

Discoveries in Encaustic: A Look through History

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ABSTRACT

Discoveries in Encaustic: A Look through History examines the techniques and history of encaustic art, a painting medium using melted beeswax and mineral pigment. This paper brings attention to encaustic so that it can be understood as an important art historical topic and as a viable medium. Additionally, it sheds light on the encaustic artists who practiced before American artist Jasper Johns popularized the medium. Though critical and historical literature on the subject is slim, encaustic formulas, methods, and subject matter have changed drastically since the medium's ancient origins. In addition to these historical considerations, this paper examines modern innovations which are fostering a renaissance of encaustic as an important art form. Both historical and contemporary ideas about encaustic through research and experimentation were explored. This project seeks to place a centuries-old technique in a contemporary light, to recognize its changes, and to appreciate its relevance in art today.

E ncaustic painting, though not often discussed in art historical literature, has served an important role in the creation of art throughout the past several centuries. Although encaustic as a medium has changed little in its formulation, it has gone through multiple stylistic changes. A closer look through art history will yield a diverse and complex past of the medium – a past not easily plotted or pieced together.

Encaustic uses wax, heat, and usually pigment to create a work of art or to varnish a work of art or sculpture.¹ The term is derived from the Greek *enkaustikos*, meaning to inust, that is to “burn in”; thus encaustic is marked by the use of heat to

melt and fuse layers of beeswax.² Burning in is the part of encaustic that literally separates the medium from other painting styles that use wax (such as ganosis and wax emulsion), as heat is included in every stage of encaustic painting. As Danielle Rice speculates in her essay, “Encaustic Painting Revivals,” the “magic” of encaustic has caused much debate, as art historians struggle to categorize this complex medium.³ Yet, artists have found encaustic as a means to visually express a unique poetic beauty. Plutarch wrote, “A beautiful woman leaves in the heart of an indifferent

1 Agneta Freccero, *Encausto and Ganosis: Beeswax as Paint and Coating during the Roman Era and its Applicability in Modern Art, Craft, and Conservation* (Sweden: ACG, 2002) 5.

2 Joanne Mattera, *The Art of Encaustic Painting: Contemporary Expression in the Ancient Medium of Pigmented Wax* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 2001) 17.

3 Danielle Rice, “Encaustic Painting Revivals,” *Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1999) 5.

man an image as fleeting as a reflection on water, but in a lover's heart, the image is fixed with fire like an encaustic painting that time will never erase."⁴ This romantic notion pairs well with the medium he chooses as his comparison; the very ingredients of this medium cause encaustic works to have a permanence not present in other works Plutarch may have encountered, such as frescoes that could chip and statues that could crack. Encaustic is based upon the layering and fusing of wax and pigment, and because wax becomes inert when hardened, an image will remain fixed within its wax "shell."

The origins of encaustic are unknown, though the Greeks may have learned to use wax for utilitarian purposes, such as caulking and painting ships, from the Egyptians, only to pass it down to the Romans.⁵ There are no known existing examples of either early Egyptian or ancient Greek or Roman encaustic art; only those works called the Fayum portraits exist, and the earliest of these dates from the first century of the Common Era. However, ancient textual and visual sources, beginning with Homer's reference in *The Iliad* to the Greeks' "vermeil-painted ships,"⁶ provide some evidence of early encaustic methods and usages. In Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (77-79 CE), the author devotes Book 35 to art, and specifically focuses on encaustic: "We do not know who first invented the art of painting with wax colors and burning in the painting." Pliny's writings describe three separate methods of using encaustic: 1) application of wax with a cauteria, 2) engraving on ivory and filling with wax using a cestrum, and a rhabdion, and 3) wax colors dissolved in naptha and applied warm

with a brush.⁷ Each of the three methods was suited to one particular outcome: the first was meant to produce murals; the second to produce small, flat, engraved ivory works similar to cameos; and the third to paint and seal ships.⁸ Homer wrote that the second method "was invented in Asia Minor and brought to Greece," while the first and third methods were invented in Greece.⁹

