



Experimenting with *Water-Soluble Oil Paint*

Maureen and Ralph Caouette

So often, we don't practice what we preach. Are we going "green" in our own art practices? This was the question I asked my husband, a secondary art teacher, when we set out to plein air paint during our summer break. He had recently encouraged me to investigate water-soluble oil sticks and now I questioned taking on traditional oil paint. Instead, we decided to look at water-soluble oil paint. After reading the book, *Paint-*

ing with Water Soluble Oils by Sean Dye, we went to our local art store and purchased the basic colors.

Water-soluble oils are unique! Whereas traditional oil painters will need to find a parallel color palette, most students, like me, will just go for it and experience this green way to paint. The only major difference in the paint is that the oil has been modified to make it soluble in water, eliminating the need for harsh or dangerous solvents. There is even linseed

oil that has been modified chemically for water-soluble oils.

We experimented with various brands, talked to other artists and painted, painted, and painted. At last, we felt we were ready to bring the experience to our classrooms.

The Middle-School Perspective

With the current surge in various allergies among our students, going "green" with oil paint is a sound, sensible way to teach painting with oils. I already had a class of twenty middle school students ready to try painting with water-soluble oil paint, so I tried the following lesson with them.

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many went on to purchase their own sets. Cleanup was a breeze and the paint even came out of clothes. As the excitement continued, I couldn't wait to see what my husband experienced with his high-school students.

The High-School Perspective

In high school, oils have traditionally been used sparingly, reserved for honors level, and involve the use of oils and cleaners, so water-based oils were an easy alternative. We discussed differences between acrylics—where students already had an experiential base—and oils. We also discussed layering, mixing, viscosity, drying, storing, and cleanup.

Students chose traditional landscapes as the subject of their paintings. They could work out of our large classroom picture window, or base their work on collections of personal photos or of specific scenes.

Students sketched thumbnail drawings to define point of view and worked on stretched 8 x 8" or 12 x 12" (30 x 30 cm) canvas prepped with gesso. Shapes were defined with sepia and color blocking followed. No black pigments were used.

Throughout the week-long project, I noticed that students arrived at the room much quicker and, like my wife's middle-school students, stayed in the studio beyond class time. An introduction to glazing was seamless with this material, as well as a later application of water-based Damar varnish.

First students created a base of gesso and crumpled tissue paper on an 8 x 8" (20 x 20 cm) canvas. They decided if they wanted to use a painted field and applied an acrylic color of their choice. This could be barn red, cadmium red, lavender, dark blue, deep gold, etc. We also discussed the issues of balance and complementary colors.

The subject for the painting was simple: apples and/or pears. After preliminary sketching, students chose a piece of fabric, draped this over an upside-down coffee can and set up their still life. We took digital photos to be able to accurately maintain the same still life for each student. The paintings evolved over the course of four to five classes.

Students loved the water-soluble oils and

The results speak for themselves. Students asked questions like "Can we paint more?" "Where do we get these paints for ourselves?" and "Can we paint portraits or still lifes?" Experiments usually pay off with open minds and this one really bolstered students' "can-do" spirit. The personal motivational factor reaped huge returns! I soon found myself hitting the catalogs to order more of these versatile paints. ☺

Maureen and Ralph Caouette are both department heads for their respective school districts in Littleton, Massachusetts and Holden, Massachusetts. Both served as past NAEA directors, past Massachusetts state presidents, and adjunct faculty at two area colleges.

NATIONAL STANDARD

Students apply media, techniques, and processes with sufficient skill, confidence, and sensitivity that their intentions are carried out in their artworks.

WEB LINK

painting.about.com/cs/oils/a/oilswatersol.htm

