# **[Painting on Paper With Oils](https://www.thoughtco.com/painting-on-paper-with-oils-2578730)**



**By** [**Lisa Marder**](https://www.thoughtco.com/lisa-marder-bio-2573582)

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Although oil paint and paper are not traditionally considered to be compatible, paper is an excellent flexible surface to paint on with oil when prepared properly or when newer types of paper manufactured specifically with oil painting in mind are used. It is also relatively inexpensive when compared to other supports such as canvas, linen, and art boards and is particularly useful for small [studies](https://www.thoughtco.com/things-to-decide-before-starting-to-paint-2573831)and painting sketches as well as medium-sized paintings or paintings done as sets, such as diptychs or [triptychs](https://www.thoughtco.com/triptych-drawing-definition-1123079).

Classical oil painters have painted primarily on wood board and canvas for hundreds of years. Paper has not typically been used by traditional oil painters because oil and solvents from oil paint can cause the paper to degrade and because it is thought that oil paintings on paper can be prone to cracking when subjected to changes in humidity. However, as the paint manufacturer, Winsor & Newton maintains in the article, [*Sizing Watercolour Paper for Oil Painting*](http://www.winsornewton.com/uk/discover/tips-and-techniques/other-tips-and-techniques/water-colour-paper-for-oil-painting), "Oil paint is completely stable when painted on properly prepared paper. Any weakness of oil on paper would be due to the lack of rigidity in the sheet versus a board or canvas paper."

**Priming**

According to [Winsor & Newton](http://www.winsornewton.com/na/discover/tips-and-techniques/oil-colour/choosing-a-surface-for-oil-painting-us), "No matter what you may have heard, it is perfectly possible to use paper for sketching in oil. Professionals like it for its texture and drag. However, it is worth investing in good quality, heavy watercolor paper that has been thinly primed with an acrylic gesso primer."

Paper that is not made specifically for oil painting needs to be primed first before being painted on with oil paint in order to seal the paper from the damaging effects of oil and solvents and to help the paint bind and cure. You can use [acrylic gesso primer](http://www.dickblick.com/products/winsor-and-newton-galeria-acrylic-gesso-primer/)or [acrylic matte medium](http://www.dickblick.com/products/golden-matte-mediums/)as sealants. Adding a layer of sealant keeps the oil from being absorbed into the paper, without which the paper will eventually degrade and the paint could flake or crack.

**How to Select and Prepare Paper for Oil Painting**

* Select a good quality acid-free heavyweight paper such as [Arches Watercolor Paper.](http://www.dickblick.com/products/arches-natural-white-watercolor-paper/) I recommend a weight of at least 300 gsm (140 lb) for small studies and sketches, and 640 gsm (300 lb) for larger paintings.
* Read [*Painting on Paper With Acrylics*](https://www.thoughtco.com/painting-on-paper-with-acrylics-2578729) to find out more about what makes a good paper for painting.
* Staple or pin the paper to a board and apply one layer of acrylic gesso primer in one direction. Mix the primer with water as necessary so that it is the consistency of heavy cream.
* Wait until dry, and then apply another coat of gesso in the direction perpendicular to the first direction.
* If desired, apply a third coat in the original direction when the second coat is dry. You may also sand the dried coats of gesso between layers if you'd like a smoother surface.
* Note: The benefit of using acrylic gesso is that you can create some textural effects in your painting before you've even begun to apply paint. You can also add other elements such as sawdust and sand to the gesso for greater textural effects if your paper is heavy and durable enough to withstand it.
* You can remove your painting from the board by extracting the pins or staples, or cutting the edges off with an Exacto or mat knife.
* **Tip:** You can prime a large piece of paper and easily cut it up into smaller pieces for a variety of different-sized painting supports.

**Types of Paper**

**Watercolor paper**: As mentioned previously, a heavyweight, rough-surfaced watercolor paper makes a good painting surface for oil. Cold-pressed watercolor paper is rougher than hot-pressed watercolor paper, but it is a personal preference, and may not make that much difference depending on how many layers of primer you put on and how thickly.

Watercolor paper comes in sheets as well as pads and blocks. Both the pads and blocks are convenient, easy to prime, and good to use for sketches or studies or plein air painting. (Note that you will want to leave your painting drying on the block so you may want more than one block to work on.) I recommend the [Arches Watercolor Pads](http://www.dickblick.com/products/arches-watercolor-pads/) and the [Arches Watercolor Blocks](http://www.dickblick.com/products/arches-watercolor-blocks/). Arches is well-known for its high-quality papers.

**Printmaking Paper:**[BFK Rives Printmaking Paper](http://www.dickblick.com/products/bfk-rives-printmaking-papers/) also makes a good acid-free surface for oil painting when primed with acrylic gesso or matte gel medium. It comes in sheets up to 280 gsm or you can purchase it in a roll of 300 gsm and cut it to the sizes you want.

**Arches Oil Paper:**[Arches Oil Paper](http://www.dickblick.com/products/arches-oil-paper/) is specifically made for use with oil media and requires no preparation of any kind since, as the DickBlick website says, it has a "powerful, efficient oil barrier that absorbs water, solvents, and binders evenly while allowing the paint and pigment to remain on the surface." It is ready to use as is without the need for priming. It has the feel of traditional Arches paper and is durable and able to withstand a variety of painting techniques. The paper is 300 gsm (140 lb) and also comes in [pads](http://www.dickblick.com/products/arches-oil-paper-pads/) 9x12 inches and 12x16 inches.

There are also [oil painting papers](http://www.dickblick.com/oil/papers/) made by other manufacturers such as Bienfang, Bee Paper, Canson, Hahnemuhle, Royal and Langnickel, and Strathmore.

**Examples of Oil Paintings on Paper**

**John Constable's Oil Sketches:**The English Romantic landscape painter [John Constable](http://linesandcolors.com/2012/06/10/constables-oil-sketches/) (1776-1837) did many [oil sketches on paper](http://www.dickblick.com/oil/papers/). According to the Victoria and Albert Museum, *"In the early 1800s, many painters such as Constable, sought to capture the subtle effects of light and atmosphere by making small-scale oil sketches out of doors. In his open-air oil sketches, Constable applied color in a variety of ways - rich impasto (thickly applied paint) and glazes (translucent oil paint), heavy dots of bright color and light touches of pure white. Quick strokes with a brush bearing only a small amount of paint gave a dappled 'dry brush' effect, allowing the colors underneath to show through."*

There are many other papers available, some high quality and acid-free, and they are certainly worth trying and using. If you don't have those on hand, don't let that stop you from painting. I have also used lower quality paper, such as brown kraft paper, with and without having primed the paper with gesso, with lovely results. The paintings might not last centuries, but that's okay, and the less expensive materials gave me more freedom to experiment.