

Encaustic

A brief history of the ancient art form

What is encaustic?

Encaustic is a Greek word meaning “to heat or burn in” (enkaustikos).

Heat is used throughout the process, from melting the beeswax and varnish to fusing the layers of wax. Encaustic consists of natural bees wax and dammar resin (crystallized tree sap). The medium can be used alone for its transparency or adhesive qualities or used pigmented. Pigments may be added to the medium, or purchased colored with traditional artist pigments. The medium is melted and applied with a brush or any tool the artist wishes to create from. Each layer is then reheated to fuse it to the previous layer.

Greek & Egyptian Art

The earliest applications of encaustic wax paint was done by the artists of Ancient Greece.

Encaustic painting was practiced by Greek artists as far back as the 5th century B.C. Most of our knowledge of this early use comes from the Roman historian Pliny the Elder whose *Natural History*, written in the 1st century A.D., was a monumental encyclopedia of art and science. According to Pliny, encaustic had a variety of applications: for the painting of portraits and scenes of mythology on panels, for the coloring of marble and terra cotta, and for work on ivory.

Wax is an excellent preservative of materials. It was from this use that the art of encaustic painting developed. The krater, pictured above, illustrates a craft for which virtually no evidence survives, that of applying pigment to stone sculpture using the technique of encaustic. The column and phiale (libation bowl) at the far left indicate an interior space, probably a sanctuary. In the foreground stands a statue of Herakles with his club, bow, and lion-skin. The painter, characterized by his cap and his garment worn to leave his upper body bare, applies a mixture of pigment and wax with a spatula to Herakles' lion-skin. To the left, an African boy tends the brazier on which rods are heating that will spread the tinted wax.

Perhaps the best known of all encaustic work are the Fayum funeral portraits painted in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. by Greek painters in Egypt. A significant Greek population had settled in Egypt following its conquest by Alexander, eventually adopting the practice of mummifying their dead. The portraits, painted either in the prime of life or after death, were placed over the person's mummy as a memorial. The custom of funeral portraits did not begin until after the conquest of Egypt by Rome and lasted about two centuries. The portraits represent the converging influence of Egyptian religious ritual, Greek aesthetic and Roman fashions and social ranking.



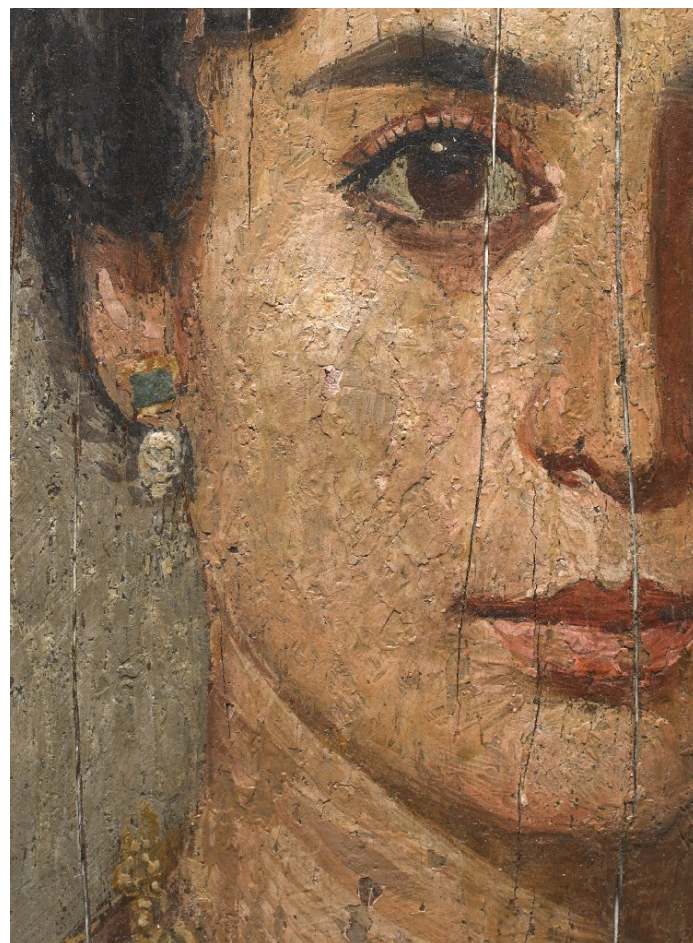
Terracotta column-krater, Attributed to the Group of Boston, ca. 360-350 B.C.



Mummy Portrait of Artemidorus; c. 100-200



Mummy-portrait; c. 160-170



Mummy-portrait, detail; c. 160-170

Encaustic Revival

The first full scale revival of encaustic was in the mid 18th century after the remains of the murals of Herculaneum and Pompeii in 1738 and 1748.

However, it wasn't until the 20th century that encaustic use was truly revived with the availability of electrical heating devices allowing encaustic to become much more accessible. In the 1920's Mexican muralist Diego Rivera began using encaustic. In the 1940's Karl Zerbe, head of Boston Museum School of Art at Cornell University, was very instrumental in the revival of encaustics and is stated to be the father of encaustics.

The history of contemporary encaustic begins with Jasper Johns who was using encaustic in the 1950's. After the 1958 other artists such as Lynda Benglis began using wax. In the 70's sculptor Nancy Graves and installation artist Michele Stuart also began adding wax into their work. Other famous artists who had tried their hand in encaustic are Pablo Picasso, James Ensor, Robert Delaunay, Antoine Pevsner, and Pedro Pruna.



Flag; Jasper Johns; 1954



Flag detail; Jasper Johns; 1954