

Egg Oil Emulsion

An egg tempera formula



Egg tempera, favored by Italian panel painters until the 16th century, is being re-examined today due to its brilliant color, archival properties, and relatively non-toxic nature. Depending on application, completed egg tempera paintings can be matte, or brought to a high shine. I started using egg tempera in 1996, after ten years of working in oils. Solvents of oil painting were problematic for me, due to health hazards associated with continued usage.

Traditionally, egg tempera is made by mixing dry pigments with a binding medium of egg and a small amount of oil. However, pigments in dry form are hazardous due to air borne contact. Instead, I use paints already suspended in water: watercolors in tubes. Clay Lohmann, my husband whom I refer to as Mr. Materials and Techniques, provides this egg oil emulsion recipe:

Separate egg and discard white.
Place yolk in a small jar.
Add two drops of stand oil.
Add a few drops of water (optional).
Mix well with a small bristle brush.

Use above egg medium with tube watercolors at about a one-to-one ratio, depending on the color and desired effect. If you see bubbles when applying paint, your mixture has too much water. Apply thin layers of tempera to a rigid surface, such as hardwood panel or Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF). It is not necessary to prime your surface, in fact never prime with acrylic gesso for tempera. If you want to begin on a white surface, apply a thin coat of white egg oil emulsion.

Keep in mind:

There are many egg tempera recipes, most more traditional. This one is simple and works well for me.

Let paint set before applying additional layers. Drying time varies, depending on paint mixture, from one hour to overnight before you can add new layers.

Sable and sablene brushes work well for glazing additional layers. Bristle brushes may lift off underpainting. Overworking an area may also lift paint.

Egg medium may be saved overnight: cover and refrigerate. Discard after twenty-four hours.

While tempera sets quickly, it takes a long time to truly dry. After photographing the work, you can even out the surface shine. Several months after completion, tempera can be lightly buffed with yarn that still contains lanolin. If desired, it can be brought to an enamel-like shine. No varnish or other finish coat is recommended. One exception: oil paint may be applied over tempera. However, once you switch to oils, don't go back to the tempera.

Dry pigment can be used instead of watercolors. A mask should be worn when working with dry pigment.

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