

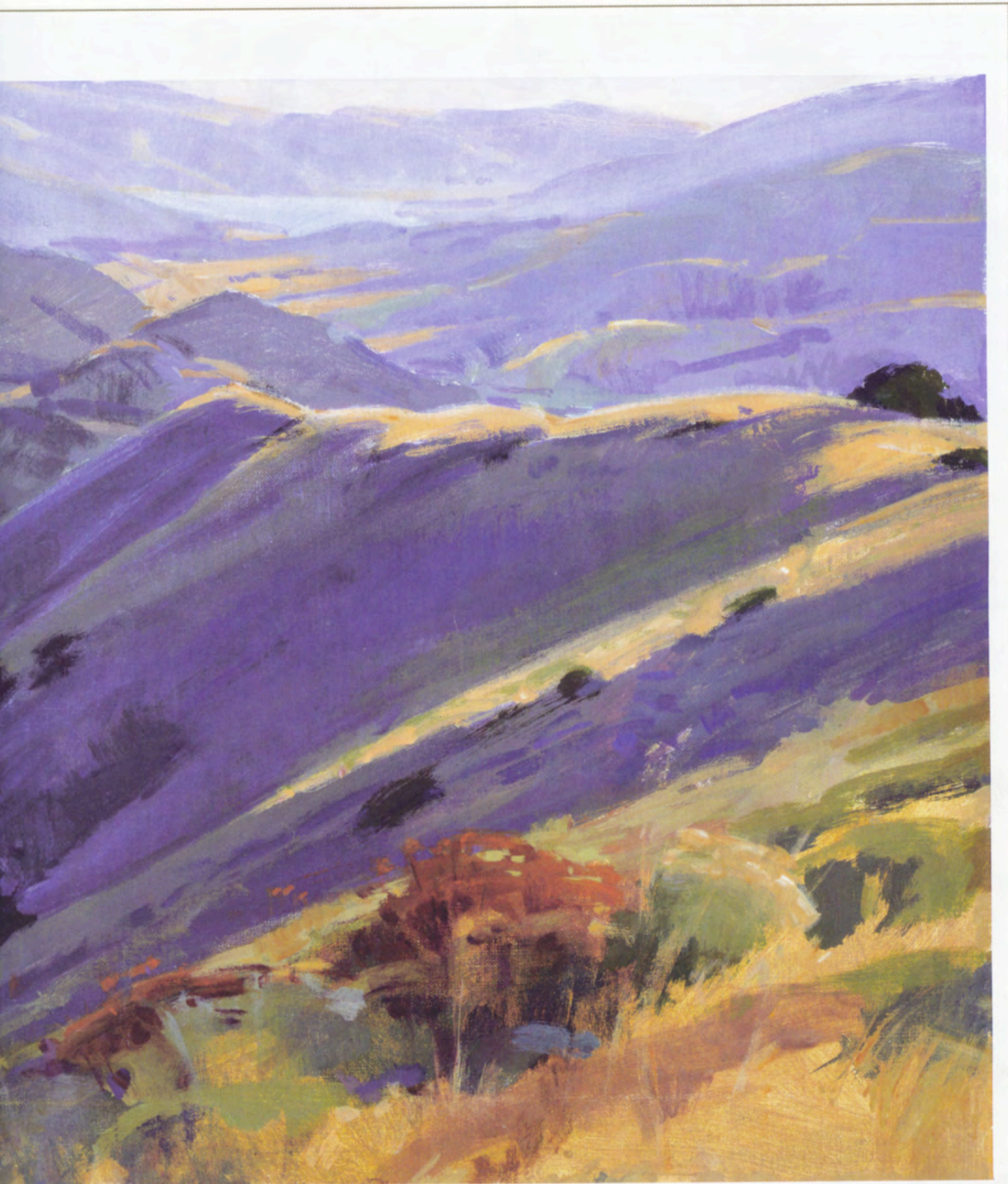
The History & Development of ACRYLIC

From acrylic's introduction in the 1950s until today, the properties, possibilities, and practitioners associated with the medium have advanced significantly.

Here's a look at the artists who made acrylic mainstream, the manufacturers who improved its formulation, and some of the contemporary painters and developments that are increasing its credibility.

—
by Allison Malafrente





ABOVE

In Memoriam, Ray Strong

by Marcia Burt, 2006, acrylic, 18 x 20.
Collection Nan Withington.



ABOVE

Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 110, Easter Day

by Robert Motherwell, 1971, acrylic with graphite and charcoal on canvas, 82 x 114. Collection Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York.

RIGHT

Untitled (Black on Gray)

by Mark Rothko, 1969–1970, acrylic on canvas, 80½ x 69½. Collection Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York.