There were apparently four primary uses for encaustic. Probably the most common was ship painting, a practical solution to both decorating as well as waterproofing the wooden sides of the ship. Panel, or mural, painting was another format. A third was ganosis, the use of encaustic to color the white marble of statuary, to polish it and provide a sheen, and to coat it with a chip-resistant sealant. A 4th-century krater, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, illustrates ganosis, or painting wax on sculpture for surface protection.¹⁰ The red-figured krater pictures an artist dipping a brush in a vat that resembles those described by Pliny. Ganosis has been viewed by some as the start of encaustic painting and by others as an offshoot of it. A fourth use for encaustic was decorating fabric. In *De Architectura*, Vitruvius noted, "Punic wax (is) melted in the fire...let it be smoothed over with waxed cord and clean linen cloths, the same way as naked marble sculptures."¹¹

No works and few references to works or artists have survived; the information we have on a few famous works of the time is solely based on literature. "Waxes," as the works were called, would have held

4 Gail Stavitsky, *Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1999) 5.

5 Frances Pratt and Becca Fizel, *Encaustic Materials and Methods* (New York: Lear, 1949) 10.

6 *The Iliad*, book II, verse 79

7 Cauteria: a tool used to heat wax, Cestrum: long tool with a spoon-like end, Rhabdion: stove.

8 Pratt and Fizel, p. 9 and Rice, p. 6

9 Freccero, p. 5

10 Mattera, p. 17 and Freccero, p. 6

11 Rice, p. 6

up well against normal wear and tear, as beeswax is generally insoluble and quite durable; but unfortunately due to various wars and natural disasters, none are extant today. Despite this, there are several accounts that cite ancient works found recently. The first is of Eugenio Latillo, who, between 1838 and 1840, wrote a treatise which hinted that he owned an encaustic work from Pompeii, and mentions the evidence of the use of a cestrum and impasto effects.¹² The second is of a peasant farmer who unearthed an encaustic painting, now titled “The Muse of Cortona,” in 1732 in Cortona, Italy.¹³ The third account relates to a “Death Portrait of Cleopatra of Egypt,” which would have been painted in honor of Augustus Caesar’s defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. This was found near Emperor Hadrian’s villa in 1818.¹⁴ There is supporting evidence that the “Muse” and “Cleopatra” are in fact ancient Roman, as they were both found at Roman sites, and were passed through several hands. It is known that Julius Caesar purchased an encaustic painting from the artist Timomakos for 80 talents¹⁵ and later bought another work, both of which were to adorn temples. A site excavated in St. Medard, France in 1895 revealed a female artist’s tools, several of which were associated with wax painting, such as cauteria, a burner, and containers of wax and resin.¹⁶ These accounts and works provide evidence that Greek traditions of encaustic

painting did spread into Rome and Europe.

Pliny’s in-depth description of encaustics suggests that the heart form continued to be a vital medium in Rome well into the first century CE. It is from the centuries that followed this that we have our first surviving examples of ancient encaustic, but they come from another region of the Roman Empire: Egypt. While this was geographically a dramatic shift, the styles found in Egypt appear to be continuations of the Greco-Roman tradition of the previous centuries. Prior to the immigration of Hellenistic peoples, the use of wax in Egyptian funerary services does not appear to have been for artistic purposes.

All of the Egyptian encaustic works that survive today and all that are mentioned in ancient writings are funerary art. Generally called Fayum portraits because the first portraits were excavated from this area in the late 1880s, this group of works is unlike typical Egyptian art. Before Greco-Roman occupation, this application of encaustic did not exist in the region.¹⁷ Done primarily between the first and fourth centuries of the Christian era, these portraits were designed to adorn wrapped mummies and convey the likeness of the deceased into the future.¹⁸ Most of the Fayum portraits were done on wood and “show their subjects nearly at bust length.”¹⁹ Although some portraits were created after the death of the subject, others were made before the person died and may have served as a symbol of status in the community while he or she

12 Pratt and Fizel, p. 16

13 Pratt and Fizel, p. 13

14 When Hadrian ruled Rome in 117 B.C.E., he is said to have moved several treasures to his villa. Pratt and Fizel, p. 15

15 About \$350,000 in 1949, when Pratt and Fizel published their book, and a sum of \$3,150,000 in 2009. Williamson, Samuel H, Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount, 1790 to Present (MeasuringWorth: 2010) 10-11.

