

Student Grade Verses Professional Grade Paint



The top left photo are student acrylic paints, where as those to the right are professional grade.

Professional acrylic paints consist of a polymer binder with pigment added. Some of the more expensive pigments may be toxic (cadmium and cobalt). They can be replaced by a man-made pigment. Some man-made pigments are labeled with the color followed by the word "Hue". Hue colors cost less and are not as intense as those with the real pigment added. While professional grade paints cost more than the student grade, they are worth the investment to anyone who is serious about painting. Professional grade paints have better color saturation and brilliance, better cover power, smoother handling and less shrinkage, and are more fade resistant.

Student grade paints are also formulated with a polymer emulsion, but also with fillers to cut cost and to make them more affordable for the consumer. Their pigments are man-made so their colors are less intense. Generally, they are smooth, but not as smooth as the professional grade, and they have less cover power than professional grade. Don't be discouraged if your budget only allows for the student grade paints.

Some student grade paints aren't that bad to start with. From personal experience, the Academy by Grumbacher, Galeria by Winsor & Newton, and Basics by Liquitex are the better of the student grade paints and mediums. I always use them to demonstrate, and to teach my beginner students and even intermediate level classes. Not only do student grade cost less, but there are ways to improve the quality of your painting when using them. I will cover that later, but for now, let's see what paints are best for you at this time. First, why would you want to over invest in something if you are not really sure how far you want to go with it. I find that some of my students have either never painted before, or that painting is just a

hobby that they occasionally enjoy. There is quite a difference between this type of painter and one whose goal is to earn income from selling his or her art. So answer a few questions and decide which grade of paint best suites you.

Where are you currently with your art?

Where do you want to go with your art?

Do you intend to sell your art, give it as a gift, or keep it?

How serious are you about creating art for the rest of your life?

Most adult painters are not professional artists, and most professional artists started drawing and or painting as children. So, by the time a professional minded artist has reached early adulthood, if afforded, will have started to invest in professional grade paints and materials. This is because it is pretty much given that art is his or her calling, and therefore, seen as a way of life.

Using student grade or professional grade paint is a personal choice. If you are just enjoying art as a fun hobby or as an occasional pass time, then the student grade is all you will ever need. I personally am not comfortable using student grade as the dominate paint for my works that I sell. However, there are always exceptions when they are most useful, and can even contribute to a painting being sold. I have found them very useful in my work as:

- Mixed with professional paint and mediums for some mixed media work.
- Tinting gesso
- Painting a study
- Experimenting
- Painting a craft project
- Painting a basecoat or cutting in a preliminary painting when many layers of the professional grade will build the remaining painting.

Student grade lacks the luster that professional paints offer. This can be remedied by mixing the two grades of paints, or by mixing the student grade with some professional grade liquid or gel acrylic medium. There are more and more student grade acrylic mediums being introduced on the market today. They too can help enhance the appearance and durability of student grade paints. When possible, use gloss or satin mediums with student grade paint. Matte will flatten student grade paint even more. If you don't want the final coat to be glossy, then apply two coats of satin as the final top layer. A final clear glaze over student grade or craft paint will help greatly to enhance their depth and color, especially if using a professional grade glazing medium.

Mixing the two grades of paint will not only improve the quality of the student grade paint, but it is also an economical way to become familiar with professional grade, and to see how they differ. The structure and characteristics of the two grades will be affected when mixed. The student grade will improve while the professional grade will lose some of its quality. The overall appearance and handling quality of the final mix will be noticeable, especially in washes and water mixed glazes where color saturation will be improved for the student grade. Student grade is perfect for painting studies, especially in color value studies. Because they cost less than the professional grade, it is easier to explore and experiment without as much concern over cost or waste.

I want to briefly cover craft paints, and temporarily include them in the category with student grade paint for several reasons. First, they have become popular not only for decorative painting and crafts, but also among beginner painters. The main reason being, they are more affordable. They cost even less than the student grade paints. Like the student paints, there are noticeable differences compared to the professional paints.

When it comes to crafts, it is more acceptable and much more affordable to use craft paints. Most, but not all craft paints come in the 2oz plastic bottles. They are used most often for tole painting and the one stroke decorative painting. Craft paints are good for learning how to paint, experimenting, and doing color value studies. They also have levels of quality within their own category. This is usually obvious just by looking at the price. But even the most expensive 2oz bottles are usually about \$2. They have become so popular that a wider selection of colors are now available in the 8oz bottles. When properly stored, they will last for literally decades. I still have some that could be classified as vintage. Some are flat, more like tempera paint when dry, while others will look more like plastic. As if there are not already enough colors, different brands are interchangeable for even more color choices. Their quality can also be improved by mixing with a good gloss glaze or gel medium to improve the luster. I have even mixed a drop or two of airbrush paint into some of the better craft paints and really liked what I saw. The colors of course changed, but were far more intense once a professional gloss medium was applied over them.

The cheap paint sets in 12-15 tiny tubes are by no means met for adults to learn how to paint with. Purchasing them is a really bad idea. By using them, you may become so frustrated that you will want to give up. You will not enjoy the painting experience or the final outcome should you decide to continue. I have seen

students give up, thinking that it was them instead of the paint being used. Student grade paints last longer and have much better cover power than these really cheap paint sets. I can guarantee that these cheap paints are loaded with far more fillers and far less polymer emulsion than the student grade paints have. It is for this reason that these awful paints cannot properly adhere to a canvas. They have a nasty drag, and are dreadfully dull and chalky when wet or dry. They are a total waste of money and time, so don't even think about going there.

It is not necessary to go all out and buy professional paint in order to create good art. Make sure that art is important enough to you before making the investment. I suggest that you start with student grade paint. As your art improves, start mixing in some professional paint with student paint to compare the difference.

If you are selling your art, just remember that your signature represents you and your art. Some student grade and craft paints fade over time, some faster than others. Your buyer may have your painting displayed where sunlight hits it daily. A sealer or varnish can help prevent or slow down some fading.

So there you have it. No big deal. Student grade paint can play an important role in creating some beautiful works of art. Like most art mediums, they are made to be manipulated by us creative beings, but they do have their limits.

Explore, Experiment! Create!

C J