

# Abstract Oil Painting with Dorland's Wax Medium

by Rebecca Crowell

*Since ancient times, artists have mixed various forms of wax with pigment to add body, brilliance and luminosity to their colors.*

Today the most widely known method of wax painting is encaustic, which involves molten wax, and fusing wax and paint layers with a heat source. There is another way to paint with wax that requires no special equipment or set-up, and is far less toxic than encaustic. This is cold wax medium—a room-

temperature substance made by suspending tiny beeswax particles in a base of solvent,

resin and other additives. While encaustic mixtures set up immediately as the wax cools,

with cold wax the “feel” is similar to traditional oil painting—the paint stays workable for hours, and is easily spread and manipulated. On the other hand, cold wax medium does speed up the drying time for oils considerably, enabling

the artist to add layers of color and textural effects without waiting days for the paint to set up.



I've been using my favorite brand of cold wax medium, Dorland's Wax Medium, exclusively for about seven years. When I first started using Dorland's, I was interested in bringing more abstraction into my work, but feeling constrained by brush techniques. I was also frustrated with other oil mediums I'd tried that made the paint slippery and runny. A sales person at my favorite art supply store recommended that I try Dorland's Wax Medium. I was delighted with the difference the wax made in adding body to the paint, and I began to experiment with ways to apply and manipulate this thicker, faster drying paint. Gradually I moved away from brush painting into the kind of abstract painting I am doing today, in which textured color fields are built up in layers, using a variety of tools.

### **Getting Started:**

In workshops that I teach about using cold wax medium with oils, I have seen artists use this product in a wide range of styles and approaches. Dorland's is a very flexible and forgiving medium, and the fun is in experimenting to find out what it offers. However, a bit about my basic procedures may help in getting started.

I paint on gessoed panels, rather than stretched canvas or linen. The rigid surface is better for holding up to my rather aggressive techniques involving scraping and scratching, and it also counters any tendency for cracking or sagging as layers are built up.

Ratios of paint to cold wax are a matter of personal preference—most of the time, I use about 1:3 or 1:2 Dorland's to oil paint, though I never measure it. I simply put a large glob of wax on my palette and mix it into individual colors as needed, using a palette knife. For the initial layers of paint, I lean toward about 1:3 or less of wax to paint, because the paint will tend to slide around on the panel with higher proportions of wax. Once a base of a couple of layers is built up, experimentation is easier. A higher ratio of Dorland's to oil paint creates a thicker mixture, and the added body will enable more textural effects. (The mixture can be made even thicker with the addition of powdered pigment or powdered marble, if desired.)

With a lower ratio of wax to paint the result is more like straight tube paint, which is useful for certain techniques. Since the wax acts as a drying agent, using only a small amount of wax usually means the paint will take longer to dry. Finding the right amount of wax for different stages of the painting takes some practice. Fortunately, there is no need to be consistent—it is fine to apply thin wax layers over thick, or the opposite. There is wonderful freedom in being able to use whatever seems called for,

to simply paint with no concern for tenets of traditional oil painting (such as the requirement to use "fat colors over lean." When oil colors are suspended in Dorland's it is unnecessary to be concerned with their oil content.)

I apply the first few layers of wax/paint mixture to the panel with palette knives or squeegees, keeping in mind that these are simply a foundation on which to build the painting, and will be covered over. Because I will later scrape, scratch and sometimes dissolve the top layers of my painting, I like to set up interesting contrasts at this stage--alternating colors, and using both opaque and transparent paints. I also stick to broad color fields rather than small patches of color, so that areas of color are somewhat predictable when exposed at a later point (though there are always surprises!)

### **Developing the Painting**

After the initial base layers of paint mixed with wax are in place, I bring a variety of techniques into play to add complexity and depth to the painting. Dorland's is an essential aspect of most of my techniques, because it allows the oils to be rolled, knifed and spread easily, and provides a receptive base for imprinted images and incised lines.

I work intuitively, allowing the painting process to suggest the direction of the painting. I'm often inspired by some evocative texture or color relationship that evolves as I go. This is not a straightforward process--there are many side trips and dead ends—but each adds some texture and subtlety to the developing image, so nothing is lost



along the way. Because Dorland's aids in drying time, I can take a painting quite far along in one painting session, building up the layers necessary for my complex surfaces.

I have no set number of oil and wax layers, and no particular amount of time between applications. Though I often wait for a surface to feel semi-dry to the touch, I also sometimes work wet-in-wet. This, requires a rather light touch to avoid mud, but enables some often lovely blending to occur. With experience, a painter using Dorland's will recognize the different stages of drying and what effects can be gained from each. The wax and oil paint mixture usually begins to set up after a few hours, and may dry to the touch overnight, but this is very variable. The color and type of paint will effect drying time (transparent colors often take longer than do opaque colors) as will the humidity and temperature of the studio.