16 Victor R. Stephen, *Wax—Materials, Equipments, and Techniques* (Pennsylvania, Penn State UP: 1963) 12.

17 However, there is some evidence to suggest that the Greeks learned of the use of beeswax for other applications, such as use as an adhesive and sealer.

18 Images of Fayum portraits, as well as the mummies they graced, can be found in Doxiadis and Rice.

19 Note that not all Fayum portraits are encaustic: some were made on cartonnages (funerary masks) of linen, plaster and stucco. David L. Thompson and Haskell V. Hart, *NCMA Bulletin. XIV.1* (NCMA, 1977) 5 and Euphrosyne Doxiadis, *The Mysterious Fayum Portraits: Faces from Ancient Egypt* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1995) 13.

was still living.²⁰

Fayum portraits can all be loosely classified based on the substrate shape: most stepped panels come from Antinoopolis, rounded panels come from the Hawara region, and angled panels originated mostly in Er-Rubayyat.²¹ Doxiadis separates the portraits into four categories outside of their shape. Those of the first category, “the highly sophisticated portraits,” are all based in the Greek naturalistic tradition, handed down in the Alexandrian school. The second group is characterized by a less intricate rendering of the face and expression. The third category shows portraits that are schematic and most likely not painted from life. The final group shows portraits that are dramatically less sophisticated and exhibit little artistic skill.²² The panels range in size from small to medium panels of wood or wood wrapped in linen. The panels were prepared with a thin layer of rabbit skin glue, which functioned as a sealant, and then finally painted with beeswax mixed with ground mineral pigments. After the wax paint was applied, often in an impasto-like manner, gilt garlands were applied over the person’s head, or gilt stucco frames were affixed to the panel. Unlike the Greek encaustic portraits (according to descriptions), gold leaf was added to Fayum portraits to make the mummies fit more in line with their traditional Egyptian funerary mask counterparts.²³

Doxiadis contends that Christians who lived in Egypt during times of persecution set up martyria for mummified martyrs. These mummies were housed in shrines, and portraits, very similar to and quite possibly actually some of the Fayum portraits, would have been affixed to them. Escaping

from persecution, the faithful would have taken the portraits with them as they fled.²⁴ Thus the practice of painting a small, easy-to-transport eikon (Greek for icon) in Egypt may have developed into the Byzantine icon tradition.²⁵ Prior to Constantine’s decree, Christians might also have used encaustic painting in rituals in the catacombs under Rome.²⁶ Pratt and Fizel also suggest a link between funerary portraiture of Egypt and the practice of icon painting: “The practice of painting and hanging the portraits anterior to death seems to have led into the painting of icons, or images, of the saints as objects of veneration.”²⁷ Of express concern to early Christians was the representational element of portraiture, as “rationalizing their image veneration.”²⁸ The subject matter, medium, and portability of icon transformed these art pieces into personal, symbolic, and powerful objects.

The Byzantine Empire, which flourished between the 4th century CE and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, has come to be intimately associated with icon painting. Though few of the early Byzantine encaustic icons survive today, the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mt. Sinai houses well-preserved encaustic wall paintings in addition to some encaustic icons.²⁹ The monastery and the area around it have provided many encaustic icons and pre-iconographical works. Thomas Mathews notes that the Byzantine icon represents the marriage of the pagan icon genre with “the

20 Doxiadis, p. 12 and 83

21 Corcoran, p. 44

22 Doxiadis, p. 83

23 Doxiadis, p. 84

24 Doxiadis, p. 90

25 Mathews, Thomas F. *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*. New York, New York: Harry N. Adams, 1998. 6.

