

Designers Gouache

Designers Gouache or body colour as it is sometimes referred to, is a water-based opaque painting medium. (Only some colours of watercolour paints are opaque but all gouache colours are, including transparent colours such as alizarin crimson, raw sienna and lemon yellow.) The pigments are bound in a gum, dextrin, but there are certain additives one of which is chalk which make them opaque.

Gouache has a high degree of permanence. The colours can be intermixed and thinned with water to create transparent colours that look similar to watercolour paint or mixed with white paint to create opaque tints. In watercolour painting, gouache permanent white can be mixed with the paint to achieve an opaque colour. Because there is a greater ratio of additives to pigment, gouache colours are cheaper than artist's quality watercolour.

In some ways gouache is similar to acrylics, inasmuch as it dries quickly, but unlike acrylics it can be loosened with water to a certain extent once it has dried. Because of its chalk content gouache does not stay as moist as watercolour. Not only does it dry fast on the support but also on the palette. It is an ideal medium for sketching outside as well as indoor, and suits those who find the permanence of acrylics too daunting or the restrictions of watercolour too difficult.

Gouache colours were the first choice of graphic designers and commercial artists for many years. Their strong colour and soft velvety non-reflective surface finish photograph well, enabling artwork to be converted accurately to print. Posters were first painted on board with gouache, tempera or cheap and impermanent poster paints. Most of the 19th century artists used gouache in some way, and its finest exponent was undoubtedly Toulouse-Lautrec who fully exploited the medium.

Techniques

Gouache is a versatile medium. Its relative opacity gives it a more rugged quality, ideal for bold, energetic paintings and rapid landscape sketches. When wet, it can be scrubbed, scratched and scumbled. Interesting things happen as colours run together to form intricate marbled and curdled patterns. Washes can be built up in layers. In theory you can paint dark over light, but in practice it is best to stick to light over dark.

Because gouache colours contain relatively little binder, they remain soluble when dry, so an application of wet colour may pick up some colour from the layer below. Allowing one layer to dry completely before applying the next can prevent this. Apply the paint with a light touch and avoid over-brushing your colours.

Supports

As gouache is opaque, the translucency of white paper is not as vital as it is in watercolour, so it can be applied to a wide variety of supports. Lightweight papers

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should be avoided; the paint film of gouache is thicker than that of watercolour, and is liable to crack if used on a too flimsy support. Gouache can also be used on surfaces such as cardboard, wood or primed canvas, as long as they are free from oil. Coloured papers and boards as used for pastel work can also be used.

Brushes

Watercolour brushes are normally used for gouache painting, though bristle brushes are useful for making textural marks.

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