Encaustic Painting in Period

A Research Paper by

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Encaustic art is a painting medium using melted beeswax and mineral pigment (Freccero 5). The term is derived from the Greek enkaustikos, meaning “to burn in”; thus encaustic is marked by the use of heat to melt and fuse layers of beeswax to bind them to each other and to the substrate, usually wood or linen (Mattera 17). Burning in is the part of encaustic that literally separates the medium from other painting styles that use wax, such as ganosis and wax emulsion, as heat is included in every stage of encaustic painting.

Wax has several inherent qualities that allow it to withstand the test of time: it is a natural adhesive; it is moisture, mildew and fungus resistant; and it is unappetizing to insects. Wax paint also does not contain solvents or oils so they will not darken or yellow with age, leaving the painting as fresh as the day it was painted. Plutarch wrote, “A beautiful woman leaves in the heart of an indifferent man an image as fleeting as a reflection on water, but in a lover’s heart, the image is fixed with fire like an encaustic painting that time will never erase”(Stavitsky 5). This romantic notion pairs well with the medium he chooses as his comparison; the very ingredients of this medium cause encaustic works to have a permanence not present in other works Plutarch may have encountered, such as frescoes that could chip and statues that could crack. Encaustic is based upon the layering and fusing of wax and pigment, and because wax becomes inert when hardened, an image will remain fixed within its wax “shell.”

The origins of encaustic are unknown, though the Greeks may have learned to use wax for utilitarian purposes, such as caulking and painting ships, from the Egyptians, only to pass it down to the Romans (Pratt 10). There are no known existing examples of either early Egyptian or ancient Greek or Roman encaustic art; only those works called the Fayum portraits exist, and the earliest of these dates from the first century of the Common Era. However, ancient textual and visual sources, beginning with Homer’s reference in The Iliad to the Greeks’ “vermeil-painted ships”, provide some evidence of early
encaustic methods and usages (Homer, book II, verse 79).

Most of our knowledge of this early use comes from the Roman historian Pliny the Elder whose *Naturalis Historia*, written in the 1st century CE, was a monumental encyclopedia of art and science. The author devotes Book 35 to art, and specifically focuses on encaustic: “We do not know who first invented the art of painting with wax colors and burning in the painting.” Pliny’s writings describe three separate methods of using encaustic: 1) application of wax with a *cauteria*, a tool used to heat wax; 2) engraving on ivory and filling with wax using a *cestrum*, a long tool with a spoon-like end, and a *rhabdion*, a stove; and 3) wax colors dissolved in pitch and applied warm with a brush. (Pliny, book XXXV, chapter X) Each of the three methods was suited to one particular outcome: the first was meant to produce murals; the second to produce small, flat, engraved ivory works similar to cameos; and the third to paint and seal ships (Pratt 9, Rice 6). Homer wrote that the second method “was invented in Asia Minor and brought to Greece,” while the first and third methods were invented in Greece (Freccero 5).

There were four primary uses for encaustic in ancient times. Probably the most common was ship painting to provide both decorating and waterproofing of the wooden sides of the ship. Panel, or mural, painting was another format. A third was *ganosis*, the use of encaustic to color the white marble of statuary, to polish it and provide a sheen, and to coat it with a chip-resistant sealant. An example of this is depicted in a 4th-century krater, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which illustrates painting wax on sculpture for surface protection (Mattera 17, Freccero 6). The red-figured krater pictures an artist dipping a brush in a vat that resembles those described by Pliny. Ganosis has been viewed by some as the start of encaustic painting and by others as an offshoot of it. A fourth use for encaustic was decorating fabric. In *De Architectura*, Vitruvius noted, “Punic wax (is) melted in the fire…let it be smoothed over with waxed cord and clean linen cloths, the same way as naked marble sculptures” (Rice 6).

Pliny also noted that it was a popular trend of Roman aristocrats to possess encaustic paintings
in their villas, suggesting that encaustic paint held popularity and prestige. However, no works and few references to works or artists have survived; the information we have on a few famous works of the time is solely based on literature. The first is of Eugenio Latillo, who, between 1838 and 1840, wrote a treatise which hinted that he owned an encaustic work from Pompeii, and mentions the evidence of the use of a cestrum and impasto effects (Pratt 16). The second is of a peasant farmer who unearthed an encaustic painting, now titled “The Muse of Cortona,” in 1732 in Cortona, Italy (Pratt 13). The third account relates to a “Death Portrait of Cleopatra of Egypt,” which would have been painted in honor of Augustus Caesar’s defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. This was found near Emperor Hadrian’s villa in 1818, as when Hadrian ruled Rome in 117 B.C.E., he is said to have moved several treasures to his villa (Pratt 15). There is supporting evidence that the “Muse” and “Cleopatra” are in fact ancient Roman, as they were both found at Roman sites, and were passed through several hands. It is known that Julius Caesar purchased an encaustic painting from the artist Timomakos for 80 talents (about $3.2M in modern terms), and later bought another work, both of which were to adorn temples (Williamson 10-11). A site excavated in St. Medard, France in 1895 revealed a female artist’s tools, several of which were associated with wax painting, such as cauteria, a burner, and containers of wax and resin (Stephen 12). These accounts and works provide evidence that Greek traditions of encaustic painting did spread into Rome and Europe.

