

Encaustic History

A Combination of Two Cultures

Encaustic painting was practiced by Greek artists as far back as the 5th century B.C. Most of our knowledge of this early use comes from the Roman historian, Pliny, who wrote in the 1st century A.D. Pliny seems to have had little direct knowledge about studio methods, so his account of techniques and materials is not thorough, but his discussion gives us an idea of its general usage. According to Pliny, encaustic had a variety of applications: for the painting of portraits and scenes of mythology on panels, for the colouring of marble and terra cotta, and for work on ivory (probably the tinting of incised lines).

Wax is an excellent preservative of materials. It was from this use that the art of encaustic painting developed. The Greeks applied coatings of wax and pitch to weatherproof their ships. Pigmenting the wax gave rise to the decorating of warships and later, merchant ships. Mention is even made by Homer of the painted ships of the Greek warriors who fought at Troy. The use of a rudimentary encaustic was therefore an established practice by the 5th century B.C. 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. Pliny mentions two artists who had in fact started out as ship painters.

The Availability of Tempera

The use of encaustic on panels rivaled the use of tempera in what are the earliest known portable easel paintings. Tempera was a faster, cheaper process. Encaustic was a slow difficult 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 3-D

The nature of encaustic to both preserve and color caused it to be widely used on the stone work of both architecture and statuary. The white marble we see today in the monuments of Greek antiquity was once colored, either boldly or delicately tinted like the figures on the Alexander sarcophagus in the archeological Museum of Istanbul. Decorative terra cotta work on interiors was also painted with encaustic.

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 customs of the Egyptians. Funeral portraits, painted either in the prime of life or after death, were placed over the person's mummy as a memorial. 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

Encaustic painting was revived briefly in the 18th century, initially by amateurs in an effort to rediscover the techniques of the ancient painters. It was further explored in the 19th century to solve the problem of dampness faced by mural painters in northern climates. The success of these efforts was limited, and encaustic remained an obscure art form.

In the 20th century, the availability of portable electric heating implements and the variety of tools has made encaustic a far less formidable technique. This factor has created a resurgence of encaustic painting, and it is once again taking its place as a major artists' medium. Diego Rivera, Antoine Pevsner, Rifka Angel, Karl Zerbe, and Victor Brauner were early exponents of the revived technique. Alfonso Ossorio, Jasper Johns, Lynda Benglis, Robert Morris, and Nancy Graves are prominent among the many artists who turned encaustic into a modernist and cross-disciplinary medium.