26 Pratt and Fizel, p. 15

27 Pratt and Fizel, p. 16

28 Mathews, p. 10

29 Margaret Perivoliotis, *Wax Resist Decoration, An Ancient Mediterranean Art* (Artciencia 2.4: Web, 2006) 3.

tradition of ancient Roman painting."³⁰ Not all of the icons found in the monastery are Christian, and clear pagan ties provide information about Egyptian influences on early Christian icon painting and style. This fact suggests that icon painters who worked in the monastery of Saint Catherine were familiar with the Fayum portraits, thus supporting the spread of encaustic from the Fayum in Egypt through the Sinai Peninsula into the monastery. A 200 CE pagan work, *Suchos and Isis*, depicts Egyptian gods seated on a double throne, clutching their attributes (*Suchos* holds a crocodile, sacred to the Nile, and *Isis* holds a sheaf of corn, representing her fertility).³¹ A telling element of the work is that the faces are encircled with gilt haloes and the physical form of the icon is very similar to later Christian icons as well as earlier Fayum portraits.³² The pose of *Isis*, the mother goddess of Egypt, predates portraits of the Virgin Mary but seems to define a generalized pose for her, as seen in later icons. These works, though not encaustic or explicitly Byzantine, serve as precursors to the technique and serve as evidence of the spread of Greco-Roman artistic methodology.

Byzantine encaustic icons share four distinct features with portraits from the Fayum district. The first feature is that of the similarity in facial structures, the second the pose of the sitter, the third the color palette, and fourth the use of the Punic wax and salt variant formula. Greek artists imported facial expressions as well as frontal and three-quarter poses to the Fayum district and combined their style with that of their Egyptian hosts.³³ In ad-

dition, the palette with which the Fayum portraits were painted was primarily white, yellow ochre, red, and black. This provides evidence that the two eras shared mineral pigments and color patterns.³⁴ One specific encaustic icon of St. Peter from the monastery upholds these ideas: St. Peter is pictured sitting in a frontal position, with his face slightly angled to the left. He is adorned with gilt additions and painted using the traditional palette. It is even described as having an "expressive and spiritual face."³⁵ The formula for the paint, essentially the same as Punic wax, differs only in the addition of resinous material.³⁶ This variation of Punic wax may have been the preferred formula in the Sinai region, as natron, a salt described by Pliny and vital to wax paint production, was particularly abundant in the Birket Quarun salt lake in the Fayum District and not in the Sinai.³⁷ The connection between the wax formulas was most likely to the continued use of formulas already perfected by Fayum artists and brought to the monastery.

While Egyptian encaustic portraits had the greatest impact on the development of Byzantine icons, artists in the Crimea may have begun working in encaustic as early as the 4th century BCE. Paintings on a sarcophagus found at Kertch, now modern-day Ukraine, support this.³⁸ The images on the sarcophagus are thought to be in encaustic medium. This early example of encaustic in eastern Europe can be seen as evidence of another influence on Byzantine wax painting, and may also have served as inspiration for some of the famous Russian

30 See Mathews for images of various Byzantine encaustic icons. Mathews, p. 4.

31 Mathews, p. 6

32 Though the icon was destroyed in the Second World War, photographs of it remain. Mathews, p. 6

33 Doxiadis, p. 91

34 Doxiadis, p. 91

35 For an image of "Saint Peter" see Jens Fleischer, John Lund, and Majatta Nielsen, *Late Antiquity: Art in Context* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001) 59.

36 Freccero, p. 68

37 Freccero, p. 51

38 Stephen, p. 14

icons, some of which were also done in encaustic. Historian A.P. Laurie's 1935 text, *The Painter's Methods and Materials*, notes that "the examination of Russian icons may reveal some other early examples of wax painting in addition to the well known Egyptian ones."³⁹

It appears that encaustic as a mode of painting fell out of fashion at the end of the 7th century. Very few icons were painted in encaustic after the iconoclastic controversy began around 726, though a post-Byzantine icon from the 17th century was reported in 1935 to be owned by a professor at the Royal Academy of Art in London.⁴⁰ Interestingly, Pratt and Fizel report that "encaustic is said to have flourished... until sometime between the 14th and 17th centuries," but give no specific details about artists or works created between the 7th and 14th centuries.⁴¹ However, another source postulates that Lucas Cranach the Elder, Andrea Mantegna, and possibly even Leonardo da Vinci experimented with the medium during the Renaissance.⁴²