THE FAYUM PORTRAITS

Pliny’s in-depth description of encaustic suggests that the art form continued to be a vital medium in Rome well into the first century CE. It is from the centuries that followed this that we have our first surviving examples of ancient encaustic, but they come from another region of the Roman Empire: Egypt. While this was geographically a dramatic shift, the styles found in Egypt appear to be continuations of the Greco-Roman tradition of the previous centuries. Prior to the immigration of Hellenistic peoples, the use of wax in Egyptian funerary services does not appear to have been for
artistic purposes. All of the Egyptian encaustic works that survive today and all that are mentioned in ancient writings are funerary art. Generally called Fayum portraits because the first portraits were excavated from this area in the late 1880s, this group of works is unlike typical Egyptian art. Before Greco-Roman occupation, this application of encaustic did not exist in the region. Done primarily between the first and fourth centuries of the Christian era, these portraits were designed to adorn wrapped mummies and convey the likeness of the deceased into the future (Doxiadis 12, Rice 10). Most of the Fayum portraits were done on wood and “show their subjects nearly at bust length” (Thompson 5, Doxiadis 13). Although some portraits were created after the death of the subject, others were made before the person died and may have served as a symbol of status in the community while he or she was still living (Doxiadis 12, 83). Archeologists have discovered over 600 portraits that have been found in the Egyptian mortuary temples. These portraits were remarkably preserved, testifying not only to the advanced skills of these ancient portrait artists, but also to the unique color qualities and durability of encaustic paints.

Fayum portraits can all be loosely classified based on the substrate shape: most stepped panels come from Antinoopolis, rounded panels come from the Hawara region, and angled panels originated mostly in Er-Rubayyat (Corcoran 44). Doxiadis separates the portraits into four categories outside of their shape. Those of the first category, “the highly sophisticated portraits,” are all based in the Greek naturalistic tradition, handed down in the Alexandrian school. The second group is characterized by a less intricate rendering of the face and expression. The third category shows portraits that are schematic and most likely not painted from life. The final group shows portraits that are dramatically less sophisticated and exhibit little artistic skill. (Doxiadis 83) The panels range in size from small to medium panels of wood or wood wrapped in linen. The panels were prepared with a thin layer of rabbit skin glue, which functioned as a sealant, and then finally painted with beeswax mixed with ground mineral pigments. After the wax paint was applied, gilt garlands were applied over the person’s head, or gilt stucco frames were affixed to the panel. Unlike the Greek encaustic portraits, gold leaf was
added to Fayum portraits to make the mummies fit more in line with their traditional Egyptian funerary mask counterparts. (Doxiadis 84)

EARLY ICON PAINTINGS

Doxiadis contends that Christians who lived in Egypt during times of persecution set up *martyria* for mummified martyrs. These mummies were housed in shrines, and portraits, very similar to and quite possibly actually some of the Fayum portraits, would have been affixed to them. Escaping from persecution, the faithful would have taken the portraits with them as they fled. (Doxiadis 90) Thus the practice of painting a small, easy-to-transport *eikon* (Greek for icon) in Egypt may have developed into the Byzantine icon tradition. (25) Prior to Constantine’s decree, Christians might also have used encaustic painting in rituals in the catacombs under Rome.26 Pratt and Fizel also suggest a link between funerary portraiture of Egypt and the practice of icon painting: “The practice of painting and hanging the portraits anterior to death seems to have led into the painting of icons, or images, of the saints as objects of veneration” (27). The subject matter, medium, and portability of icons transformed these art pieces into personal, symbolic, and powerful objects.

The Byzantine Empire, which flourished between the 4th century CE and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, has come to be intimately associated with icon painting. Though few of the early Byzantine encaustic icons survive today, the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mt. Sinai houses well-preserved encaustic wall paintings in addition to some encaustic icons (29). The monastery and the area around it have provided many encaustic icons and pre-iconographical works. Thomas Mathews notes that the Byzantine icon represents the marriage of the pagan icon genre with “the tradition of ancient Roman painting” (30). Not all of the icons found in the monastery are Christian, and clear pagan ties provide information about Egyptian influences on early Christian icon painting and style. This fact suggests that icon painters who worked in the monastery of Saint Catherine were familiar with the Fayum portraits, thus supporting the spread of encaustic from the Fayum in Egypt through the
Sinai Peninsula into the monastery. A 200 CE pagan work, Suchos and Isis, depicts Egyptian gods seated on a double throne, clutching their attributes – Suchos holds a crocodile, sacred to the Nile, and Isis holds a sheaf of corn, representing her fertility (31). A telling element of the work is that the faces are encircled with gilt halos and the physical form of the icon is very similar to later Christian icons as well as earlier Fayum portraits (32). The pose of Isis, the mother goddess of Egypt, predates portraits of the Virgin Mary but seems to define a generalized pose for her, as seen in later icons. These works, though not encaustic or explicitly Byzantine, serve as precursors to the technique and serve as evidence of the spread of Greco-Roman artistic methodology.

