

# **Matter Matters: Encaustic in the Studio Classroom**

## **Open Source-Collaborative Document**

Southeastern College Art Conference session, October 17, 2012

**Presenters:** Sara Mast, Chair, Montana State U; Jane Nodine, U of South Carolina Upstate; Teresa Prater, Converse College; Reni Gower, Virginia Commonwealth U.

**Participants:** Joseph DiBella, U of Mary Washington; Raymond Gaddy, U of N. Florida; Wesley Ortiz, U of Mississippi; Dawn Dickins, Young Harris College; Michael Dickins, U South Carolina Upstate; Mary Lou Hightower, U South Carolina Upstate; Kathleen Wentrack, Queensborough Community College, CUNY; Howard Solomon, West Main Artists; Kristen Gallagher, Meredith College.

### **THE CURRENT STATE OF ENCAUSTIC EDUCATION**

Over the last 30 years, encaustic painting has grown in prominence due to the proliferation of artists using it throughout the US and Canada. This is evidenced by its growing presence in galleries, the publication of a significant number of books and DVDs on encaustic technique, and the well-attended encaustic conferences and other events.

It is of importance to note that encaustic education has not by and large been included in the college level curriculum, Instead, it has been conducted through privately run workshops whose performances are not scrutinized by peer review. This is not to say that workshops are not an effective means of disseminating information on technique and materials. It does, however, raise the question of whether standards are being set by academic institutions. Are the study of the history, technique and safety precautions of encaustic being made available to students in the same way they are for oil and acrylic painting?

### **PURPOSE FOR ORGANIZING THIS SESSION**

To begin a dialogue and to generate a collaborative, open source document that outlines strategies to:

- establish the relevance of the encaustic painting medium to art departments and art program administrators in accredited institutions
- address the issues that prevent encaustic from being integrated into existing painting program curricula and offer realistic solutions to the physical set-up of encaustic classrooms
- address the standards and practices of teaching encaustic in college and university settings

### **ONLINE SURVEY**

This last summer Sara Mast sent out a survey to the studio members of SECAC, inquiring about the teaching of encaustic in their schools. Although the response was small, it gave insight into the attempts and difficulties in making it part of the academic program. Following are the results.

**Number of respondents:** 47

**Target audience:** college level studio professors

### Questions Posed

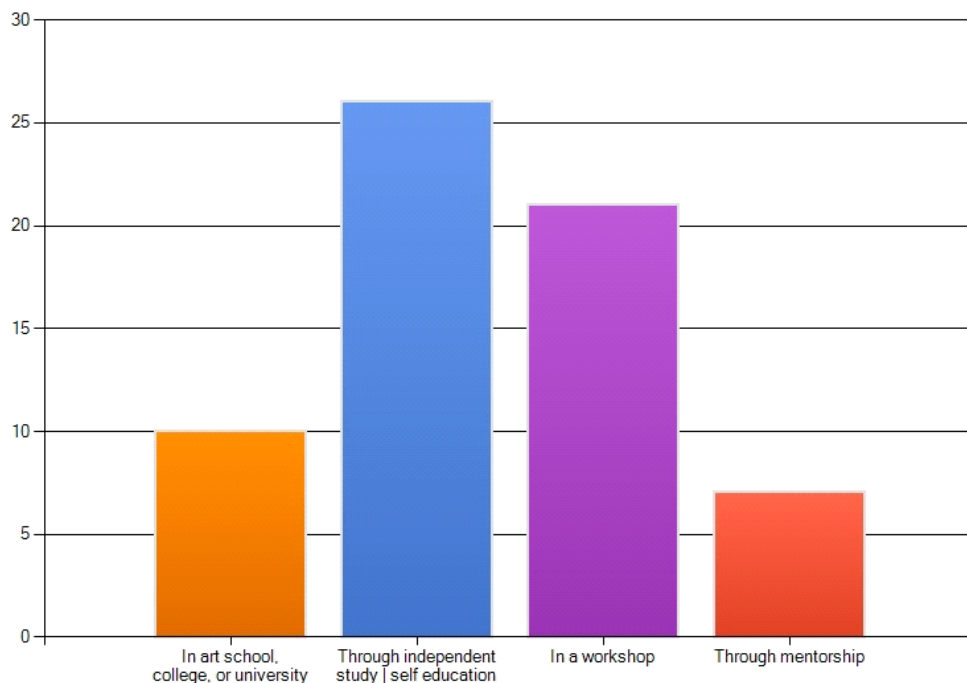
1. If you work in encaustic, how long have you been doing so?
2. Where did you learn to work in encaustic?
3. If you have taught encaustic, in what capacity?
4. If you have integrated encaustic into an existing course, which one?
5. What safety issues do you cover?
6. If your program does not include encaustic, have you/others attempted to introduce it into the curriculum?
7. Have you/others encountered obstacles to establishing encaustic in the program? If so, what are they?
8. Do you have any suggestions for overcoming these obstacles?