In the early 18th century, Comte de Caylus, a French antiquarian interested in Pliny's writings on encaustic, began to experiment with the medium. Caylus hired chemist and artist Joseph-Marie Vien to test several formulations and applications of wax medium. Vien eventually painted and exhibited his own encaustics.⁴³ Another intellectual of the day, Denis Diderot, "condemned Caylus... and championed instead the experiments (in encaustic) of Jean-Jacques Bachelier."⁴⁴ Both agreed

that "the encaustic medium would offer certain advantages" such as strength, durability, and brilliance of color. Rice speculates that for Caylus and Diderot encaustic was a means to return art to the "ancient style."⁴⁵ Several other artists began to try both Caylus' and Diderot's methods, and artists such as Alexander Roslin and Louis-Joseph Le Lorrain exhibited encaustics in France during the late 1700s. The idea that French painting – regularly done in oil – had become corrupt pushed these men to champion an art medium that demanded discipline and great attention to detail, and secretly, a demolition of the "painterly style" then popular. In effect, the revitalization of encaustic caused attitude shifts in the European art world that began to favor the antique style, also known as the "goût grec."⁴⁶ Encaustic began to appear in Sweden, England, Germany, and Italy.⁴⁷ Jacques-Louis David, the master of the neoclassical style and student of Vien, was no doubt familiar with encaustic. He commissioned the American artist Rembrandt Peale in 1810 to paint his portrait in oil and encaustic.⁴⁸ In turn, Peale learned the technique from David's student, Jacques Nicolas Paillot de Montabert, whom Rice gives the honor of bringing encaustic into the 19th century. In 1829, Paillot published a nine-volume treatise on painting methods, with one devoted only to encaustic. After learning from Paillot in Philadelphia

39 Stephen, p. 20

40 Pratt and Fizel, p. 16

41 Pratt and Fizel, p. 12

42 Gerald Ward, *The Grove encyclopedia of materials and techniques in art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 192-193.

43 Ward, p. 192-193

44 Ward, p. 192-193

45 Rice, p. 8

46 Rice, p. 8

47 Specific artists who pioneered encaustic in these countries: Carl Gustaf Pilo (Sweden), George Edwards and Johann Heinrich Müntz (who worked under Horace Walpole's supervision at Strawberry Hill and translated Caylus' treatise into English) and John Francis Rigaud (England), Benjamin Calau and Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (Germany), and Vincenzo Requeno and Christoph Unterberger (whom Catherine the Great commissioned to paint a cabinet in encaustic) (Italy), Ward, p. 192-193

48 Rice, p. 9

in 1793 and in Paris in 1809, Peale soon “became an authority on the medium” and painted several portraits, including ones of the Marquis de Lafayette and François Gérard.

In London in 1847, W. B. Sarsfield Taylor published his findings and theories on encaustic methods in *A Manual of Fresco and Encaustic Painting*. Artist Henry Styleman Le Strange studied the manual, and taught the American artist John La Farge the process of encaustic painting as they traveled in Belgium. La Farge began to work on decorative works in encaustic, and later painted encaustic murals at Trinity Church in Boston, beginning around 1876.⁴⁹ In four months, La Farge had completed the murals, several of which were done in “durable, water-resistant encaustic, consisting of wax melted with turpentine, alcohol, and Venice turpentine and applied directly to the walls.”⁵⁰ Though La Farge’s medium was more of a heated wax emulsion, his paintings do represent a bridge between Peale and later American encaustic artists.