Byzantine encaustic icons share four distinct features with portraits from the Fayum district. The first feature is that of the similarity in facial structures, the second the pose of the sitter, the third the color palette, and fourth the use of the Punic wax and salt variant formula. Greek artists imported facial expressions as well as frontal and three-quarter poses to the Fayum district and combined their style with that of their Egyptian hosts. (Doxiadis 91) In addition, the palette with which the Fayum portraits were painted was primarily white, yellow ochre, red, and black. This provides evidence that the two eras shared mineral pigments and color patterns. (Doxiadis 91) One specific encaustic icon of St. Peter from the monastery upholds these ideas: St. Peter is pictured sitting in a frontal position, with his face slightly angled to the left. He is adorned with gilt additions and painted using the traditional palette. It is even described as having an “expressive and spiritual face”. (Fleischer 59) The formula for the paint, essentially the same as Punic wax, differs only in the addition of resinous material (Freccero 68). The connection between the wax formulas was most likely to the continued use of formulas already perfected by Fayum artists and brought to the monastery.

While Egyptian encaustic portraits had the greatest impact on the development of Byzantine icons, artists in the Crimea may have begun working in encaustic as early as the 4th century BCE. Paintings on a sarcophagus found at Kertch, now modern-day Ukraine, support this (Stephen 14). The images on the sarcophagus are in encaustic medium. This early example of encaustic in eastern Europe
can be seen as evidence of another influence on Byzantine wax painting, and may also have served as inspiration for some of the famous Russian icons, some of which were also done in encaustic. Historian A.P. Laurie’s 1935 text, The Painter’s Methods and Materials, notes that “the examination of Russian icons may reveal some other early examples of wax painting in addition to the well known Egyptian ones” (Stephen 20).

**THE DECLINE**

It appears that encaustic as a mode of painting fell out of fashion at the end of the 7th century. Very few icons were painted in encaustic after the iconoclastic controversy began around 726 CE (Pratt 16). The great period of economic instability that followed the decline of the Roman Empire and the change in cultural values caused encaustic to fall into disuse. During the Middle Ages, more artists turned to tempera, fresco, and oil painting techniques that were cheaper, faster, and did not require the cumbersome task of building charcoal fires to liquefy the wax paints. Interestingly, Pratt and Fizel report that “encaustic is said to have flourished…until some time between the 14th and 17th centuries,” but give no specific details about artists or works created between the 7th and 14th centuries (Pratt 12). However, another source postulates that Lucas Cranach the Elder, Andrea Mantegna, and possibly even Leonardo da Vinci experimented with the medium during the Renaissance (Ward 192-193).

**THE REVIVAL**

Modern encaustic painting began in the 18th century with the archeological discovery of the beautifully preserved walls of Herculaneum and Pompeii were discovered exhibiting encaustic paintings. Historians and artists strove to rediscover the techniques of the ancient painters. Encaustic was further explored in the 19th century as a way solve the problem of dampness faced by mural painters in northern climates. Encaustic in particular greatly benefited from the availability and accessibility of “electrically heated equipment and commercially prepared materials” (Stavitsky 1).
Encaustic had always been a difficult and cumbersome painting material, and it never became as popular as other painting styles because of this. However, several artists of the 20th century, emboldened by the recent interest in ancient history and in encaustic paintings and aided by new technologies that made the method easier, found working in encaustic to be a unique experience.

**MODERN TECHNIQUES**

Modern artists use a variety of heating tools, such as an electric skillet with digital thermometers to keep the waxes at 180-200°F. Wax begins to melt at 165°F and begins to smoke and become toxic at 250°F (McDermott). One must have a proper ventilation system to exhaust the fumes, as no respirator will protect one from the formaldehyde and other carcinogenic vapors that are produced when the beeswax begins to break down (McDermott). They may also use a heat gun, an iron, a heated pen, and a heat lamp to manipulate the wax once it is on the surface.

Because the wax begins to solidify once it leaves its heat source, it must be placed quickly and the painting cools within minutes. Once the surface has cooled, encaustic paints present a permanent lustrous enamel appearance, yet the painting can be revised and reworked at any time (McDermott). The process of heating and cooling sets up a dynamic of chaos and control unlike that of any other painting medium. Trial and error is the only road to proficiency (McDermott).

An encaustic painting is stable in a temperature range of approximately 40-110°F (McDermott). Very hot days can soften the wax somewhat, but will cause no real damage. A painting may become dull or haze over with temperature and humidity shifts. If dulling occurs, the surfaces can be buffed when the painting is cool, until it again shines (McDermott).
Works Consulted


McDermott, Mary, MD. "Encaustic Painting Workshop." Personal interview. 8 Oct. 2015.