When one looks at the media choices and practices of artists throughout history, it quickly becomes apparent that acrylic is the youngest and most modern medium on the market.

Compared to its oil and watercolor counterparts, which have been in use since before the 15th century, acrylic's introduction in the 1950s and widespread use by the Abstract Expressionists and Color Field painters immediately classified it as a nontraditional medium of an up-and-coming generation of revolutionary painters. Although acrylic had its roots in Modernism, today artists of all subject matter and styles employ the medium's fast-drying properties, flexibility, and vibrant color to diverse effect.

HISTORY & EARLY PRACTITIONERS

Artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning first began experimenting with acrylic in the 1950s, but it wasn't until the 1960s that the medium reached mainstream popularity through such Color Field painters as Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Morris Louis. Its first formulation in 1947 was a mineral-spirit-based paint known as Magna that was produced and distributed by Leonard Bocour, who had been collaborating with Sam Golden. These paints would dry when



Rediscovering Acrylic

& The Artists Who Helped Shape It



the solvent evaporated and remain resoluble in the mineral spirits in which they were dispersed. In 1955, Permanent Pigments produced the first commercially available water-based acrylic-emulsion paint under the name Liquitex. Soon after, acrylic emulsions were branded under both Bocour Aquatec and Liquitex Permanent Pigments, and within the next few decades other companies began adapting the chemistry of this new copolymer and formulating their own

water-based acrylic-emulsion colors, including Grumbacher Hyplar, Shiva, Winsor & Newton, Pelikan, Golden, New Masters, and Lascaux.

CHARACTERISTICS & PROPERTIES

The Abstract Expressionists relished the properties of acrylic for both similar and different reasons than the painters of today. When acrylic first burst onto the scene, the Action Painters—such as Pollock and De Kooning—were just beginning to pioneer a more physical,

intellectual approach to painting and looking to reach beyond the limitations of traditional media to relay their message. Standing above his canvas and slapping paint down with sticks and brushes, Pollock had started experimenting with enamels, while De Kooning and other artists such as Jean Dubuffet were looking to incorporate various substances into their oil paint that lent elements of thickness, grit, and texture to their multilayered creations. Robert Motherwell and other minimalist Color Field painters sought to express ideas and emotions through flat, solid color, and all Modern painters were looking for new media through which to convey novel forms and processes.



When these and other artists were introduced to acrylic-solution and acrylic-emulsion paints, they immediately indulged in the medium's fast-drying properties, flexibility, and bright color; and they used their canvases as a stage on which to display the medium's manifold possibilities. "Exploiting the properties of acrylic-solution paints by realizing that they could be applied to raw canvas without harming the fibers was an extraordinary discovery for these painters," says Michael Skalka, the chairman of the American Society of Testing and Materials, DOI.57, Artists' Materials. "Paintings became surfaces that displayed the working properties of the medium the artist chose to use. While an eager representational-based public

sought identifiable imagery and meaning in the delivery of the strokes of color, the Modern artist was focused on how the paint appeared on the surface."

Today's acrylic painters still appreciate the medium's flexibility, vibrancy, and versatility, but many representational artists have also learned to manipulate and adapt the medium to achieve more traditional, oillike effects. "Acrylic allows me great freedom and flexibility in my artistic process," said California plein air painter Marcia Burt in her feature article in the June issue of *American Artist*. "It dries fast and thin, enabling me to continually repaint areas without losing freshness. And because acrylic dries to a nearly uniform opacity, if I need to

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

Saraband

by Morris Louis, 1959, acrylic resin on canvas, 8' 5 1/4" x 12' 5". Collection Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Broad Beach Reflections

by Marcia Burt, 2008, acrylic, 24 x 36. Collection Birnam Wood Golf Club.

ABOVE

Hay Harvest

by Gil Dellinger, 2009, acrylic, 36 x 72. Collection County of San Joaquin, California.

Rediscovering Acrylic & The Artists Who Helped Shape It



ABOVE

Sunset in the Teton Valley

by Gil Dellinger, 2008, acrylic, 16 x 20. Collection George and Sharon Bensch.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

Former Getty Conservation Institute graduate intern Roberta Renz prepared artists' paints for testing.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

A scientist at the Tate used a cotton swab to clean acrylic-emulsion test paints.

restructure shapes or value relationships, I can do that either by painting the negative space around it to carve out a new shape or by painting a darker or lighter value or color on top." Gil Dellinger—also a plein air painter from California—creates acrylic works that are so painterly and lush, it is nearly impossible to distinguish them from oil paintings. "A lot of people are discouraged when they first use acrylic because they use water to thin it, and water kills the color," he says. "If you substitute water with one of the many mediums on the market, and learn how to use each one well, you can replicate the rich effects of oil while achieving much more vibrant color."

