

What is Encaustic Painting?

Enkaustikos—the name means "to burn in." The ancient Greeks gave the art of painting with hot beeswax more than a name, they gave it a form. The exact timeline is unclear, but at a point some three thousand years ago, Greek shipbuilders began experimenting with uses for heat and wax other than simple hull caulking. By adding pigments for color, and resin for hardness, they created a painting medium like no other. Before long, encaustic could be found everywhere, from painted ships to depictions of everyday life on urns and lifelike colors applied to statuary.

Encaustic painting weaves in and out of art history, gaining prominence for a time, then slipping back into the shadows for centuries. A thousand years after the Greek shipbuilders discovered it, Egyptian painters resurrected the medium, crafting exquisite portraits to decorate the mummy after a patron's death. In the seventh century, veneration of a Byzantine icon made of beeswax, using the ashes of Christian martyrs for pigment, was credited with saving Constantinople from attack by the Persians.

Fast-forward to the mid-twentieth century. Almost single-handedly, artist Jasper Johns reintroduced encaustic to the art world. Since that time, it has steadily gained acceptance. The medium's popularity has begun picking up momentum rapidly in the last decade. It's no wonder that we keep revisiting this ancient art form—few others can match its versatility, both in technique and result.

Wax is immediate. It allows no time for pondering. It's workable and elastic only for the precious seconds between being lifted from the hot palette and cooling on the board. Encaustic rewards *doing* over thinking

Despite its urgency, wax is also reassuringly pliable. If you don't like the way the work came out, scrape it off and try again! Heat it, let it flow, and it will solidify moments later into a new shape. Encaustic is the very definition of forgiving.

Works of encaustic can be sedate and smooth, or seductively dimensional. The wax has an inviting surface that begs to be stamped, gouged, and carved. It invites the viewer not only to look, but to touch and smell. Encaustic is sensual.

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From the introduction to **Embracing Encaustic**, by Linda and Bill Womack

Purchase the book online at www.embracingencaustic.com