## RESULTS OF THE ONLINE SURVEY

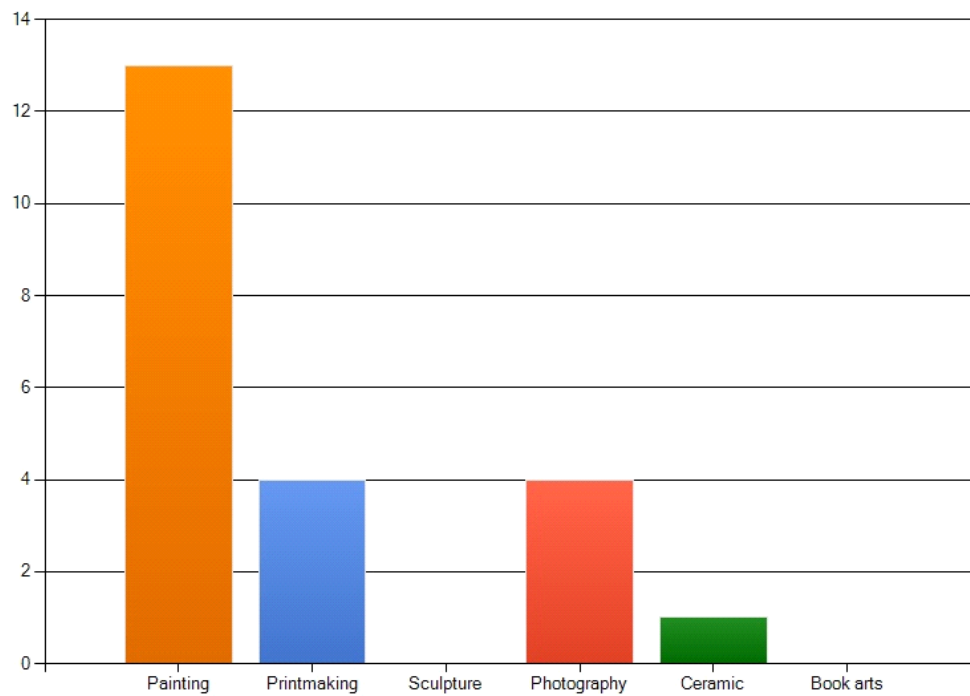
### Where and in what capacity have you taught encaustic? (from highest to lowest)

1. Integration in existing curricula
2. Independently organized workshop
3. At non-profit or as visiting artist
4. One on one mentorship
5. Invitation to present or conferences/retreats
6. A semester long course

### Where did you learn to work in encaustic?



**If you have integrated encaustic into an existing course, which one?**



**Obstacles Encountered in Using Encaustic in the Studio Classroom (from highest to lowest)**

1. Cost of ventilation system
2. Ventilation system and physical feasibility
3. Capital cost of initial set-up
4. Lack of adequate classroom space
5. Toxicity of materials
6. Safety concerns
7. No room in curriculum
8. Heating equipment
9. Lack of qualified instructor

## SOLUTIONS PRESENTED TO OBSTACLES AT MATTER MATTERS (SECAC)

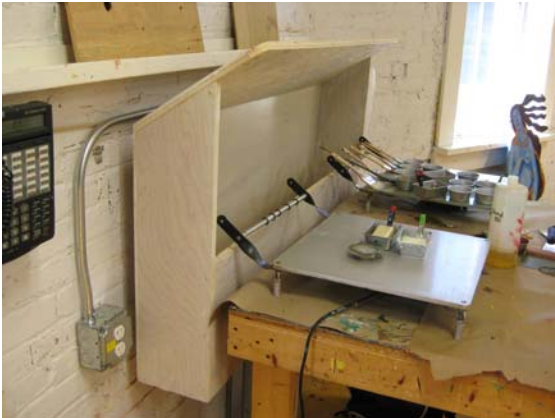
### Ventilation System – Cost and Feasibility

1. Toby Sisson's classroom setup at Clark University, Worcester, MA



Relatively inexpensive, utilizing windows and using oven hoods. Two fans serve 5 palettes, 2 wax baths. Needs stronger, better positioned fans, but could still remain inexpensive.

2. R&F Handmade Paints, workshop room, Kingston, NY



Duct system powered by 2 centrifugal fans in basement. Serves 15 palettes (adaptable for more) plus 2 wax baths. Vent hoods are not standard design. System must be designed by ventilation experts.