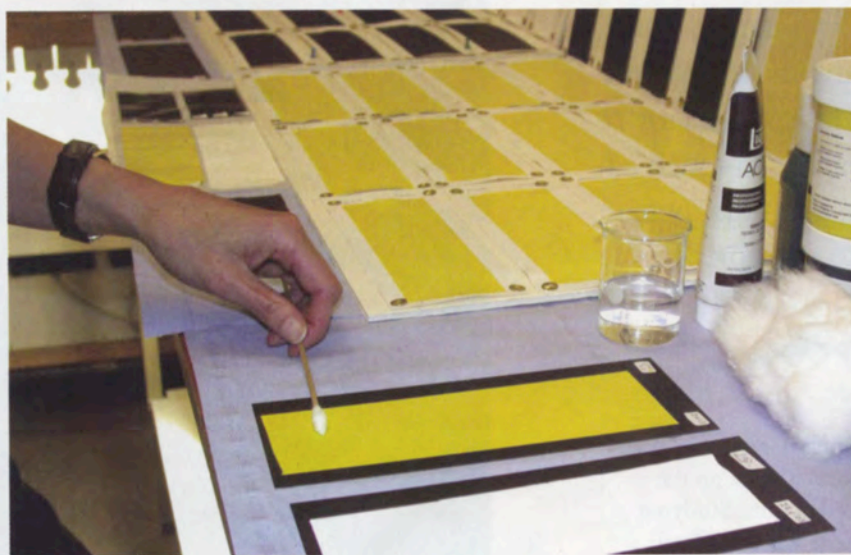
MODERN DEVELOPMENTS & RESEARCH

The possibilities that manufacturers have offered painters through mediums, gels, and developments in acrylic's formulation are a major part of what's allowed acrylic to become a more mainstream media in recent years. "When acrylic first came on the market, paint manufacturers were delving into uncharted territory," says Skalka. "Although some early acrylics were stable and delightful to apply, others transformed into solid masses

or separated to the point of being unusable after being put in tubes and placed in retail stores. Early manufacturers of acrylic conducted research, relied on advice from raw-materials manufacturers, and made numerous batches of test paints, which allowed them to develop stable, consistent products across the entire color line. Paints that were once inconsistent, separated within the tube, hardened before being used, or gritty and unmixable, have improved significantly since the 1950s."

Some of the companies who have made great strides in acrylic's development include Chroma, DaVinci Fluid, Daler-Rowney, Golden, Utrecht, and Liquitex, all of which have reformulated acrylic or developed new mediums to retard its quick drying time, keeping them "open" longer and allowing artists to work wet-in-wet as they would in oil. These brands are particularly well suited to plein air painters, who sometimes battle environmental conditions that further accelerate the drying time of acrylic. Chroma Atelier Interactive, Blick, Matisse, Old Holland, Sennelier, Tri-Art, and Winsor & Newton have also greatly improved the handling ability and viscosity of acrylic, and many studio artists enjoy these brands for their high pigmentation and body.

This article is the first in a series that will explore the recent developments and possibilities of acrylic paint and the contemporary artists employing it. The October issue of *American Artist*, which is themed "Landscape & Nature," will report on the practices and products that plein air acrylic painters use when working outdoors. The November issue, which will celebrate women in the visual arts, will also feature artists' experiences with acrylic paints.



Because acrylic is a relatively new medium that has not yet proved it can stand the test of time, conservators have made concerted efforts in the last several years to better understand how its complex formulation will respond to environmental conditions, aging, and modern conservation procedures. Significant progress in this area was made in the landmark 2006 study titled "Contemporary Art Research: Modern Paints," a three-phase

scientific research project conducted by conservation experts at the Tate, in London; the Getty Conservation Institute, in Los Angeles; and the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, DC, that began in 2002. "Experts have been studying Old Master works for centuries, but acrylic and water-soluble oils are such a new area," said John Giurini, the assistant director for public affairs at the J. Paul Getty Museum, in Los Angeles. "Now is the

time to begin conducting research on these materials so when it's time to start conserving modern works there will be information available."

Experts at the Tate took the lead on researching how works of art created with modern paints, particularly acrylic, will respond to conservational cleaning methods and various types of aging. Painting more than 600 samples of acrylic emulsions on various substrates, including primed and unprimed canvas, scientists conducted a range of both wet- and dry-cleaning-technique tests. According to Tom J. S. Learner, the former senior conservation scientist at the Tate and an organizer of the Modern Painters project, the potential for acrylic's permanence looks promising. "Acrylic has been around for 50 years, and it seems to be holding up quite well," he concluded. "We are not finding anything in our research that leads us to believe that works created in acrylic or other modern paint are going to deteriorate significantly over the next 50 years." ■

Allison Malafronte is the senior editor of American Artist.