

Ask the Artsperts

by Kristine Meek and Juliana Meek

Harmon-Meek Gallery, Naples, FL

Is Oil on Canvas Best?

Dear Artsperts:

I was told that I have to buy oil on canvas. Is that considered the best and most valuable type of painting?

Signed,
Canva\$ed

Dear Canva\$ed,

The simple answer is no. There is no reason for oil paint to be considered better than other types of paint media. However, there is a clear bias in the marketplace which has less to do with the medium of oil, but rather the surface on which it is painted. Works on canvas or panel are believed to be more valuable than works on paper. A belief that is not based on the work itself but rather because of perhaps an aesthetic aversion to works behind glass or the misconception that museums and academics do not value works on paper.

It is often thought that oil paintings are best, but in our observation those who are asking for oil paintings cannot see the difference between acrylic, casein, oil, and egg tempera paint until we explain the differences in media. What most are actually trying to differentiate between is works on canvas/panel versus work on paper. The noticeable and obvious difference being that works on paper must be framed behind glass or Plexiglas to protect the paper. Watercolor, pastel, crayon, ink are all forms of medium that must be painted on paper and therefore framed behind glass.

The choice of medium an artist works in does not in any way reflect the proficiency of the artist. In fact, watercolor is one of the most challenging forms of medium to master. However, prices do reflect the bias against works on paper in the marketplace. An artist's work on canvas or panel will almost always be priced higher than the same artist's work in paper. This is based purely on market factors of supply and demand and the false perception that works on paper are somehow inferior. This is unfortunate because collectors are missing out on truly magnificent works by disregarding works on paper.

There are probably many factors that led to this false perception in the marketplace. One being the aesthetic of glass and perhaps the resulting reflection. However, Museum Glass and Optium Acrylic are anti-reflective and provide a solution to this issue.

A second factor, and probably the more driving of the two, is that when people visit major museums, it is unlikely they will see works on paper exhibited. This is not because museums do not collect works on paper. Art museums have many works on paper in their permanent collections and continue to add works on paper to their collections. In the past year we have brokered the donation of several works on paper to museums that were thrilled to receive these works. However, museums don't tend to exhibit works on paper from their permanent collections. These works are often kept in dark storage because museums are concerned with fading or light damaging the paper. A museum's most important purpose is to ensure paintings are protected for the ages.

The most famous example of this is the watercolor painting, "Spring in Central Park" by Adolf Dehn (1895-1968). The work was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York shortly after it was created in 1941. To our knowledge, it has not been exhibited in decades. Yet, the work is so well loved that the museum shop has reproduced the image on countless items. It has become the most recognized, yet unseen painting in New York City.

So, if museums are this concerned with fading, should you have the same concern when adding works on paper to your own collection? No, advances in modern day framing techniques have negated these concerns of the past. Products like Museum Glass, UV Plexiglas, Optium Acrylic, and acid free materials protect watercolors from fading and paper from deteriorating. You can also exercise extra caution by hanging works on paper away from direct sunlight.

By understanding that the marketplace bias toward oil paintings is not based on any knowledgeable reasons, you can take advantage of the lower prices of works on paper to add truly wonderful works to your own collection.

Sincerely,
The Artsperts



"Spring in Central Park" by Adolf Dehn, Watercolor, 1941. This work is in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. However, it is kept in dark storage, and has not been exhibited in decade. (image below)

One of the displays for items depicting "Spring in Central Park" by Adolf Dehn at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Met Store. Its popularity and reproduction on countless items have made this painting the most recognized, yet unseen work in New York City. (image to left)

