

FRAMING WATERCOLOURS WITHOUT GLASS

By Karen Richardson

HOW DOES THIS METHOD WORK?

People ask me this question frequently. Sometimes they are curious collectors but often they are fellow artists who wonder if they too can present their artwork without the weight and glare of glass.

I summarize my experiences here so that art collectors can be better informed when contemplating an art purchase, and artists can choose safe procedures and materials, and avoid potential problems.

That said, if you are an artist and wish to display your paintings without glass, I encourage you to do your own research and find the archival method that suits your circumstances and keeps your artwork protected. I place a lot of trust in art material manufacturers' recommendations based on actual science, rather than those of well-intentioned but possibly ill-informed artists on YouTube.

Outlined below are the methods and materials I use to mount and varnish my watercolour paintings, along with some important tips I have learned over the last decade. The process takes about a week to complete and can be somewhat perilous for novices. Remember that mounting your painting to a panel is non-reversible, so start with a small sample painting while you learn and test the process. Also bear in mind that some art societies might consider a watercolour painting coated with acrylic varnish to be a mixed media artwork.



TEN STEPS TO MOUNT AND VARNISH A WATERCOLOUR PAINTING

1. Obtain an art panel which has already been sealed and primed, and a floater frame that will fit. Panels come in standard sizes; the smallest I use is 8 x 8 inches and the largest is 24 x 36 inches. My favourite panels are Jack Richeson cradled gessoed tempered hardboard panels, ApollonGotrick gesso wood panels, and several coated panels made by Ampersand (Claybord, Gessobord, or Primed Smooth Artist Panels). I prefer the 3/4" or 7/8" panel profiles. I buy custom floater frames that will fit the panel profile plus the thickness of the watercolour paper and still have at least 1/8" of the frame protruding beyond the front surface of the artwork. This will protect the vulnerable edges of the painting.

2. Complete a finished painting on 300lb acid-free Arches watercolour paper, with an image that is 1 inch longer and 1 inch wider than the panel. The excess paper will be trimmed off after mounting is complete. Thinner papers will show any unevenness of the adhesive layer, so avoid 140 lb paper. I do the mounting after the painting is done for two reasons; the mounting adhesive affects how paint behaves on the paper, and I don't want to risk wasting a panel with an unsuccessful painting.

3. Decide where the image will need cropping, to become the same size as the panel, but don't cut the watercolour paper yet. On the back of the paper, draw a pencil outline of where the panel will need to be placed. If your painting scene has a horizon, make sure it aligns parallel with a panel edge.

4. Place the painting face down on a hard, flat surface that is covered by a clean towel. Wet the back of the painting with clean water using a sponge. Quickly apply a thin coat of Golden Soft Gel Matte acrylic medium to the surface of the panel, using a two-inch flat brush. This needs to be done in about 30 seconds so the adhesive stays evenly wet. (Use a cheap brush, because the dried adhesive eventually builds up in the brush hairs, no matter how carefully I rinse the brush.)

5. Flip the gel-coated panel over and place wet side down onto the back of the wet paper, aligning the panel within the pencil lines from step 3. Press hands hard on the centre of the panel to force air bubbles out the sides. Pile on heavy objects (stacks of books work well) on the centre of the panel to make sure the paper and panel are squeezed tightly together. Leave overnight to dry, then remove the weights and flip the painting front side up to continue drying.



6. After another day, or once the painting feels fully dry, paint the edges of the panel with black acrylic paint. I usually apply two coats. The flange of watercolour paper helps to protect the front of the artwork from the acrylic paint.

7. Once the acrylic paint is dry (30 minutes), place the painting face down on a clean cutting mat and remove the paper flange with a very sharp utility knife. Make the cuts vertical and flush with the panel edge. When done, use a fine grit sanding block to sand the edges of the paper to remove any burrs.





8. The exposed thickness of the watercolour paper is white. Paint it with a black or very dark watercolour mixture. I mix my black from the three primaries. This dark colour will make the paper look like part of the panel rather than a separate layer. Do not use a black marker or acrylic paint, as it is too easy for these pigments to bleed over onto the front of the painting. Leave the painting face up to continue drying for several days before varnishing.

9. I never varnish my paintings in my studio, because of the toxic fumes. I set up my turntable stand in a garage with ambient temperature between 65 and 75 degrees F (18 to 24 degrees C). The varnishing process takes me a whole day because there are seven coats, with at least 45 minutes drying time between each coat. I varnish my paintings in batches of 4 to 6 pieces to make the process more efficient. I wear a respirator mask and use a spray varnish that does not disturb the watercolour paint. I start with three coats of Golden Archival Varnish (Mineral Spirit Acrylic Aerosol with UVLS) Gloss, followed by four coats of the Matte version.



This non-yellowing finish protects the artwork from dirt and dust and is moisture resistant. UVLS stands for UltraViolet Light filters and Stabilizers, which provide archival protection and reduce light damage. According to Golden, manufacturer of artist paints and varnishes, it takes a minimum of six coats of varnish to provide UV protection. The gloss coats seal the surface while keeping the painted image sharp, and the matte coats eliminate glare. I have not noticed any colour change caused by the varnish. It does add a slight texture to the surface of the painting. I have read that this varnish provides better UV protection than UV-blocking glass offers. I let the varnish dry overnight in the garage, to allow most of the smell to dissipate, before bringing the painting back to my studio.

10. After the varnish has dried for at least two days, I attach the frame to the back of the panel, add a hanging wire, and label the back of the panel with artwork and artist information. Now the painting is ready to hang on a wall.

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