

An Introduction to Gouache

Presented by Colleen Nagel, BVCG meeting, September, 2015

What is gouache?

Gouache (pronounced *gwash*) is a water media paint, which can be described as opaque watercolour. It consists of pigment (natural or man-made colour particles), chalk (for opacity), a binder (Gum Arabic), and a carrier (water). It is sold in tubes and pans. For our purposes, I will refer to the tubes.

Why do calligraphers like gouache?

- ♦ Versatility – Gouache can be used in a variety of nibs and brushes, and it works well on most papers.
- ♦ Quality – Gouache is opaque and has a matt finish when dry. This makes it ideal for making consistent even letters, and also for covering any drawn guidelines. When writing on coloured paper, the opaque colour tends to stay true because the paper does not show through. (Inks are thinner and result in transparent, sometimes blobby-looking, letters.)
- ♦ Range of colours – Gouache comes in a wide range of right-from-the-tube colours; and more importantly, colours can easily be intermixed. With the three primary colours, plus black and white, your colour choices are endless.
- ♦ Lightfastness – Generally gouache colours do not fade quickly which makes them suitable for broad-sides (pieces of calligraphy that are framed and exposed to light).

Purchasing gouache:

- ♦ Invest in top quality products such as Winsor & Newton, Schmincke, or M. Graham. Anything less and you could be disappointed and frustrated.
- ♦ Because the primary colours can be intermixed to create new colours, a good start would be the Winsor & Newton Primary Yellow, Primary Blue, Primary Red, Ivory Black and Permanent White.
- ♦ For a smooth dense black, go with Jet Black, either Schmincke or Winsor & Newton.
- ♦ W&N rating for permanency (lightfastness) is indicated on the back of the tubes. AA is most permanent, C is fugitive. The Series numbers indicate the price range, with #1 being least expensive.

Mixing gouache:

- ♦ When you open your new tube of gouache, discard the initial runny liquid. Give the screw threads a thin coat of Vaseline which will make for easy opening in the future.
- ♦ Squeeze out ½ inch of gouache into a mixing palette or any small, shallow, white dish. To keep the top of the tube clean, cut off the bead of gouache with a flat tooth pick.
- ♦ Add a couple drops of distilled water and begin mixing with an inexpensive pointed brush.
- ♦ Continue adding water and stirring until it is the consistency of thin cream. Easy does it! It's simpler to add water gradually, than getting it too thin and having to add more gouache.
- ♦ After testing it in your nib, add more water if it does not flow easily. Having the right consistency is paramount. If it is too thick it won't flow from the nib; if it is too thin, it will run from the nib. Also, stiff nibs require thinner gouache. Brush lettering needs thicker gouache.
- ♦ Optional: add a couple drops of Gum Arabic to control the flow, to increase the viscosity which enables thinner hairlines, and to prevent smudging so that guidelines are more easily erased.

Mixing specific colours:

- ♦ Start with the lightest colour and add tiny amounts of the darker colour.
- ♦ As you are mixing, do tests on the same kind of paper as your project.
- ♦ Allow each test to dry thoroughly as the value of the colour will change.
- ♦ If you are mixing a custom colour, be sure to make a substantial amount for the project. If you run short, it would be very time consuming, if not impossible, to mix a duplicate batch. Any left overs can be allowed to dry out, and are easily reconstituted with water for another project later.
- ♦ If you are saving leftover gouache, be sure to label it, and include a sample of the colour on your container's lid.

Loading your nib:

- ◆ Make sure your nib is clean! Any previous residue will come out into your colour.
- ◆ Load the mixing brush with gouache.
- ◆ Gouache of the correct consistency should cling to your nib; therefore a reservoir isn't really needed.
- ◆ Stroke the brush across the edges of your nib to load the underside. Prime the tip.
- ◆ If you do use a reservoir, fill it to about three-quarters full; you should see an air space at the top. A quick shake will remove any excess.
- ◆ Do not dip your nib. All surfaces will be coated and will soon be encrusted with dried gouache.
- ◆ Do a few test letters and if it doesn't flow freely from your nib, add a few drops of water to the palette and stir. Remember to remove the first thick gouache from the nib before loading it again.
- ◆ Gouache dries quickly so you will have to clean your nib often to keep a crisp writing edge. Add a few drops of water to the palette to keep the gouache flowing nicely.



▲ *This colour wheel flower was prepared in Reggie Ezell's Yearlong Class, 26 Seeds – A Year To Grow. It was painted with the three primary colours, plus white and black.*

What about those pans, or cakes of gouache?

- ◆ For a splash of colour or a few letters, the pans of gouache are very handy.
- ◆ Add a few drops of water directly to the pan and let it sit for a minute.
- ◆ Using a mixing brush, create a little puddle of liquid gouache on the top of the pan.
- ◆ Feed it into your nib and test for thickness as described above.
- ◆ If a calligraphic brush is your tool of choice, simply moisten the bristles and drag them across the paint surface to pick up some colour. (Optional: Begin with a misting of water from a spray bottle onto your gouache colours. This will help soften the cakes and have them at the ready.)

Get creative!

- ◆ If you are using a brush, load the corners of the brush with two different colours. (Choose analogous colours - on the same side of the colour wheel - that will blend nicely together in the middle.)
- ◆ OR use a new colour each time you load the brush.
- ◆ Try these techniques using a nib and tube gouache. You will need to have two or more different colours on the go with separate loading brushes for each.
- ◆ Have fun!

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