To push, pull and manipulate the wax/paint mixture, and to remove areas of paint, I use palette knives (photo) of every size and shape and various kinds of squeegees. These range from artist tools to hardware store wind-shield squeegees, to my current favorite--a silicon-bladed dough scraper. Even pieces of cardboard or old credit cards can be used as squeegees. Each tool will yield slightly different results.

Besides palette knives and squeegees, my other main tools are different sizes of soft rubber brayers (the type used in printmaking) which are excellent for laying down thin films of paint, creating repeated patterns, and imbedding textures. I also use them to apply pressure to the back of a drawing on newsprint or tracing paper, which transfers the image to a slightly tacky paint surface. A sheet of craft foam can also be used as a printing surface. I draw onto it with tube paint and then transfer it to the surface of the painting by going over the back side with a rubber brayer, creating a bold mark (photo.)

For textural effects, flat or crumpled wax paper, plastic wrap or newsprint may be rolled or pressed onto a fresh layer of paint and wax. This technique leaves tracks and impressions behind, and lifts off a thin film of paint. Powdered pigment, metallic powder or powdered charcoal can be sprinkled into the surface, and gone over with a soft brayer, creating small, filled pock marks. Thread, yarn or string may be dipped in powdered pigment and rolled onto the surface or pressed in by hand to create lines of various widths and character. Whisk brooms, pot scrubbers, nail brushes—all sorts of bristled objects—make surprisingly interesting lines. Sponges, soft rags, cosmetic squares and cheesecloth are used for subtle transitions. I joke that I never go into a hardware store or discount



store without seeing painting tools everywhere—there are endless possibilities. In each of these techniques, and others that follow, the substantial body that Dorland's adds to the oil paint is essential.

Lines and contour drawings are also imbedded in the layers of my paintings. Sometimes I draw with a tube of paint directly onto the surface—one of the few times I do not mix the oil paint with wax (I just squeeze it out as I draw.) I also draw with a brush dipped in solvent, powdered pigment, or a wax and oil mixture, and with oil bars or pigment sticks (oil paint manufactured in stick form). A solvent line, when gone over with a squeegee, often produces beautiful subtleties (photo.) As I near the end of a painting, I may add scratched lines, created with a cooking skewer, dry ballpoint pen, or palette knife (photo.) Scratching and chipping away at the surface is possible because the surface of the painting, even if it has become fairly dry or tacky to the touch, remains workable if attacked energetically. If the surface has become



too dry for these techniques, it can usually be softened by rubbing with some plain wax.

Although I don't tend to add collage elements to my work, Dorland's does provide a suitable base for the addition of paper, thin fabric, thread and the like. Collage elements can be layered and imbedded into a developing



painting at any point. Sometimes, I do like to add a bit of metallic leaf or metallic powder which I work into the surface.

Part of the process of my work is to destroy as well as build up. I never hesitate to make major changes—painting over a whole panel or washing it all out with solvent. I make a special point to eliminate “darlings”—those charming little surprises that pop up during the process. They can easily become too precious and impede the natural progression of the work if allowed to dominate too early on. My process involves both spontaneity and decision making, and careful editing—in the end, I value most what I have learned to control and predict. When it comes to surprises, I keep only what works in the painting as a whole.

### **Glazing and Finishing:**

Near the very end of a painting, when the only changes I want to make are fairly subtle, I sometimes rub a glaze made with of a small amount of transparent paint mixed with Dorland's onto selected areas of the painting with a soft cloth. This creates a slight color shift or enhanced contrast, and can unify areas that seem a bit disjointed or broken up. For areas of paint that I would like to remove or tone down slightly, I gently rub with plain wax and cheesecloth. When the painting is dry to the touch, I may buff it with a soft rag, one last advantage of using Dorland's over other types of oil mediums. There is no need

for a final varnish, as the wax itself provides sufficient sealing of the paint.

All of these aspects of my process have evolved over time, through experimentation and combining ideas from various sources. They include methods that I've stumbled upon, borrowed from my earlier background in printmaking, and discovered while playing with a particular tool or art supply. Almost everyone who tries Dorland's comes up with some new ideas. This includes artists in my workshop, a few of whom can take credit for something here that they were kind enough to share.

Without cold wax medium, most of these techniques would never have become important to my work. Dorland's has opened up a new abstract vocabulary for me and one that offers new possibilities every day in my studio.



## **BIO**

**Rebecca Crowell**

is a professional, full time artist who lives and works in Osseo, Wisconsin. She is best known for her abstract paintings created in oil and cold wax on panel.

Her work is exhibited at galleries in Santa Fe, Telluride, Scottsdale, Minneapolis, and two Wisconsin locations, and can be found in hundreds of private, corporate and public collections around the country.

Please visit [www.rebeccacrowell.com](http://www.rebeccacrowell.com) to see Rebecca's work and for information about the Oil and Wax Workshops she conducts.