

Instruction Sheet Encaustic Basics

BASIC INGREDIENTS:

- Encaustic medium (Beeswax + Damar Resin Crystals) You can make your own (1 part Damar Resin to 8 parts Beeswax) or you can buy pre-made medium. **When I refer to “wax” in this instruction sheet, I mean encaustic medium.**
- Encaustic paint (Beeswax + Damar Resin Crystals + Pigment) Encaustikos and R&F make great paints that are pre-mixed – I prefer this to using powdered pigments to make my own paint. Locally, Art Media and Collage both have encaustic supplies, but **Muse Art and Design on Hawthorne** has the best selection of encaustic painting tools, and the staff is *very* knowledgeable.
- Heating tool like an electric skillet or pancake griddle for heating wax paints (melt wax at about 175-195 degrees – if it smokes, it’s too hot!)
- Tacking iron or flat hobby iron (no holes in the bottom!)
- Embossing gun or heat gun (you can also use a propane torch) to fuse layers
- Bristle brushes in various sizes (no nylon or plastic bristles – cheap, stiff brushes work best). Sash brushes (available through Art Media and JerrysArtarama.com) also give additional control and texture.
- Scraping and incising tools like those used for working with clay and linoleum block carving
- A variety of natural fiber fabrics, sheer, plain, and printed (cotton, silk, and rayon work well)
- Paper napkins, tissue paper, other collage papers
- Embroidery floss or heavy thread
- Laces and mesh (can be synthetic fabrics)
- Plywood, Claybord Panel, birch panel or other firm, slightly porous **substrate**
- **Ventilation – Get some air flow.**

ENCAUSTIC 101:

- Optional: You can decorate your unprimed surface with pen, pencil, watercolor, or other non-acrylic media. Generally, acrylic and wax don’t mix, though some artists have had good success using light layers of paint on highly porous surfaces. Be aware, though, that the wax may smear some media, especially if the media has been applied heavily or is very pigment rich.
- Start by priming the board with two coats of encaustic medium – this lets you scrape back to “neutral” if need be, and gives you a starting point to fuse into. Try to get rid of air bubbles, and get this layer as smooth as possible using a combination of the iron and the embossing gun.
- You need to fuse each layer of wax – the first to the board, and the subsequent layers to each other. This means heating it evenly until it’s a bit shiny. You can use the iron or the heat gun – I like to use the iron on the first few coats of wax to get an even coat. Just heat between each coat of wax. The wax will go cloudy for a bit right after it’s applied, then clear up as it cools.
- Painting with hot wax is all about building layers. **For more about the basics of painting with wax, check out Linda Womack’s book, *Embracing Encaustic*.**

SCRAPING

One of the advantages of working with wax is that if you don't like what you've put down, you can scrape it off. You can use a razor blade, a paint scraper from the hardware store, or a loop tool used in clay carving. Experiment with different tools, and find the one that works best for you to scrape back a layer of wax. **Note:** Cool wax is easier to scrape off in a controlled manner than warm wax. Try waiting until the wax feels about the same temperature as your skin.

MASKING

Lay down a line of blue painter's tape to mask off an area and get a clean line of color.

COLLAGE FABRIC, PAPER NAPKINS, or PAPER INTO THE PAINTING:

Use professionally printed fabric, or your own decorated fabric, or both.

If the fabric or paper is **lightweight**, like tissue paper or a layer of paper napkin or lightweight silk:

1. Warm the wax slightly with an embossing gun.
2. Lay the fabric down, and press it slightly into the wax, just so the surface of the wax grabs it. You can also burnish it with a spoon.
3. Once it's positioned firmly on the wax, use your embossing gun to heat the wax – the fabric will almost seem to “melt away” as the wax soaks into the fibers.

With lightweight papers, you can also lay them down, burnish them, and then paint wax over the top and fuse. I prefer heating the wax underneath because a) it makes it easier to see air bubbles trapped underneath and b) I generally get better fusion.

