

10 Things You Need to Know About the White Goop We Call “Gesso”

1. Traditional gesso smells...distinct. If you've ever used the old-school version with rabbit-skin glue, you know. It has a warm, slightly barnyard-adjacent scent. Renaissance studios were not the fresh, airy spaces we imagine.
2. It can literally crack on purpose, and people like that. Some artists intentionally force gesso to crack with thick layers or fast drying to get that aged, fresco-like surface.
3. You can carve into it like soft plaster. Catch it at that perfect semi-dry stage and you can incise lines, patterns, even text. It is basically low-commitment sculpture hiding in your painting prep.
4. Gesso can dull your colors, a lot. Ultra-absorbent surfaces can pull the vibrancy out of your paint, especially with acrylics. Sometimes a color issue is actually a surface issue.
5. It can warp paper if you look at it wrong. Too much gesso on thin paper turns it into a wave pool. It has strong opinions about how much moisture your surface should handle.
6. There is a thing called black gesso rebellion. Some artists refuse to start on white and only use black gesso, forcing everything to emerge from dark. Dramatic and effective.
7. Cheap gesso can feel like painting on chalky sadness. Lower quality versions often have too much filler and not enough binder, which can lead to flaking, dusting, or a squeaky drag.
8. You can mix things into it you probably should not. Sand, marble dust, coffee grounds. People treat gesso like a texture playground. It is basically the what if medium of painting.
9. It can make cardboard feel important. One coat of gesso and suddenly that shipping box has presence. Structurally and visually upgraded.
10. It quietly determines how your painting ages. Long before varnish or framing, your gesso layer is setting up whether your painting will flex, crack, absorb, or hold up over time. It is the invisible decision-maker.

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