3. Encaustic taught in areas such as printmaking, sculpture and ceramics can capitalize on areas already well ventilated.
4. Student complaint to Montana State Univ. president with threat to 'sue' for ventilation issues has elicited immediate action, measurement of air quality now being taken by Facilities to determine how to move forward (student complaint can create action!)
5. David Gordon of Gordon Air Quality Consultants, Inc., Billerica, MA is an expert in ventilation for studio classroom. He has designed ventilation systems for art schools across the country. The cost for designing an 11-station system for Virginia Commonwealth Univ. was just under \$2,000. Although this was never implemented, the estimated cost for installing that system was \$50,000, not counting a temperature-controlled makeup air system.

### **Ways to deal with capital cost of initial set-up/proposal for school**

1. Be ahead of the game and develop proposal NOW
2. Proposal should include: scope of issue, potential solutions, timeline, estimated costs and anticipated outcomes
3. Share this proposal with your department chairs and administrators when the time is right (look for windows of opportunity, ie., change in administration)
4. Cultivate connections to include facilities and maintenance, administrative assistants, CFO in business office, advancement office, deans and directors, provosts & chancellors
5. Look for creative funding and establish creative partnerships
6. Focus on the institutional benefits
7. Document outcomes and publish data
  - a. Demonstrate how outcomes drive enrollments and dollars
  - b. Demonstrate connections between standards and accreditation

### **Ways to deal with lack of adequate classroom space/no room in curriculum**

1. Link to existing classes (ie., fibers, prints, book arts, sculpture, painting)
2. Proposal for a 'sustainable' solvent-free space that is also handicap access in any space available
3. Create a special topics class or independent study that utilizes the classroom in 4 week January term or summer school, when space demand is lower and unique offerings are encouraged
4. Do an off-campus presentation (ie, artist co-op) to develop student interest and demonstrate that it can be successful to administrators. Students get hooked.
5. Develop an 'encaustic cart' — can be moved from classroom to classroom, can be moved near ventilated area, useful for students who want to try encaustic and builds interest

### **Regarding toxicity of materials**

1. The toxicity of encaustic is often more myth than reality. The unfortunate interpretation of "caustic" in encaustic has led some to incorrectly believe that the paint is in some way chemically corrosive to the skin. Encaustic heated to proper working temperatures and properly ventilated is a relatively safe medium to work in.

2. Encaustic does not require the use of solvents. Studio-made recipes that incorporate solvents with encaustic are as unnecessary as they are unsafe.
3. If temperature is kept low (between 180 and 225 °F), and basic ventilation is used, it is less toxic than oil painting with solvents. Oil paint can be used with encaustic as long as no solvents have been added.
4. However, making your own encaustic requires handling of dry pigments, which are in all cases a hazard because the small particulates can remain insoluble in the lung. Please note: In this regard, ready-made paints are much safer.

If using dry pigments, one should use a respirator with a NIOSH P-100 particulate filter, and gloves and/or barrier cream should be used to protect hands. If using cobalt or cadmium pigments in particular, which are highly toxic, they should be used only in enclosed box (see 'glove box', page 109, *The Art of Encaustic Painting*). Keep pigment from getting on clothing and wet mop up any spilled pigment. Once dry pigments are suspended in wax and are not airborne, they do not pose the danger of being inhaled.

### Safety concerns

1. Create a safety checklist (this could be done at the International Encaustic Conference *Towards Standards and Practices of Teaching* session which Sara will co-lead in June, 2013)
2. See ventilation and regarding toxicity (above).

### Heating equipment

1. Heat guns - need to introduce safe use of heat gun and what to do if you burn yourself.
2. Torch use - torches used in both sculpture and metals, same protocol for using a torch with encaustic

### Lack of qualified instructor

1. A visiting artist program at a college or university is a good way to introduce this medium to students and faculty, if there is no instructor in the program who works in encaustic.
2. R & F offers a workshop for teachers, which is specifically geared to those who want to learn the best way to present this medium to students.
3. A fairly large selection of literature is now available for instructors.

#### BOOKS

Joanne Mattera, *The Art of Encaustic Painting*. Watson-Guptill  
 Daniella Woolf, *Encaustic with a Textile Sensibility*. Waxy Buildup  
 Daniella Woolf, *The Encaustic Studio: A Wax Workshop in Mixed-Media Art*. Interweave Press.  
 Lissa Rankin, *Encaustic Art*. Watson-Guptill  
 Linda Womak, *Embracing Encaustic*. Hive Publishing  
 Patricia Baldwin Seggebruch, *Encaustic Workshop*. Northlight Books  
 Patricia Baldwin Seggebruch, *Encaustic Mixed Media*. Northlight Books  
 Michelle Belto, *Wax and Paper Workshop*, Northlight Books

