



## Utrecht Art Supplies Water Miscible Oils Explained



**Ask the Expert: "I've been interested in trying water-mixable oil paints for a while, but have hesitated because I still don't quite get how they work. How exactly do they make them water-soluble? What do I need to know before adopting this new medium?"**

**A:** Many artists discover water-miscible (WM) oils while examining options to reduce hydrocarbon solvents in the studio. When considering replacing an oil palette with WM oils, the best approach is to evaluate WM oils on their own merits, rather than trying to substitute them for traditional materials.

### **How WM oils compare to traditional oils:**

Overall, the colors themselves perform very much like traditional oil paint. The WM paint vehicle is vegetable oil, treated to render it capable of being thinned and cleaned up with water. It's important, however, to avoid excessive dilution in order to maintain a strong paint film with good binding power. Thinning too much with water can result in a powdery, weak paint layer.

Amendments used in the manufacture of WM oils are different from the ones used in traditional oils (e.g. stearates). The exact amendments used vary by brand, and are not usually disclosed. For example, thickeners borrowed from the food or cosmetics

industries may be added to improve body and workability, in place of the waxes and stearated commonly used in oil paint.

### **Mediums:**

There is a significant difference between traditional and WM oil painting mediums. Because hydrocarbon solvents like mineral spirits evaporate so quickly, traditional oil painters initially need to become accustomed to the slower evaporation rate of water, and how this affects paint behavior. Acrylic painters are used to the effect of water on brushes and the canvas, but oil painters may not initially be ready for this.

The gesso ground can become waterlogged after a long session, and natural bristle brushes rinsed repeatedly in water can become soft and lose their snap. For this reason, it's not uncommon for WM oil painters to use synthetic filament brushes, which are not as prone to become saturated. Also, it's important to note that some WM oil painting mediums don't have a long "open" time and can begin to solidify more quickly than older mediums.

### **In combination with other paints:**

WM and traditional oil colors can be combined, but doing so diminishes water miscibility, and solvents may be necessary to thin and clean up colors.

WM oil paint dries essentially just like any other oil paint. Since humidity can increase the time it takes for an oil paint film to dry to the touch, water taken up by the priming may cause paint to remain soft longer than standard oil paint.

Ordinary (solvent-based) picture varnishes can be applied 6-12 months after completion of a picture; retouch can be applied sooner. Because migration of surfactants (detergent-like compounds) has been reported in rare occurrences, some artists suggest wiping the dry painting with a damp cloth before varnishing.

Questions? [Ask the Expert](#).

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