

CANVAS GUIDE

Canvas Types

Cotton Duck Canvas

The most common and affordable variety of canvas making it very popular for students. The fibers of the cotton duck canvas are shorter, stretchier than linen, which is a much longer strand and stronger fiber that offers less flexibility. An advantage of cotton canvases is that they are easier to stretch than linen. Cotton Duck is classified according to its weight and surface texture.

Linen Canvas

Considered to be superior to cotton due to strength and lack of stretch. As linen is not as super absorbent by nature like cotton is, it is less prone to expand and contract due to flexibility. Linen also retains its natural oil content, which preserves the fiber's long term flexibility. It also provides a variety of weights and textures from very smooth to extremely rough, that cotton canvas cannot match.

Canvas Terminology

Single Primed

One coat of gesso. More flexible than double primed canvas.

Double Primed

Two coats of gesso, producing a smoother surface that is better for portrait or airbrush techniques. Smoother and stiffer than a single primed canvas.

Sizing

Seals, protects and makes canvas less absorbent. Provides receptive surface for the Ground.

Priming

The preparation of a surface upon which to paint, using a sizing and ground. Acrylic gesso is an acrylic primer. Animal skin glue followed by an oil-based Ground is an oil paint primer.

Ground

A material that prepares the surface upon which paint will adhere. Acrylic ground is also known as acrylic gesso.

Canvas Weight

The weight of a square yard of raw canvas usually stated in ounces, prior to priming.

Warp

Yarns running the length of the canvas.

Weft

Yarns running the width of the canvas.

Count

Number of yarns in warp and weft per square inch.

Gesso

What is gesso?

Gesso prepares (or "primes") the surface for painting. It dries hard, making the surface more stiff. It is similar to a white acrylic paint, only it is thinner. It acts as a binder for the paint to adhere to as it makes the surface slightly textured. Without gesso, the paint would soak into the weave of the canvas.

Different types of gesso

Gesso is traditionally white, but also comes in black, clear and even coloured gesso ready-made. You can also tint your gesso to make it any colour you wish to use by adding an acrylic paint.

Gesso comes in student and artist grades. The difference between the two amounts to the different ratios of pigment vs filler. Artist grade contains less filler than student grade gesso and has more pigment making it thicker and more opaque. These differences are reflected in the price as well as the quality.

Priming & Sizing

Priming

Priming your canvas by applying a layer or two of gesso to the surface, whether cotton or linen, will help in a number of ways. The white layer of gesso – one of the most popular primers – beneath the visible surface of a painting has the effect of making all the colors in the painting a little brighter. An unprimed canvas can also soak up all the paint, causing some of it to disappear into the canvas or clot up on the surface of it.

If you are going to prime a cotton canvas and want to use either oil or acrylic colour then an acrylic gesso primer is generally used.

Linen can be difficult to prime and stretch properly, but once you have mastered this it offers the smoothest and stiffest painting surface. When priming a linen canvas you can use an acrylic primer or an oil primer. If you use an acrylic primer this is less expensive than an oil primer and you can use both acrylic or oil colour on the (acrylic) primed surface.

Sizing

If you are using an oil primer on either cotton or linen then the surface must first be 'sized' with rabbit skin glue or poly vinyl acetate (PVA) size. 'Sizing' is the process that fills the pores in the surface with glutinous material (rabbit skin glue or PVA) and helps to stop fluid leaking through, and it also helps stiffen the fabric. If oil is applied to an 'un-sized' canvas the oil will eventually weaken the fibres and the image on the surface may fade.

It is important to remember that if rabbit skin glue or neutral pH PVA size is to be applied to either cotton or linen the canvas must not be stretched too tightly. Because both sizes are very fluid they will cause the fabric to contract to such a degree that the stretcher bars may warp.

How to prime a canvas

Priming

- Using a wide, flat brush, brush the gesso onto the canvas surface
- For the first coat, dilute the gesso with some water if it is too thick.
- Make sure you cover the entire surface evenly - working in a well lit area will help you see if you have missed any small spots
- When applying the gesso turn the canvas 90 degrees between coats to insure an even coverage.
- Don't forget to prime the edges!
- To make the surface smoother, apply a couple of coats of gesso and use a light sandpaper in between - make sure each layer is completely dry before sanding
- Apply a final coat using the pure, undiluted gesso.