

Preparing Encaustic Supports with Cold Wax Paste

By Cassandra Kelly, [The Hive Encaustic](http://hive-encaustic.com) (<http://hive-encaustic.com>)

The Ancient Greeks and mural art

For their murals, the Greeks didn't just heat their wax—they heated their walls.ⁱ They started with a clean but not polished stone wall. They built large moveable scaffolding from which they could suspend a charcoal-fired brazier which hung close to, but not touching, the surface of the wall. The artist heated the wall in sections until it reached about 100 degrees F. Once a section was properly heated, the artist applied a cold wax emulsion to the stone. The process was repeated over and over again, maintaining the heat level, until the stone wall couldn't absorb any more.

Once I learned about the ancient Greeks and their mural walls, I had to try to prepare some boards and tiles with cold wax medium. Cold wax saturation creates one of the most stable wood-wax bonds, and greatly reduces pin holes and bubbles from your paintings.

Note: Cold wax medium contains volatile solvents which will evaporate when exposed to air and ignite when exposed to flame. Please don't use your butane torch to fuse cold wax medium, and be careful of overheating with your other tools. Once the solvent has gassed off, cold wax medium is just as safe as beeswax medium. Please read the instructions for the solvent you used to create the cold wax paste.

You will need:

- Clean wood panel
- Heat gun (do not use a torch)
- Cold wax paste (recipe below)
- Paint brush

Step one: Prepare cold wax paste (one week to ten days in advance)

Wax can be emulsified, that is, turned from a solid to a liquid or paste by combining it with solvents like mineral spirits, turpentine or damar varnish. The proportion of wax pellets or wax medium to solvent is as follows:

4-5 parts mineral spirits, damar varnish or turpentineⁱⁱ
4-5 parts beeswax

Place wax and spirits in a glass jar and seal tightly. Shake the jar until wax is coated, and shake the jar daily until the spirits are absorbed and the wax has become a soft paste or gel. This process will take a week to ten days. When finished, you should be able to spoon it out like mayonnaise.



Cold wax paste made with mineral spirits and white beeswax prill.



Cold wax paste made with damar varnish and white beeswax.

Step two:

Using your heat gun on medium, heat a 6" x6" section of your panel until it is almost too hot to touch.

Step three:

Apply a teaspoon or so of paste to the heated section. It will melt like butter and soak into the wood. You may notice some fizzing as air leaves the board. This is what you want. Air inside the board is being replaced by wax. Later when you use the board for your encaustic work, you will notice fewer pinholes and bubbles.

Step four:

Repeat steps one and two until surface is covered. At this point the wood will look wet. Only a small amount of wax has penetrated the board at this point. You will need to repeat this process several times to drive out the air.

Step five:

I like to let the board rest for a few minutes between applications. I am generally prepping several boards at a time, so I simply add a coat to each board and move on to the next. I have added as many as seven applications of cold wax before the board is saturated, but generally, three applications is enough. You'll know it's done when the hot paste pools on the surface and the air is no longer fizzing out of the board.

When it's cooled you should still be able to feel some of the wood grain with your fingertips, but the surface will be waxy. If you turn the board on edge you might be able to see how deeply the wax penetrated.

When you reheat the surface later, some additional fizzing will occur as wax bubbles out of the wood. This is good. The wax in the wood will fuse and bind with the wax you paint on the surface. There is no need for other gesso compounds.

Advantages

By submitting the board to repeated high heat and infusions of wax paste, most of the gas is driven out of the wood. You should get fewer gas bubbles and pin holes as you reheat and paint with encaustics. Saturating the board with wax creates a very durable wax-wood bond, probably the most stable ground for encaustic.

Disadvantages

The luminosity thing. You still need to add white base layers to the surface if you want that inner glow. Melt a tin of regular wax medium and add a teaspoon of titanium white, mixing thoroughly to create an opaque white paint. Use this as your first base layer of hot wax.

About the Hive Encaustic blog

A weekly blog and meditation on encaustic materials and techniques by a writer. Cassandra's experiments with encaustic are a blend of wry humor, disaster and triumph. Making encaustic art has never been this cheap. Visit <http://hive-encaustic.com/>

Coming soon--***Encaustic Materials Handbook*** by Cassandra Kelly. The antidote to the high cost of making encaustic art, ***The Encaustic Materials Handbook*** explores options for encaustic gesso, paints and glazes, cold wax paint and different surface preparation ideas. ***The Encaustic Materials Handbook*** is for artists with a do-it-yourself attitude who want to explore and experiment with the most beautiful art materials ever. The book will be available as an ebook from various sources.

Coming soon-- Francis Pratt's influential text ***Encaustic Materials and Methods***. Published only once in 1949, ***Encaustic Materials and Methods*** was written when artists were seeking out new ideas and non-traditional materials. Though neither new nor non-traditional, encaustic was enjoying a renaissance made possible by electric heating sources, and many artists were re-discovering the medium. ***Encaustic Materials and Methods*** is full of encaustic recipes and techniques from artists who mastered the medium over seventy years ago. Francis Pratt's revolutionary little encaustic book will be available as a print-on-demand facsimile edition. For more information about Francis Pratt and the re-release of ***Encaustic Materials and Methods***, go to www.francisprattart.com.

ⁱ Taylor, William Benjamin Sarsfield. ***A Manual of Fresco and Encaustic Painting***. London: Chapman Hall. 1843. Page 135.

ⁱⁱ Taylor, page 135.