

The Process of Applying Gesso to a Canvas

The following instructions teach the novice painter how to apply gesso to a stretched canvas. A stretched canvas must be constructed before beginning.□

Gesso is a white paint-like liquid that is applied to an artist's canvas before the artist begins painting. Gesso provides a smooth ground and reduces the absorption of acrylic or oil paints into the canvas. Oil paints can damage cotton canvas if they are applied directly. Another benefit of applying gesso is that the cotton canvas shrinks a bit after drying. This increases the drum-like tightness of a well-stretched canvas.

Gesso is thinner than paint and allows some of the canvas's natural texture to come through. A little texture is desirable as it provides a surface for the paint to adhere to.

Raw (unprimed) cotton canvas has too much texture for a paint-loaded brush to glide over easily. Raw canvas is also too soluble; paint will soak quickly into the canvas instead of sitting on the surface.



Golden Gesso

fig. 1



Unprimed Canvas

fig. 2



Gesso Brush

fig. 3

Materials

- **Gesso** - a white paint-like liquid used to coat a canvas before oil or acrylic paint is applied. Golden brand is highly recommended.
- **Canvas** - raw cotton canvas stretched over and stapled onto a wooden frame.
- **Drop-cloth** - fabric or plastic placed under the work area to catch spills.
- **Gesso Brush** - a 3 inch wide paint brush with dense, stiff bristles.
- **Glass or plastic cup** - for mixing gesso with water. The mouth of the cup should be at least 4 inches wide to accommodate the gesso brush.
- **Water** - used for diluting the gesso and for clean-up.
- **Spoon** - used for stirring gesso.
- **Paper towels and soap** - used for clean-up.
- **Fine-Grain Sandpaper** - used to sand off areas where the gesso is too thick or cracked.
- **Paper Face Mask** - worn when sanding off gesso. Manufacturers of gesso recommend wearing a face mask when sanding gesso. Sanded gesso particles are not toxic, but are fine and easily inhaled.

Note: All materials can be purchased at most art supply stores.

Applying the Gesso

1. Place a drop-cloth under the stretched canvas. Gesso is thin and drips easily.□
2. Gather all materials and keep them nearby and ready. Because gesso dries quickly, it□ needs to be applied quickly.
3. Stir the gesso with a spoon until it is of a uniform consistency.
4. Pour enough gesso into a cup to cover the canvas with one or two coats. One coat is□ sufficient for acrylic paintings. Two coats should be applied for oil paints, which are□ more soluble and can damage the canvas.
5. Replace the lid of the gesso container as soon as possible so that the gesso does □ not solidify.
6. Add a little water to dilute the gesso. Water should be at most 10% of the total□ gesso/water mixture. Stir the mixture.
7. Using the gesso brush, paint a thin coat of diluted gesso onto the canvas, covering□ all of the raw canvas. The edges of the canvas do not need to be gessoed unless they□ will be painted.
8. Let the first coat dry for an hour before applying a second coat. If more than one □ coat of gesso is applied, remember to keep it thin so that some of the texture of the □ canvas is preserved. After all coats are applied, let the canvas dry overnight before □ applying acrylic or oil paint to it.
9. Clean around the edges of the canvas with a paper towel. The drying gesso may act□ as a glue and adhere the canvas to the surface it is sitting on.
10. Clean the brush, cup and stirring spoon with mild soap and water. When gesso dries,□ it is very hard, so wash all materials as soon as possible.

Troubleshooting

- ***If gesso cracks on the surface of the canvas*** - too much gesso has been applied.□ Sand the canvas lightly all over with sandpaper while wearing a paper face mask.□ Sand only until the cracks have disappeared. Wipe off gesso particles with a □ paper towel.
- ***If the color of the raw canvas can still be seen*** - too little gesso has been applied. □ The canvas should be completely white. Apply one more coat after the first coat.□