

What is Encaustic Art?

HISTORY

'Encaustic' is a Greek word meaning 'to heat or burn in' (enkaustikos). This technique has been around for centuries – it dates back to the ancient Greeks who used it to decorate their warships. Perhaps the most famous examples which have survived are the Fayum funeral portraits painted in the 1st through 3rd centuries AD by Greek painters in Egypt. A portrait of the deceased was placed over the person's mummy as a memorial. It is remarkable how fresh the colours have remained throughout the centuries.

TECHNIQUE

Encaustic painting has been enjoying a revival in Australia in recent times. The beeswax medium is melted and coloured with powdered pigments or oil paint and then applied to the chosen surface with brushes. Wooden boards are usually used as the painting ground. A blowtorch or heat gun is used to fuse the wax and more and more layers are then added.

A wide range of different materials and techniques can be incorporated into the encaustic painting – collage, stenciling, texturing, inks, oil pastels, dry pastels, engraving, shellac burning – techniques are limited only by the imagination.

Encaustic is the most durable and archival of all paint media because the main element is beeswax – inherently an excellent sealant and preservative agent. Encaustic paintings are therefore impervious to mould, mildew, insects and moisture, all of which are major causes of deterioration in other fine art media. Encaustic works must be treated in the same way as other fine art pieces – do not hang in direct sunlight or over a heater. They will not be affected by heat unless exposed to temperatures around 65 degrees Celsius.

Encaustic Painting can produce "beautiful" results but working with running wax can be unpredictable. Sandra ... *"I usually have something in mind that I want to do, but you can only control it so far. You have to let the painting take you where it wants to go."*

The completed surface of an encaustic painting is very much like enamel and occasional polishing with a soft cloth will preserve the rich, glowing surface.