With a kind of circular motion, artists in Europe encouraged a return to ancient styles while academics explored ancient encaustics. Viennese art dealer Theodore Graf and British archaeologist Flinders Petrie shared a great interest in early encaustics. Graf purchased almost one hundred Fayum portraits in 1887, and Petrie’s publications on the topic spurred great interest in the subject.⁵¹ Many artists saw a deeply emotional and contemporary aesthetic in the funerary portraits, but were also able to relate to the ancient style of the medium, thus encouraging the upward spiral of encaustic. The dialogue between art and history that occurred at the turn of the

20th century fueled interest in the medium and led many artists to work with wax. The experimentation occurring at the turn of the century led to a revolution in several artistic media. Encaustic in particular greatly benefitted from the availability and accessibility of “electrically heated equipment and commercially prepared materials.”⁵² Encaustic had always been a difficult and cumbersome painting material, and though several artists in its history capitalized on its complex nature, encaustic never became as popular as other painting styles because of this. However, several artists of the 20th century, emboldened by the recent interest in ancient history and in encaustic paintings and aided by new technologies that made the method easier, found working in encaustic to be a unique experience.

In 1934, a German artist named Karl Zerbe came to America, fleeing Nazi persecution. In 1935, the artist went on to become the head of the painting department at the Boston Museum School and began to search for ways to explain “what makes a picture.” His search led him to wax, a medium that allowed him to layer paint without the long drying periods of oils, and he discovered that applying it hot onto canvas or board gave him immense flexibility.⁵³ His experimentation eventually led him to “the right mixture: ninety percent beeswax and ten percent of sun-thickened linseed oil, heated to 225 degrees Fahrenheit” which he achieved with an electric palette and fused with blow-torches and hand-lamps. He demonstrated his process in a 1957 film he created and later shared with students.

While Zerbe created his groundbreaking Symbolist encaustics, American modernist Arthur Dove also began to work with encaustic. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Dove painted several wax emulsion works.

49 Rice, p. 10-11

50 For images of La Farge’s cathedral paintings, see Henry Adams et al, *John La Farge* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987) 165.

51 Rice, p. 12-13

52 Stavitsky, p. 1

53 Amnon Goldman, *Karl Zerbe - Biography* (Rockport: Mercury Gallery, Web, n.d.)

Working from Max Doerner's 1921 book, *The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting*, Dove explored encaustic as a material for expressing his "vision of the underlying material and spiritual essence of nature." He began to use beeswax in two ways, either dissolved with turpentine or mixed with oil paint, creating wax emulsion; because it can be applied cold this is not considered true encaustic. However, his interest in wax emulsion led him to paint with it as his principal medium during the last eleven years of his career.⁵⁴

American Abstract Expressionist painter Jackson Pollock began to experiment with wax in the early 1940s. In 1947, he created several works on paper that are known to be wax-resist, again not true encaustic. Pollock may have learned about wax-resist from his former teacher, Thomas Hart Benton, but may have also seen Zerbe's film. In 1950 Pollock created two works that employed wax as a major element. Just a year before the creation of the two mysterious works, the first comprehensive book on encaustic was published by Frances Pratt and Becca Fizel, *Encaustic: Materials and Methods*, which documented the history of the medium from Pliny to 1949. Stavitsky notes that the book was extremely well received in the art community, and served to further fan the flames of an encaustic revitalization.⁵⁵ In addition to the Pratt and Fizel book, Pollock may also have been inspired by his friend and mentor, Antonio Ossorio, who used wax-based techniques in his own work.

In 1951 Ralph Mayer published a short article in *Art Digest* on encaustic. It defined the process, denoted supplies, and gave a brief history of the medium. Mayer noted in his first paragraph that the medium was undergoing a revival among modern painters, mostly "because its effects are

so appropriate to the visual and textual aims of many modern tendencies."⁵⁶ In 1955, four years after Mayer's article was published, Robert Knipschild showed a group of fourteen encaustic abstractions at the Alan Gallery in New York City. In the same year, Jasper Johns' first significant encaustic painting *Flag* propelled him into the limelight.

