

Lately I've been reading about varnishes and fixatives for work on paper. I've never used them before, but as my cp application is getting a bit heavier, I may need some protection from wax bloom.

Reading about satin and matte finishes, I found some facts that are good to be aware of. Satin and matte finishes are created by adding solid particles to the formula. Those solid particles refract light and break up the surface created by the varnish, making it less shiny.

Because of these particles, you should always use gloss finish for the under coats and matte finish for only the top coat when you apply multiple coats of a varnish. Too many layers of a matte varnish can cause a thick layer of those particles and create a cloudy effect.

Another thing, if the surface of the surface itself is still somewhat exposed, the varnish will be absorbed into the paper. If the artist is using a matte finish, that means the varnish will be absorbed, but the particles will stay on the surface. This will create a cloudy or opaque film on the artwork. The best way to avoid this is an isolation layer to separate the artwork from the varnish. For most artists, this could just be a bottom layer of gloss finish followed by the matte finish on top.

Something that many artists fail to realize is that "varnishes" are meant to be removable. The purpose of a varnish is to protect a painting from dirt, soot, atmospheric pollution, etc. As that varnish layer gets dirty, you're supposed to be able to remove it and apply new varnish.

This is an idea that isn't really talked about when artists discuss "varnishing" works on paper, and most artists spray

the finish directly onto their artwork without much thought about the long term effects of these sprays. The main concern for most cp artists is to protect their work from wax bloom or to frame it without glass.

When an artist sprays something directly onto the drawing, the varnish is never removable. You need a solvent to remove varnish and a solvent would, of course, also remove the cp, pastel, etc.

So, a true isolation layer is something that will separate the drawing/painting from the varnish and will not dissolve in solvent—you can then remove the varnish without disturbing the drawing.

Many cp artists probably think that's too complicated to worry about, but the benefit is that if your varnish layer goes horribly wrong, you can just remove it and try again.

I was terrified of varnishing paintings until I talked to the people at Gamblin a few years back. To be honest, their Gamvar is the only varnish I trust. It dissolves in Gamsol (which I know many of you use in your cp work) so you don't have to use something really harsh like turpentine.

Although it was designed for oil paintings, I'm going to try to come up with a way of varnishing cp work with Gamvar (which is glossy, but can also be made matte with cold wax medium). I just need to figure out what the best isolation layer would be, and you definitely need an isolation layer because Gamvar is painted on, not sprayed. I just read something about an artist presenting pastels without glass by spraying the surface with diluted Gamblin PVA, so that might be worthy of exploration as well.