

# Enhance and Protect Your Finished Oil Paintings

By John Seibels Walker

When I was growing up in South Carolina, my father had an art gallery where he principally dealt in antique paintings, much of it being oil paintings from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He employed an art conservator and offered very fine picture framing services as well. I spent much of my free time and summers working there and gaining an exposure to the art business which, it turns out, ended up being very instrumental in my formation as an artist and as a portraitist.

The presentation of our gallery paintings was always of utmost concern. It was important that they were clean, varnished and appropriately framed. And it was not just a priority for the paintings that we owned and represented for sale, but also for many of our clients' canvases that were brought to the gallery for framing, proper stretching and varnishing. This included numerous portraits done by assorted portrait artists from near and far for our local clients. Most artists at the time did not really take varnishing seriously, but my father did. He advocated for the proper care and finishing of every painting that came through the gallery. It became normal for me to see varnishing being done as a service for clients once their paintings were completely dry.

When one walks through a fine art museum, one typically sees oil paintings which have a finished and unified surface—a surface that may be shiny or possibly satiny, but not completely matte or dry looking. Historically, oil



John Seibels Walker varnishing his portrait of John Kasich.



*The Honorable John R. Kasich, Governor of Ohio, oil on linen, 62 x 40"*

paintings were varnished to give them the finished look that artists desired, bringing them back to the look of when they were freshly painted, but also to protect the paintings for years to come. Of course, the environment which most artwork used to live in was not particularly art friendly. Many locations were quite damp and frequently filled with smoke from fireplaces, candle or lamp light and tobacco products. Paintings needed all the protection they could get! Varnishing a finished painting,

even with a fragile natural resin varnish like Damar, was critical for that protection. In fact, it was so critical to the successful presentation and protection of artwork that the grand French Salons in the 19<sup>th</sup> century used to have "Varnishing Day" when all the paintings to be hung were laid out on the floor for final coats of varnish before opening day.

So, with all of that in mind, I have always tried to be very conscientious about varnishing my finished portraits. I typically wait at least a year to be sure that all of the pigments I use, including the slowest drying, have fully cured enough not to bind in any way with a final coat of protective varnish. This is especially important should the varnish ever need to be

removed for any reason. I make every effort to schedule in the varnishing of my previously completed oil portraits during my travels for the following reasons:

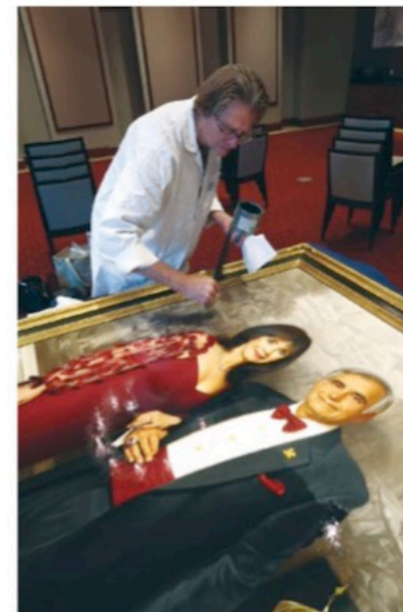
1) Most oil paintings look much more harmonious and finished after having been varnished, so they show better and therefore represent your work better when hanging up on the walls of homes and institutions. Lighting is not always ideal where things ultimately hang, so a painting where some colors and passages have become flat and dry while oiled areas still look wet and shiny is distracting to the viewer and lacks the illusion of form and dimension.

2) It is always beneficial to revisit one's own artwork after some time has passed. You can see things more objectively while viewing the choices that you made and learn from both the good and the bad choices you see in your work. This will help make you a better painter.

3) Caring about your paintings with knowledge and expertise is very meaningful to your clients. Returning to varnish your work or helping them to find an art services specialist who can do so, shows great professionalism and that you value your work. In many cases, lasting friendships are formed with one's clients, so caring for your artwork nurtures those relationships too.

Of course, how much one may feel the need to varnish an oil painting is fully dependent upon the quality of the painting surface one is dealing with. Whether an artist has previously left a surface oiled out or varnished with a retouch varnish may affect where one wants to go with a more substantial final varnishing.

These days, I like to use a non-yellowing Gloss MSA synthetic varnish made by Golden. It has a UV filter and cleans up with mineral spirits. Several other brands make virtually identical products: Daniel Smith, Liquitex, Gamblin, etc. If gloss is not your taste, a coat of satin can be applied over the harder and more protective gloss coat for a softer affect. Because I am frequently "on the road" traveling when I take care of varnishing portraits, I often apply the varnish while the portrait is still in the frame so that the client can easily rehang the portrait the next day without my returning to reinstall the painting into its frame the next day. I would not recommend this, however, unless you have an



John Seibels Walker varnishing the Pastides' portrait.



*President Harris Pastides and Ms. Patricia Moore-Pastides, University of South Carolina, oil on linen, 68 x 50"*

extremely steady hand and use a high quality square-edged flat brush allowing one to cut a very fine clean edge at the frame so as not to "glue" the portrait to the frame!

Before varnishing a painting, it is essential to dust and clean it entirely. I first use a broad bristle brush on the painting's surface followed by the palm of my hand, which picks up light lint and dust. I then lay the painting on a flat surface such as a protected table or bed in a location that will be completely free of people or pets. You will also want to be sure that you have adequate ventilation during the process, but that the painting is away from any strong fans or heating/cooling vents that might stir up dust.

These new synthetic varnishes are thick, sticky products and you must spread them on with a wet into wet method. I choose to create bands of about 4 to 6 inches at a time working across the painting and down from one end to the other. I try to set things up where I am working with enough of a raking light for me to constantly check my progress and make sure that I am not missing any spots or leaving any hairs or heavy lint stuck behind in the varnish. I will have my small varnish can and a paper towel in one hand while I use the brush with

the other. This way I can wipe my brush off on part of the towel if needed as I go. As you move along, you can go back and stroke varnish back into wet passages, but it may startle you to see that the new strokes look matte and choppy against the surface that you have already created. Do not worry, it should quickly meld together again. Study your surface carefully as you go and give everything a good final review before you put your brush away.

The varnish dries and levels fairly quickly, but I always recommend leaving a painting laying flat overnight before rehang. I also try to bring along some "Don't Touch/Wet Varnish" signs to place next to a work when I varnish a painting on location. A thumb print in still wet varnish cannot be removed, so an extra warning to all is a good thing. I then wrap my brush up in plastic wrap to be cleaned later and I am on my way! 🎨

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Seibels Walker splits his time between his home and studios in Charlotte, North Carolina and Lucca, Italy. A portrait artist for many years, John's work is known for its luminous flesh tones while capturing the character and uniqueness of each sitter.



Gloss MSA Varnish by Golden