Easily the most recognizable American encaustic artist, Jasper Johns' foray into encaustic seems to have begun in the early 1950s. Prior to painting *Flag*, Johns destroyed many of his works from before the mid 1950s and left only one encaustic untouched.⁵⁷ That work, *Star*, was painted with wax and house paint in 1954. Johns experimented with different painting methods and tried to combat the slow-drying nature of his oil paints by mixing beeswax with tube paint and melting it on a hot plate. When he found that process ineffective, he secured the hot plate to a stick so that he could easily move the plate around without getting burned. Johns claims his work "had nothing to do with Zerbe," though publications and other artists of the time (and especially Zerbe) had referenced the media.

Johns' process combined layer after layer of paint, wax medium, newspaper and collage items to create a sensation evoking a personal history. After making a preliminary charcoal sketch, he would dip strips of newspaper into wax, either pigmented or clean, and adhere them to the canvas with the same medium. He would then apply strokes of wax with brushes and palette knives to create varied surfaces. Adding oil pigment and more newsprint, he could

56 Ralph Mayer. "Encaustic Painting." *Art Digest*. 25.27 (1951): 27. Print.

57 Johns "methodically destroyed all the work in his possession" in 1954, the year his first encaustics appeared. Johns may have painted more prior to 1954. For an image, see Michael Crichton, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994) 29.

54 Stavitsky, p. 1

55 Stavitsky, p. 2

build up the surface indefinitely, hiding and obscuring certain sections as he went. Through a continual dialogue between the medium, subject, and composition, Johns was able to create a unique “amalgam of image/symbol, concept, and material.”⁵⁸ In other words, this meant that he could make the wax part of the meaning, not just the vehicle for its creation. By allowing the newsprint to show through the wax veil just enough for the viewer to realize what it is but not enough to read it, Johns called attention to the medium as part of the piece.

Stavitsky notes that encaustic “played a significant role in Johns’ fundamental change of spirit and attitude... in terms of what he has referred to as ‘a sense of becoming more independent and more focused, recognizing private strengths, doing something which was my own.’” Encaustic proved to be an especially important medium for Johns, and several of his most famous works were encaustics, made between 1954 and 1958, though he did use the medium well into the 1980s.⁵⁹ Working with encaustic allowed Johns the freedom to create work that hardened rapidly. It also offered him the ability to work in sections without the possibility of ruining other areas of the canvas or substrate. His work makes use of the texture of each brushstroke and the gestural qualities the wax contained. Each stroke became “distinct rather than blurred.”⁶⁰ In addition to exploiting encaustic for its textural and painterly qualities, Johns used wax as a mask in many of his compositions. The wax’s ability to simultaneously shield and emphasize certain visual elements gave Johns the flexibility to control the amount of information viewable to the audience.

Johns’ prominence may have inspired others, including academics, to begin

to seriously consider the topic. Thelma Newman’s 1966 book *Wax as Art Form* and the 1972 film *Painters Painting* emphasized encaustic, and Victor Stephen’s masters’ thesis on encaustic was completed in 1963.⁶¹ Artist Brice Marden also began working in encaustic in the 1960s after seeing Zerbe’s film. Marden researched the Fayum portraits on his own and sought out Johns’ work as well. In 1966, he created his first encaustic work, a monochromatic painting. Marden noted, “I am never exactly sure of how much wax is added to the oil paint in the final surface, but oil remains the primary binder as opposed to encaustic where the wax is the binder.” As early as 1965, Marden began to vary his formulas by combining graphite and beeswax to create works on paper. These works were divided into two sections, with one half covered in clear wax and the other covered but scraped down and rubbed thoroughly with powdered graphite to create an opaque surface with no visual texture.⁶²

American artist Lynda Benglis began to experiment with encaustic in the 1960s. Aware of the encaustic works of Johns and Marden, she purchased wax from a lipstick company and mixed it with damar resin crystals and powdered pigments. Benglis appears to be the first artist to use this particular formula. Her work from 1966 to 1975 became a “landmark” group of paintings that “were soon recognized as declaring ‘a very strong female sensibility, image and process... experienced as one.’”⁶³ Her early work in encaustic mainly consisted of wax layered into sculptural forms on masonite. Benglis’ contribution to feminism in the visual arts and her innovation in encaustic make her an undeniably vital part of the American revival of encaustic. Her work would have (and continues to have) a

58 Stavitsky, p. 2

59 Stavitsky, p. 2

60 Stavitsky, p. 2

61 Stavitsky, p. 3

62 Stavitsky, p. 3

63 Stavitsky, p. 3

profound influence on the work of Martin Kline, an artist who began working in the 1980s.