#### DVDs

Daniella Woolf, *Encaustic with a Textile Sensibility* (120 min.) Order thru [www.daniellawoolf.com](http://www.daniellawoolf.com)  
 Daniella Woolf, *The Encaustic Studio: A Wax Workshop in Mixed-Media Art* (included in book, above)  
 Aikin, Stabile, Woolf, *Encaustic + Paper* (155 min.) Order thru Wax Works West 831 786-9120  
 Paula Roland, *Encaustic Monotypes* (145 min.) Order thru Paula Roland, [paularoland@yahoo.com](mailto:paularoland@yahoo.com)  
 Cari Hernandez, *Wax Twist* (110 min.) Order thru Cari Hernandez [cari@carihernandez.co](mailto:cari@carihernandez.co)  
 Patricia Baldwin Seggebruch, *Encaustic Collage Workshop* (84 min.) Order thru Creative Catalyst Prod., Inc. [www.ccpvideos.com](http://www.ccpvideos.com)

## SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

- Most instructors and practitioners of encaustic learned in an unregulated, workshop situation. The universities/colleges have not set the standard for encaustic practice, technique and safety.
- The lack of standardized safety instruction has helped to give encaustic an undeserved reputation as an unsafe medium to work in. On the other hand, there are numerous examples of unsafe use of the materials due to ignorance or neglect of simple safety procedures (which is true of any medium). Artist Michael David has spoken publicly about developing severe neuropathy by working in encaustic for many years in a non-ventilated studio at hazardously elevated temperatures. One 'experimental' student worked on her stove at home and almost created a fire.

With standardized safety instruction, harmful situations can be identified and avoided. Health and safety issues are just beginning to be considered more seriously in art departments across the country, and generally, art studio ventilation systems are substandard and ineffective in addressing many of the materials and techniques used in contemporary art.

- While it can no longer be said that there is a dearth of technical literature on encaustic, the recent proliferation of instructional books and DVDs have had very little peer review for classroom use.
- The majority of encaustic teaching in college/university settings is done in the painting classroom, which is not reflective of the range of encaustic workshops being taught today, such as Paula Roland's widely known encaustic monotype workshops. Other workshops have incorporated encaustic with sculpture, fiber art, printmaking (etching/lithography), photography, and book arts. This is a missed opportunity to bridge various areas within art departments.
- Due to lack of technical instruction, a great deal of substandard work results. Rather than encaustic being associated with the quality of the Fayum portraits or the contemporary paintings of Jasper Johns, encaustic risks being associated with the predominance of substandard work not taught as an academic discipline.

This last point is underscored by a post on Joanne Mattera's blog on June 22, 2012 (<http://www.encausticissues.blogspot.com>). Mattera is the founder and director of the International Encaustic Conference, held annually in Provincetown, MA (<http://encausticconference.blogspot.com/>). She is also the author of *The Art of Encaustic Painting* (Watson-Guptill, 2001).

### ***Who's Teaching?***

*Crafters and hobbyists are fortunate to have access to top-quality paint and panels for their projects. Indeed one of the things the encaustic community has done for all its practitioners is to make those at all levels aware of the importance of best practices, which includes using the best-quality paint, panels and supplies each artist can afford. Outreach by the various manufacturers has been crucial in this regard. The weak link in the chain is the teaching of encaustic. In my opinion, the bar for teaching needs to be raised.*

*While serious teachers do attract serious students—sometimes under the aegis of manufacturers like R&F, or an event like the Encaustic Conference, or sometimes out of their own studios—there are too many “encaustic artists” teaching “encaustic art,” which in turn creates an exponential growth in the number of dilettantes with a sense of entitlement. (That's a value judgment) The point in my raising this issue here is not to scorn teachers, but to nudge the insufficiently trained ones to learn more and do better--and, equally important, to educate consumers, i.e. students, to choose wisely.*

*At the **Sixth International Encaustic Conference**, Sara Mast and Cherie Mitenthal led a discussion, **Toward Standards and Practices in the Teaching of Encaustic**. The one-hour discussion engendered such interest that it will continue throughout the year among a handful of teaching professionals and then return for discussion at Conference 7 in 2013. The intent is to develop standards—with input from a range of teachers—and make them available throughout the encaustic community.*

## GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

The initial challenge that we face is how we raise the level of awareness, interest and instruction in encaustic in our college and university art programs. These following suggestions came out of the panel discussion:

- Begin by curating an encaustic exhibition that includes recognized professionals who work in encaustic for the university gallery or other exhibition space. This is a great way to introduce the community to the medium and raise interest for a semester long encaustic course (or other course integration).
- Introduce encaustic not only in painting, but in printmaking, sculpture, ceramics, photography, book arts and fiber courses to show the range of possible applications.
- Share your success stories and document results.
- Purchase the encaustic publications for your university/college library and make sure resources are available to students and faculty.
- Educate your community on the history of encaustic, thereby demonstrating its relevance and focus on a content-driven initiative.
- Do a risk analysis comparing encaustic to other media being used in studio courses to demonstrate (particularly for administrators) its relatively low-risk qualities in terms of health and safety.