

HOW TO PAINT IN OILS WITHOUT TOXICITY

By Erin Hanson

MANY WOULD-BE oil painters avoid painting in oils because they believe they are toxic. In this article, I am going to share with you how to paint in oils without toxicity.

One common misconception is that oil paints themselves are toxic. This is incorrect, as long as they are used correctly. Their beautiful colors come from metallic chemicals such as cadmium, lead, and cobalt. However, as long as you do not inhale or eat the paint, those elements will not enter your body. The molecules of oil paint are too large to be absorbed directly through your skin.

So how are oil paints toxic? The toxicity comes from using mediums and paint thinners that contain harmful, volatile hydrocarbons, such as turpentine or Turpenoid (odorless turpentine). These are used by many oil painters to thin paint and clean their brushes. Min-



Erin has been painting in oils using non-toxic mediums ever since she was pregnant in 2018.

eral spirits, Gamblin Oil Medium, Galkyd, Liquin, Gamsol, and others are all highly volatile and affect the digestive and nervous systems.

I am going to show you how I paint with oils without using any volatile substances.

First, to thin my oil paints and clean my brush in between paint

colors, I use linseed oil. By dipping my brush into a small container of linseed oil and wiping it clean with a paper towel, I can get my brush almost as clean as when it was brand new. Linseed oil can also be used to create washes (thin, transparent layers of paint).

My favorite brand of linseed oil is Rublev Colours' Pale Drying Oil. I also use Winsor & Newton's Drying Linseed Oil. If you want your painting to take longer to dry, I recommend Gamblin's Safflower Oil.

When I am done painting for the day, I wrap my brushes tightly in a paper towel and place them in the freezer, along with my entire palette of paint. My brushes last for weeks without cleaning by storing them at night in the freezer.

When I do clean my brushes, I never use turpentine. Instead, I use The Masters Brush Cleaner. This large block of soap comes in a 24 oz classroom tub, and it will last for a year or longer. The same brand also makes a fantastic hand soap that gets every bit of oil paint off your hands without using toxic chemicals. (And if you get oil paint on your clothes, even if it dries, you can get it off with Kiss-Off Stain Remover sticks.)

The only time I must use toxic chemicals as an oil painter is when I varnish my paintings. Damar varnish is made from tree resin, but it contains volatile hydrocarbons.



Erin stores her brushes in the freezer at night, so she doesn't have to clean them every day.

My paintings are varnished in a heavily ventilated room next to my studio; however, you can varnish at home by taking your painting out of doors or in the garage with all the doors wide open.

To summarize, you don't have to expose yourself to toxic chemicals when you are oil painting. Avoid turpentine and use linseed oil instead as your painting medium. Clean your brushes with natural soap or store them in the freezer. Use Masters Soap to wash your hands, and varnish paintings outside.

I hope this opens the door to exploring oil paint as a medium, and I wish you happy painting.