If the fabric or paper is **heavier**, like copy paper or muslin:

1. Place the fabric or paper in your skillet, and brush wax into it.
2. When you have completely saturated the fabric or paper, use tweezers to pick it up.
3. Allow it to air dry for several seconds until the wax is no longer molten, just barely warm to the touch.
4. Place the item on the painting and press it in with your fingers. You can warm the wax underneath, but it's not necessary.
5. Burnish the item lightly with a spoon. This helps to prevent air bubbles when you fuse it.
6. Use your embossing gun or iron to fuse the fabric or paper to the wax underneath by heating it up. Often, the iron is easiest for this – just be careful not to overheat, and look out for air bubbles under the fabric. Tweezers can be used to hold recalcitrant fabric or paper in place until the wax cools.

INCISING TO CREATE LINES:

1. When the wax is cool to the touch, use a v-line linoleum block tool, a needle tool like an awl, or a tiny loop carving tool cut a line in the wax.
2. Fill in the line with encaustic paint. The paint will spill over the line, but be sure to fill the line in completely.
3. Let it cool.

4. Now, using a larger loop carving tool or a paint scraper, scrape back the wax. You'll scrape away the excess and reveal the line.
5. Fuse.

USING THREAD to CREATE LINES:

I like to use embroidery floss because you can vary the weight of the line depending on the number of strands you use.

If you are using multiple strands, or a heavier cord like waxed linen thread -

1. A with incising, use a v-line linoleum block tool or a needle tool like an awl to draw a line in the wax where you want the thread to go.
2. Dip your thread in the encaustic medium, completely soaking it.
3. Pull it out with tweezers, and let it air dry until it is cool and will hold its shape easily.
4. Lay the thread into the channel, pressing it in with your fingers.
5. Fuse the thread with the embossing gun.
6. Cover with another coat of encaustic medium.

Sometimes, if you are working with very fine thread, you can skip the first step, but I like having a channel in the wax – even if it's a very shallow one – so that the air of the embossing gun doesn't displace it.

USING LACE or a DOILY as a STENCIL:

Synthetic lace, crocheted doilies, even mesh, can be used to create an impression and a pattern in the wax.

1. Make sure that there is at least one coat of plain encaustic medium over the entire surface – this protects whatever you've already put down!
2. Position your lace on the painting, and burnish it in with a spoon.
3. Coat the lace with encaustic paint – whatever color or colors you put down now is what will show up in the holes of the pattern.
4. Fuse the wax. Get it really melty.
5. Let it cool – go away for ten minutes and do something else.
6. Now try lifting up a corner, and seeing how much stays behind – you should have a pattern of the lace visible in the colored wax.
7. Lift up all the lace, slowly.
8. Now, using a different color or colors of encaustic paint, fill in all the gaps. Really get the wax into the crevices – you may need to do this slowly to avoid air bubbles.
9. Let it cool again. Really. Go away for fifteen minutes this time. Work on another painting.
10. Now, scrape back the top layer of wax – the entire lace pattern should be revealed!
11. Once you've done all of your scraping, fuse the wax that you used to fill in the gaps or lines of the lace pattern.
12. Top with another coating of encaustic medium to preserve it as you keep building layers.

CARE AND FEEDING OF YOUR ENCAUSTIC PAINTING:

Don't leave it in the trunk of your car or on the dashboard. Basic rule of thumb, if you wouldn't do it to a VHS tape, don't do it to an encaustic painting.

As with any artwork, don't hang it in direct sunlight or set it on top of your wood stove. Encaustics do best when kept between 40 degrees and 110 degrees.

If it gets dusty or dull, just take a lint-free fine-weave cotton cloth and buff the surface. If there's nothing embedded in the surface, you might also try using your hand to buff it as the heat and oils in your skin can bring out a glow in the wax (though this can impact the archival quality!)

RESOURCES:

Great book for beginners: *Embracing Encaustic* by Bill and Linda Womack

<http://www.lindawomack.com/books/purchase.html>

Encaustic Supplies in Portland: *MUSE Art and Design*

4224 Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard

Portland, OR 97215-3161

(503) 231-8704

<http://www.museartanddesign.com>

Encaustic Supplies on-line: <http://www.encausticsupplies.com>

Substrates: Claybord and Encausticbord from Ampersand

<http://www.ampersandart.com>

THE NOT-SO FINE PRINT:

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