



THE HISTORY OF ENCAUSTIC

Wax is an excellent preservative of materials. The Greeks applied coatings of wax and pitch to weatherproof their ships. Pigmenting the wax gave rise to the decorating of warships and merchant ships. The use of a rudimentary encaustic was an established practice in the Classical Period (500-323 BC). It is possible that at about that time the crude paint applied with tar brushes to the ships was refined for the art of painting on panels.

ENCAUSTIC AND TEMPERA

Encaustic on panels rivaled that of tempera in what are the earliest known portable easel paintings. Tempera was a faster, cheaper process. Encaustic was a slow involved technique, but the paint could be built up in relief, and the wax gave a rich optical effect to the pigment. These characteristics made the finished work startlingly lifelike. Moreover, encaustic had far greater durability than tempera, which was vulnerable to moisture. Pliny refers to encaustic paintings several hundred years old in the possession of Roman aristocrats of his own time.

ENCAUSTIC IN SCULPTURE

We know that the white marble we see today in the monuments of Greek antiquity was once colored, either boldly or delicately and that wax was used to both preserve and enhance that marble (see "Polychromy in Greek Sculpture" below). The literary evidence of how this was done is scant. The figures on the Alexander Sarcophagus in the archeological Museum of Istanbul are an example of such coloration, although it is not clear how intense the original color was. The methods used to color the marble probably varied. They may have been painted with encaustic or painted with tempera and "varnished" with fused wax. A 4th Century BC terracotta krater vase in the Metropolitan museum depicts a painter applying encaustic to a sculpture of Heracles while his servant heats up metal spatulas on a charcoal brazier.

THE FAYUM PORTRAITS

Perhaps the best known of all encaustic work are the Fayum funeral portraits painted in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. by Greek painters in Egypt. A significant Greek population had settled in Egypt following its conquest by Alexander, eventually adopting the practice of mummifying their dead. The portraits, painted either in the prime of life or after death, were placed over the person's mummy as a memorial. The custom of funeral portraits did not begin until after the conquest of Egypt by Rome and lasted about two centuries. The portraits represent the converging influence of Egyptian religious ritual, Greek aesthetic and Roman fashions and social ranking. Many of these pieces have survived to our own time, and their color has remained as fresh as any recently completed work.

The great period of economic instability that followed the decline of the Roman Empire and the change in cultural values caused encaustic to fall into disuse. Some encaustic work, particularly the painting of icons, was carried on as late as the 7th century, but for the most part it became a lost art. It was replaced by tempera, which was cheaper, faster, and less demanding to work with.

THE REVIVAL

18th & 19th Century Revivals. The roots of modern encaustic painting go back to the 18th century when antiquarians, excited by the archeological discovery of the buried cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, strove to rediscover the techniques of the ancient painters. Encaustic was further explored in the 19th century as a way solve the problem of dampness faced by mural painters in northern climates. Although the practice did not become widespread, there were some amazing successes, such as John LaFarge's murals for Trinity Church in Boston.

20th Century Revival. In the first half of the 20th century, the invention of portable electric heating implements made encaustic a far less formidable technique. Numerous artists were drawn to experiment with it and apply it to their individual styles. Robert Delaunay, Antoine Pevsner, Diego Rivera, Rifka Angel, Karl Zerbe, and Victor Brauner were early exponents of the revived technique.

Alfonso Ossorio, Jasper Johns, Lynda Benglis, Robert Morris, Nancy Graves, Mia Westerlund Roosen, Robert Rauschenberg, are prominent among the many artists who turned encaustic into a modernist and cross-disciplinary medium, extending its use from painting to collage, assemblage, sculpture, and printmaking. In the 1940s, encaustic became available commercially. The latter part of the century saw a further explosion of encaustic painting propelled in part by the availability of commercial encaustic paint, first introduced by Torch Art Supplies in New York City in the late 1940s.

ONLINE ARTICLES:

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"The Oldest Modernist Paintings" *History and Archaeology*, February 2012. Smithsonian.com

"Proportion and Personality in the Fayum Portraits" The British Museum.

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Gail Stavitsky, Danielle Rice and Richard Frumess. *Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America During the Twentieth Century*. Montclair Art Museum, May 1999.

Edward M. Gomez. "ART / ARCHITECTURE; Improvised Images in Molten Wax, as Fluid as Jazz." *New York Times* 16 May 1999.

FURTHER READING ON FAYUM PORTRAITS:

Euphrosyne Doxiadis, *The Mysterious Fayum Portraits*, Abrams, 1995.

Susan Walker, *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

Lorelei Corcoran, *Portrait Mummies from Roman Egypt*, Univ. of Chicago, 1995.