The 1970s saw a downturn in the interest in encaustic, though the medium did not become obsolete. Artist Nancy Graves created a group of encaustic paintings from 1977 to 1984. These works are little-known and under-researched due to the fact that many of them may no longer exist. She later began to overtly use wax in her sculptures. During the same period but halfway across the country, Noah Jemison also began to work in wax. Familiar with the Fayum portraits, Jemison also looked at the works of Zerbe, Dove, and Johns for inspiration; in 1971, he created his first encaustic painting. Jemison still works in encaustic, drawing upon his African-American heritage and love of jazz to create large-scale works characterized by organic lines and heavy layering of wax. His 1973 move to Brooklyn served to spread the influence of encaustic.⁶⁴

Encaustic supplies became more commercialized and accessible in the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps leading to an interesting debate about the high-art versus low-art nature of the medium today. Interest in the medium grew rapidly as exhibitions included more encaustics and as literature on the technique became more widespread. The 1990s saw an increase in encaustic exhibitions, including shows at New York's Tibor De Nagy Gallery, the Palo Alto Cultural Center, the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati, and the Montclair Art Museum. When Gail Stavitsky began organizing her exhibition entitled *Waxing Poetic: Encaustic Art in America* at the Montclair Art Museum, she received over two hundred submissions.⁶⁵ Several artists included in the show challenged the still-young norms

of encaustic painting, even in the mid to late 20th-century, by working with new substrates, pigments, and techniques.

Twenty years after Benglis began using wax, Martin Kline began working in similar styles. He continues to paint with encaustic medium to create heavily textured, built-up surfaces that can rise several inches off the base, in a style that is strikingly similar to that of Benglis. Artists have also challenged the idea of working small, or large with collage as support: Tony Scherman's large scale portraits use a painterly style to present a textural, layered approach to figural storytelling. Byron Kim, a Korean-American artist, notes that encaustic is "long-lasting yet so fragile... like the human body in some ways." Kim's work pushes the boundary between painting and sculpture, as his process of pouring wax medium into a rubber "sheath" allows the medium to pucker in "a rotund, belly-like manner." Many have now branched out into three-dimensional work. Of note are Sylvia Netzer's wax-on-ceramic works, which possess an organic, sculptural quality that allow even heavy materials to seem almost weightless.

In addition to newer encaustic artists, others discussed earlier, such as Johns and Jemison, still work in encaustic but have adapted their styles as current issues change and impact their lives. Topics such as sexuality, AIDS, sexism, the human body, and social injustice provide rich material for encaustic painters already familiar with the layering effects of the medium.⁶⁶ As alluded to earlier, there exists a sort of break between high art encaustic artists and "hobbyist" encaustic artists. The cyclical motion that has occurred throughout the history of encaustic is present yet again in the cycle of learning, understanding, and producing encaustic art. While many opportunities have been created so that current encaustic

64 Stavitsky, p. 3

65 For images of the work of Byron Kim and Sylvia Netzer, see Stavitsky, p. 4.

66 Stavitsky, p. 5-6

artists can support and learn from one another, some other artists whose work has already been well received in galleries tend to distance themselves from what many consider “hobbyist” artists. These hobbyist artists learn from the multitude of videos online, basic wax art books on the shelf, and the classes offered by community centers in response to the explosion in popularity. This “easy access” may cause resentment in the art community, as some artists, whose artistic caliber may not be as high as that of others, attempt to join ranks with

accomplished encaustic artists.

The study of encaustic art itself has evolved over the years, as formal research has been published since Pliny’s time all the way up to the present year. However, the decided lack of scholarly research on the subject published in the last decade calls for a well-researched, stringent article. It is the goal of the author to increase the understanding and knowledge of the subject, as well as to encourage further investigation of encaustic art across the globe.

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