



## VARNISHING WATERCOLORS

**CAUTION:** *The varnishing of watercolor paintings is a non-reversible addition to the artwork that will permanently change both the nature and appearance of the piece. Understanding these issues as well as performing application testing is critical before applying any varnish to a watercolor painting.*

Watercolor paintings are very fragile and easily damaged if not protected. Traditionally framing the watercolor under glass has been the solution. It is possible to varnish watercolor paintings with minimal change to the color and texture of the painting and to make the varnish completely removable with the use of an isolation coat. Without an isolation coat the varnish becomes a permanent component of the painting.

### ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- Application of a varnish and/or an isolation coat will change the appearance, texture and feel of the substrate of a watercolor painting. If done properly this change can be minimal.
- Gloss varnish or mediums can darken colors
- Satin and matte varnishes and mediums can lighten colors
- The physical barrier offered by the glass and frame will be gone
- When shipping artwork, contact between the varnished painting and packing materials should be minimal.
- A varnished watercolor painting may be considered mixed media by some watercolor societies once acrylic varnish is applied
- A varnish or isolation coat can become permanent components of the painting due to the absorbent nature of the watercolor substrate
- Photograph painting prior to varnish application to minimize glare
- When varnishing watercolor paintings, be aware that although an increased number of coats will result in greater protection against UV radiation, it also reduces the textural quality of the paper and paint.

### LAYERS APPLIED FOR A REMOVABLE VARNISH

#### **FIXATIVE: 1<sup>st</sup> layer applied to finished watercolor painting**

- A sprayable coating that would fix or secure the watercolor painting to the surface it was painted on
- Allows isolation coats, varnishes and other media to be applied over watercolor paintings without causing bleeding or streaking.

Use GOLDEN Archival Varnish Gloss (aerosol) to fix the watercolor painting. Apply 2-3 evenly sprayed coats depending on sensitivity of



watercolor painting.

GOLDEN Archival Varnish:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/archvarn.php>

### **ISOLATION COAT: 2<sup>nd</sup> layer applied over fixative**

- An isolation coat is a permanent coating that goes over the painting and under the varnish
- The isolation coat protects the painting if the varnish is ever removed due to damage
- The isolation coat reduces and evens out the absorbency of the painting so the varnish can be uniformly applied

For a **brushable isolation coat** slowly and thoroughly mix 2 parts GOLDEN Soft Gel Gloss with 1 part water. Brush over fixed watercolor using a soft broad brush that holds a lot of material. 1-2 coats should be sufficient.

For a **sprayable isolation coat** (for use with an airbrush or other spray equipment) mix 2 parts GOLDEN GAC 500 to 1 part GOLDEN Airbrush Transparent Extender. 1-2 coats should be sufficient.

More on isolation coats:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/isolationcoat.php>

### **VARNISH : 3<sup>rd</sup> layer applied over isolation coat**

- A varnish functions as a tough yet flexible protective film over artwork.
- It is designed to reduce damage caused by humidity, dust, dirt, smoke, ultra violet radiation, scuffs and scratches.
- Varnish is, ideally, a removable coating that should endure environmental abuses that would otherwise compromise the longevity of artwork (removability is possible with the use of an isolation coat).

**GOLDEN MSA Varnish, GOLDEN Archival Varnish or GOLDEN Polymer Varnish** may be applied over the isolation coat. If brushing 2-3 coats are recommended and 4-6 coats if spray applied. Please test all of these materials and applications to a test piece prior to final application to minimize issues and familiarize yourself with the materials.

GOLDEN MSA Varnish:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/msavar.php>

GOLDEN Archival Varnish:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/archvarn.php>

GOLDEN Polymer Varnish:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/polvar.php>

### **LAYERS APPLIED FOR A NON-REMOVABLE VARNISH**



## VARNISH : 1<sup>st</sup> layer applied over watercolor painting

- A varnish functions as a tough yet flexible protective film over artwork.
- It is designed to reduce damage caused by humidity, dust, dirt, smoke, ultra violet radiation, scuffs and scratches.
- Varnish is, ideally, a removable coating that should endure environmental abuses that would otherwise compromise the longevity of artwork (removability is possible with the use of an isolation coat).
- When applied on weakly bound media like watercolor paint films, varnish also has the ability to seal and hold the pigment and binder in place on the paper, but in doing so removal is not possible.

**GOLDEN MSA Varnish** or **GOLDEN Archival Varnish** may be applied directly to the watercolor painting, spray application is highly recommended. Polymer Varnish and other water based varnishes are not recommended for direct application as this could result in bleeding of the watercolor painting.

GOLDEN MSA Varnish:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/msavar.php>

GOLDEN Archival Varnish:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/archvarn.php>

### Recommended Varnishes

**GOLDEN Archival Varnish** is a mineral spirit based acrylic aerosol varnish that is formulated with UVLS (Ultra Violet Light Stabilizers) to reduce the effects of UV radiation. It creates a tough but flexible film that is suitable for interior as well as exterior applications. It can be utilized as a fixative or final varnish. If used over an isolation coat it can be safely removed. Available in gloss, satin or matte. Use gloss varnish prior to satin or matte to best retain the original color. Application of satin or matte varnishes directly to an absorbent surface can result in a lightening of color.

GOLDEN Archival Varnish:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/archvarn.php>

**GOLDEN MSA Varnish** is a mineral spirit based acrylic varnish that is formulated with UVLS (Ultra Violet Light Stabilizers) to reduce the effects of UV radiation. It creates a tough but flexible film that is suitable for interior as well as exterior applications. It is a final varnish. If used over an isolation coat it can be safely removed. Can be thinned for brushing or spraying with MSA Solvent or rectified and distilled turpentine. Available in gloss, satin or matte. Use gloss varnish prior to satin or matte to best retain the original color. Application of satin or matte varnishes directly to an absorbent surface can result in a lightening of color.

GOLDEN MSA Varnish:  
<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/msavar.php>

**GOLDEN Polymer Varnish** is a water based acrylic varnish that is formulated with UVLS (Ultra Violet Light Stabilizers) to reduce the effects of UV radiation. It is less effective in providing UV protection than MSA or



Archival Varnish. There is a concern in using water based materials over water sensitive media since this can lead to bleeding or streaking, especially when brush applied. . It is a final varnish. If used over an isolation coat it can be safely removed. Can be thinned for brushing or spraying with water. Available in gloss, satin or matte. Use gloss varnish prior to satin or matte to best retain the original color. Application of satin or matte varnishes directly to an absorbent surface can result in a lightening of color.

GOLDEN Polymer Varnish:

<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/polvar.php>

#### **Additional Resources**

Introduction to Varnishing:

<http://www.goldenpaints.com/technicaldata/varnapp.php>

Mark Golden's blog entry addressing varnishing watercolors:

<http://www.goldenpaints.com/blog/2007/plastic-arts/varnishing-watercolors/>

Just Paint article addressing testing and protective coatings:

<http://www.goldenpaints.com/justpaint/jp14article2.php>