

Egg Tempera

Sami Starkey

Egg yolk is a binder, meaning it makes paint stick to things. It is an effective binder for many different types of colorant because it forms an emulsion, a suspension of non-aqueous particles in aqueous solution. Thus, it is compatible with both water soluble and non-water soluble dyes and pigments. When the fatty oils in the egg dry, they form a film that protects the colorant and preserves the painting.

Eggs and milk began to be used in paint in the Middle Ages, and continued to be popular for centuries, until oil paints largely replaced egg tempera after their invention in the late 15th century. Below is an example of an egg tempera painting dated at about 1675. It depicts the three holy hierarchs: Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom.



<http://commons.wikimedia.org>



My egg tempera snow-scape.

The history of paint is a history of trial and error. Through the years, countless different techniques have been tried, growing popular and declining in time. As science advances, different, more effective methods are discovered and the old ways are phased out. Not to say that egg tempera and other archaic paints (encaustics, frescos, etc.) are not still perfectly effective, but new technology and chemistry is constantly improving and perfecting the visual arts. Bright colors and intricate designs have always been essential to human society, and so it only makes sense that humans would be obsessed with finding better ways to create images. The long chain of tried and true paints that came before modern synthetic paints tells the history of humanity's passion for creative expression, and our desire to constantly improve the visual arts.

It was fun for me to get to step back in time and work with a medium that is nearly forgotten in today's art community.