

WHAT IS A PANEL? WHY USE ONE?

Bottom line at the top: beyond the intangible, your task as an artist is to eclipse all others in luminosity, longevity and demonstrable quality.

What a panel does.

A panel is just a strong, stable support; the stronger and more stable, the better. They stop a painting getting dented and make the paints sing. My panels finish at about 13mm (½") thick. Canvasses were *always* the cheap option.

As an artist, you are trying to sell luxury goods, the surface of which most clients feel very shaky about judging. Artists often mistakenly think that in the moment of the sale, clients are interested in the art or the artists' personality. But, actually, build quality is the chief metric that turns interest in a luxury good into a sale. Most people know how to gauge quality when they can touch it; you or your gallery needs to give a teetering client that affirmative trigger to convert a sale. I have been humbled to learn that the hardware sells it!

How a panel works.

Most strong panels are made of acidic wood. This acid destroys paint.

On the most lasting panels, the wood is covered with cloth. The cloth isolates the wood, consolidates it as the cloth shrinks in drying, hides the woods' imperfections, and, finally, adds tooth for the paint layer to adhere to.

But, from the other direction, paint destroys cloth!

So, gesso - a bonding, isolating layer is applied to the cloth to act as a barrier between the paint and the cloth. Gesso can only be applied to a panel; it cannot be applied to flexible, trampoline substrate like stretched canvas because it cracks. Massively strong cloth is chosen for stretching and it is primed with a smeared, thick coat of oil paint. Panel cloth can be a finer cotton.

On an artist's panel, while the painting delights your viewer, the oily skin of the painting also protects the gesso from moisture. The back of my panels are completely secured from the ingress of moisture with three layers of shellac then two layers of high quality acrylic polymer.

I have not included all the layers that are in my panel, nor the process, but a schematic cross section of Artist's Panels looks like this:



Why Artist's Panels are special.

There is a total dearth of prestige substrates in the art market. You can't find them anywhere. Stretched canvas has always been the budget option. You can find elite paints & elite brushes, but no elite substrates. There are Aluminium panels and acrylic 'gesso' - I address both in detail below. They are not good products.

My gesso is made of chalk, hide glue & a bit of pigment. That's all. Same ingredients, same recipe, same method that has been used for +4000 years. With stone and lime plaster (which is also calcined stone), gesso is one of the trinity of substrates that has carried images from antiquity into our eyes today. True gesso is still used as the soundest material in restoration by **all** the major public galleries of the world. Simple things last longest.

These panels are silky to the touch but are not smooth.

Many machine-made things are too smooth to paint on. All commercial substrates for painting are machine made.

Apart from an electric heater to heat a pan of water, there are no powered tools used in the manufacture of these panels. None. Their flatness is created with the palm of my hand, so they are **not mechanically flat**. They are smooth but it is dimpled with a slightly irregular surface - a difficult finish to achieve. This irregularity - so fine it cannot be felt with the hand, is what aids the paint layer to mechanically grab and bond itself to the gesso.

Are these panels better than acrylic 'Gesso' artist's panels?

Acrylic 'gesso' has completely captured the gesso market and **every** commercial canvas and panels is primed using it. Is it good?

It isn't gesso. It is a highly complex aqueous medium containing an emulsion of micro plastics plus titanium dioxide, plus surfactants for stability, plus rheology modifiers to control flow, levelling and sag, plus chalk. It is marketed in DIY stores as 'chalk paint'. It is airgun sprayed onto canvas and boards in a booth and smoothed using air powered orbital sanders by people in hazmat suits.

The chalk is the **only** ingredient in it that stops your painting delaminating from the plastic. I watched plastic paint products enter the fine arts market when I was about 16 years old. I didn't for a moment think that anyone would fall for them. It is mind boggling that so many now do. Think of acrylic gesso as ultra-processed food - it uses an identical economic model.

Real gesso ought to be 96% chalk, 4% glue. No other ingredients are necessary. Simple things last the longest.

Are these panels better than aluminium artist's panels?

Some modern panels are made of aluminium. Are these good?

Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) panels are used as elite, rigid, lightweight painting supports (like Dibond or AlumaComp). It is actually very thin, 0.12 mm to 0.5 mm (roughly 0.005" to 0.02") on each side of a plastic core, totalling 3mm (0.1"). It is technically 'tinfoil' stuck to expanded polythene.

While they may look like thick aluminium, they are actually sandwich panels consisting of a polyethylene core bonded to thin aluminium skins. You make your mind up whether they are destined to last!