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Gouache: What it is and Why it is Wonderful

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Washington Studio School

Summer 2021, July 5 - August 2 (five weeks, online)

Mondays, 7-10 pm EST

Course Description

Summer is a great time to explore a new medium, and gouache is perfect in so many ways. It is water based like watercolor, but it's opaque qualities give it the coverage power of oil paint. It has a beautiful matte surface, and combines well with many other materials, including watercolor, soft pastels, oil pastels, graphite, and colored pencil. It is easy to clean up after in home spaces and is portable for travel. It has a long history as a medium and has evolved over time to include both traditional gouache, which can be reactivated during the working process, and acrylic gouache, which sets once dry. Working from sources such as still life, window views, and a model, students will learn to employ strong design and composition through the use of this beautiful medium.

Materials List

Pencils and sketchbook

*At Home Supply: Miscellaneous still life objects and a small table/platform. These objects could be boxes or bottles, for example. Try to avoid objects that are smaller than your hand or larger than your torso. Objects that are single colors or neutral like white are great to use. The overall form of objects is usually more important than any surface design. Glass and metal objects are also good, but use them more sparingly. Drapery such as old bedsheets is also useful. Consider your trash and recycling bin and upcycle! There is little need to buy new things. Keep in mind that you probably want more objects available than you will actually use and that the objects that have the most sentimental value often are the hardest to make visually interesting in a painting (ex: in beginning painting the empty milk carton usually beats grandma's gold jewelry)

*At Home Supply: A desk light or other spot light that can be used to dramatically light a still life.

*At Home Supply: An easel of some kind. This could be as simple as leaning a canvas against a Masonite panel propped against the back of an old wooden chair to a proper easel. The best of these for beginning painters is probably a collapsible aluminum easel (either standing tripod easel or table easel). A good aluminum tripod easel costs somewhere in the range of \$50-75 and can be used both indoors and outdoors for landscape painting, and can last for years and years.

*At Home Supply: A taboret (or painting table). This needs to hold supplies like the palette, brushes, tubes of paint, rags, etc. An old end table or small card table will work fine. Remember it will get paint on it, unless you cover it up.

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1 pad Bristol Paper 14" x 17" or larger. Alternatively, watercolor paper can be used. I recommend hot press or smooth surfaced papers over papers with any texture for gouache.

Optional: 1 pint of acrylic primer (acrylic gesso) and a 2-3" flat house painting brush (*you will want to paint at least 1-2 additional coats of gesso over pre-stretched canvases as the grounds of most pre stretched canvases are very unsatisfying surfaces to paint on – you will want to do these coats in advance so that they are dry and ready to use in class.). Primer will make the paper less absorbent and overall smoother for painting.

Assorted Brushes – Watercolor style brushes are recommended. Soft bristles such as synthetic nylons are good. Natural sables or other bristles that you would use for watercolor can also be used. I would recommend you not use these natural animal bristles if you are using acrylic gouache, as the acrylic can easily wear out these brushes. For acrylic gouache, I recommend sticking entirely to synthetic nylons, which stand up to wear-and-tear better. Get a range of 3 to 4 brushes, alternating from flat to round shapes in various sizes.

Large Flat Brush – get a watercolor style brush that is flat in $\frac{3}{4}$ " – 1" wide. This will be used for working with washes.

Palette – Watercolor style palettes, such as the "John Pike" style palettes are ideal, especially for traditional gouache. Butcher trays or glass palettes can also work. Gouache can work on palettes that would otherwise be used for watercolor or acrylic painting. Do make sure that you are not using a palette that has any residual oil paint, as it will interfere with mixing gouache. Temporary palettes can also work. Try not to get a palette much smaller than 9" x 12".

Optional: Utility razor for cleaning a dry palette (Ideal for a glass palette).

Painters tape

Paper towels or cotton rags

An apron/smock

Nitrile/Latex/Vinyl gloves (I recommend Nitrile)

Water container – something the size of an old yogurt tube is ideal.

Soap for clean-up (ex: Ivory/Dove soap)

Paint colors (recommended brands [approx. from cheap to expensive]: Reeves, Holbein Acryla Gouache, Winsor & Newton Designers Gouache). You can purchase paints either in sets of ~5-6, ~10-12, or ~24 or as individual tubes. The sets allow you to save some money. Sets with a dozen or so colors can be a great starting point.

Reeves Gouache, Set of 24, 10 ml, ~\$42.99 – This set has a wide range of colors, though many of them are mixtures. It is the best price for a decent quality paint. If you run out of a color, it usually is not possible to buy Reeves tubes as separates, so use the occasion to upgrade to a tube of something like the Winsor & Newton Designers Gouache.

Holbein Acryla Gouache, Lesson set of 12 Assorted, 20 ml, ~\$73.15 – Probably the most popular of the acrylic gouaches on the market and a darling of 2D Design and Color Theory classrooms in many

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colleges, given that they are some of the least fussy paints I've ever used when it comes to brushability, limited drying shift, and simple clean up (though this is really true for all gouaches). The tubes even include the Munsell color notes for each color, which is reflective of the thoughtfulness of Holbein.

Winsor & Newton Designers Gouache, Set of 10 Introductory Colors, 14 ml, ~\$54.00 – This brand is more of the traditional popular favorite brand of gouache. It is probably the best quality gouache that you will reasonably be able to source in the average fine art store.

Most tubes will be small ~10 - 20 ml in size. You may want an additional larger tube just for white of the best quality that you can find and afford.

Look for colors like this:

Opaque White: Titanium White

Earth Yellow: Yellow Ochre

Cool Yellow: Lemon Yellow/Hansa Yellow Light/Cadmium Yellow Pale Hue*

Warm Yellow: Indian Yellow/Cadmium Yellow Deep Hue*

Earth Red: Burnt Sienna

Cool Red: Alizarin Crimson/Quinacridone Red

Warm Red: Naphthol Red/Cadmium Red Hue*

Cool Blue: French Ultramarine Blue

Warm Blue: Cerulean Blue/Cobalt Blue Hue*

Dark Earth: Burnt Umber/Raw Umber

*Hue colors are imitations of genuine pigments that closely match the original color. They are cheaper in price and are usually less toxic. The trade-off is that the hue color may not be as strong or permanent. For beginning painters, I recommend starting with hue colors.

A Brief Comparison of Gouache vs. Acrylic Gouache

Gouache is composed of pigment, water, gum Arabic, and chalk. It is rewettable. Acrylic gouache (or acryla gouache) is composed of pigment, water, an acrylic binder, and chalk. It is not rewettable. The main advantage of traditional gouache is that even if the paint dries on the palette or brush, it can easily be cleaned with some water and friction. Soft brushes that we use here for painting are some of the most fragile brushes, and often the best brushes are the most fragile. Layering several layers with gouache, while possible, does get trickier with each successive layer, as you can unintentionally rewet the underlayers. Acrylic gouache allows the underlayers to stay undisturbed, but it does mean you have to be more careful about not letting the paint dry on the brushes. You will also find that the surface look and working characteristics of the two paints will not be identical. There is no clear overall advantage or disadvantage when comparing these two paints.