

# Making Egg Tempera Paint

## Prepare the pigment paste

Grind pigment powder with distilled water on a sheet of glass, using a glass muller. Distilled water ensures that the appearance and longevity of the paint are not adversely affected by minerals or bacteria. Using circular motions, grind the pigment to a creamy consistency. Transfer the pigment mixture to a small jar and, to prevent drying, top with a thin layer of distilled water. Properly stored, this paste can last for years.



## Prepare the yolk medium

The yolk medium serves as the binder for tempera. Hold the yolk over a vessel and pierce the membrane, allowing the yolk to drain. Discard the membrane. Thin the yolk with distilled water until the consistency is slightly thinner than heavy cream. The color of the yolk has little to no impact on the final color of the paint.

## Mix the paint

Combine the pigment paste with the yolk mixture, starting with equal quantities. The necessary ratio of pigment to yolk varies according to the specific pigment and the consistency of the yolk. As the tempered pigment sits, the yolk begins to cure, becoming thicker and more difficult to apply with the brush. Mixed paint cannot be stored, so prepare only enough paint for immediate use.



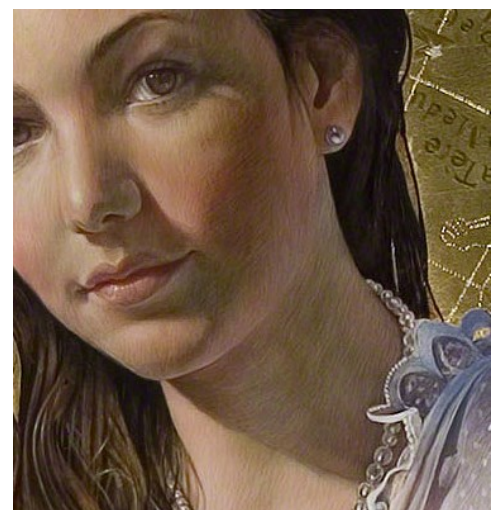
# Techniques and Properties of Egg Tempera

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Egg tempera paint demands a more delicate application than most other paints, but is remarkably durable. All types of paint contain pigment (color) mixed with a binder (to bind the color to a surface) and a liquid vehicle, which enables the paint to flow. Egg tempera consists of powdered pigment and a fast-drying yolk binder mixed with water, vinegar, or white wine. The result is a glossy paint that must be applied quickly, but can last for centuries under the right conditions.

Water-based egg tempera dries very quickly—within seconds—once applied. Consequently, artists work in a very particular and precise way. The brush is loaded with paint and then wiped to enable smooth application. Excess paint on the brush can leave thick lumps that will crack when dry. Each stroke is laid down thinly and precisely, more closely resembling pen or pencil drawing than typical brush painting.

Egg tempera dries too quickly to mix colors with strokes already applied to the painting's surface. Instead, colors are applied in layers that the viewer will *perceive* as blended. This “optical” blending preserves color brightness and intensity. Traditionally, the artist starts with a drawing, then builds the image with layers of semi-translucent paint. As in drawing, cross-hatching lends color and defines forms. Each stroke remains separate and must dry before the next is applied. This gradual layering produces a translucent effect, which gives egg tempera its characteristic luminosity.



Fred Wessel, detail of *Becca (Telescope)*, egg tempera with gold and palladium leaf

Cross-hatching defines forms and shadows.

This medium is very durable when applied to a rigid surface. Unlike oil paint, egg tempera must be applied thinly to avoid cracking. Walls and rigid panels painted in egg tempera during the Gothic and Renaissance periods survive today.

# Artist Statement

A two-week trip that I took to Italy in 1984 had a profound and prolonged influence on my work. I went to Italy to view the art of the Renaissance, for it is my belief that all visual artists, especially realists, should experience and study this work firsthand. I believe that in our search for novelty in post-modernist art making, we often lose touch with certain basics. Beauty, grace, harmony, and visual poetry are nowadays rarely considered important criteria in evaluating contemporary works of art.



Artist Fred Wessel



Fra Angelico, detail of *San Domenico Altarpiece*, 1423-24, tempera on panel

Since the Bauhaus, the term 'precious' has had a negative connotation in art schools. It was a term used derisively in the 1960s to describe work that did not adhere to the fashionably pared-down kernels of conceptualism or minimalism. But after seeing the beauty, sensitivity, harmony—the 'preciousness'—of Italian Renaissance painting—especially the early Renaissance work of artists such as Fra Angelico, Duccio, and Simone Martini—I realize that, as artists, we may have abandoned too much.

The ever-changing inner light that radiates from gold leaf and the use of pockets of rich, intense colors that illuminate the picture's surface impressed me deeply. It was 'preciousness' elevated to grand heights: semi-precious gems such as lapis lazuli, malachite, and azurite were ground-up, mixed with egg yolk, and applied as paint pigments, producing dazzling, breathtaking colors!

I look to the early Renaissance as a source of inspiration that I can use along with contemporary content and image making. I look to the Renaissance as the artists of that time looked to early Greek and Roman art—not as a reactionary, but as one who rediscovers and reapplies important, but forgotten, visual stimuli.

**W**ESSEL'S egg tempera paintings are known for their rich flesh tones. To achieve these realistic colors he paints in much the same way that 14th-century Italian artist Cennino Cennini describes in his book, *Il Libro dell'Arte*. Warm and cool tones are in careful play with one another and thin layers of color are applied by alternating glazing and modeling with transparent and semi-opaque colors. The following five photographs, taken by the artist, document the process of creating *Taurus*. The initial drawings are covered as the painting develops.



Wessel begins each of his egg temperas with a silverpoint drawing. Silverpoint is an extremely delicate medium requiring a meticulous and detailed approach. Classic methods of shading and modeling, including cross-hatching and stippling, are often employed. The marks, made with soft metal tips on a primed surface, cannot be erased. Dark areas are built up by working layer over layer of shading.



India ink, a black ink commonly used for drawing and outlining, is applied over the silverpoint drawing. This ink wash adds tonal values to the image. If gold gilding will be used, the gold leaf must be applied after the drawing is completed, but prior to the addition of paint to the panel.



To achieve his characteristic, rich flesh tones, Wessel follows a process very similar to that recorded by Italian artist Cennino Cennini 700 years ago in *Il Libro dell'Arte*. First, the artist thinly applies a warm green pigment called *verdaccia*. This deepens the shadows, setting up contrasts of warm and cool greens that will provide the base for the flesh tones.



Warm glazes of vermilion or cadmium red are applied over the green in areas that should appear pinkish such as the cheeks, nose, and ears.



The green under-painting is allowed to show through in areas where the skin requires more neutral tones. Opposite pink on the color wheel, subtle greens enhance gradual contrasts in skin tone.