STRETCHLEARN · WORKBOOK

Encaustic Art — Workbook

This workbook turns the course into studio practice. Each section pairs with a course module: you mix and test medium, drill fusing until it is reflexive, build and carve layered surfaces, and compare hot wax against cold wax for your own studio. Keep your filled sheets, swatches, and test boards together; over time they become a personal reference of recipes and results you can reproduce rather than rediscover.

Wax, Resin, and a Safe Studio

Set up a ventilated, fire-aware workspace, then mix and verify your own medium and a small palette of tested colours.

Checklist: Studio Safety and Ventilation Check

[ ] Cross-ventilation set: fresh air in one side, exhaust pulling fumes away from your face
[ ] Window or downdraft exhaust fan running at the work surface, not just a cracked window
[ ] Digital thermometer present and used to verify real wax temperature, not relying on the dial
[ ] Wax held below 200 degrees Fahrenheit, never above 220, at all times
[ ] Class B fire extinguisher and a metal smother-lid within arm's reach
[ ] Cool water bowl ready for burns; running water access nearby
[ ] Hair tied back, sleeves secured, flammables and paper towels clear of heat tools
[ ] Organic-vapour respirator on hand as backup; nitrile gloves for handling hot tins
[ ] Plan to never leave heated wax unattended and to unplug everything at the wall when finished

Exercise: Make and Verify a Block of Medium

Mix one batch of clear encaustic medium at roughly 8 parts beeswax to 2 parts damar by weight (8:2). Melt the beeswax first at about 200 degrees Fahrenheit, add the broken damar crystals, hold steady until fully dissolved (20 to 40 minutes), filter through cheesecloth into a clean tin, and pour a block to cool. Then judge the result against the marks of a correctly made batch.

• What were your exact weights of beeswax and damar, and what ratio did that give?

• How long did the damar take to fully dissolve, and at what verified temperature?

• Cooled, is the block clear to pale honey, and does it resist a fingernail dent? If not, which (cloudy / sticky / acrid) and what likely caused it?

• Did you filter out bark and grit, and how much debris came out on the cheesecloth?

Worksheet: Medium Batch Record

Fill one record per batch of medium you make, so a successful recipe can be repeated exactly. Note the verified temperature, not the dial setting.

Date made

Beeswax type (refined white / natural yellow) and weight

Damar weight

Ratio (beeswax : damar)

Verified melt temperature (degrees F)

Time for damar to fully dissolve

Filtered through (cheesecloth / fine strainer)

Cooled appearance (clear / honey / cloudy / sticky)

Hardness check (fingernail dent: none / slight / deep)

Intended use (clear glaze / base for tinting)

Exercise: Three-Colour Swatch and Tint Test

Tint clear medium into three colours, either by melting ready-made encaustic cakes or by stirring artist pigment or a little oil paint into medium (start about 1 part pigment to 8 to 10 parts medium). Brush a stroke of each onto a scrap panel and fuse it. Judge colour only after it has cooled and fused, because molten wax reads darker than the finished film.

• For each colour, what was your tint strength, and did the cooled-and-fused swatch match what you expected from the molten paint?

• Did any mix go crumbly or dull from too much pigment? How did you correct it?

• If you used raw dry pigment, did you wear a dust mask, and were any of your pigments on the toxic list (cadmium, cobalt, lead white)?

• Which colour will you use as a base layer, and which as accents, and why?

The Heated Palette and Fusing

Lay a sound first layer on the right support, then drill fusing until reading the just-glossy moment is automatic, and build a luminous layered surface.

Checklist: Support and First-Layer Check

[ ] Support is rigid and absorbent (birch cradle, hardboard, or Encausticbord); no stretched canvas
[ ] Any white ground is absorbent/matte, not slick acrylic gesso that wax cannot grip
[ ] Edges of hardboard or MDF sealed so the board cannot swell
[ ] Base coat of clear medium or base colour brushed over the whole panel, no bare support
[ ] Base layer fused into the support so it bonds rather than sits on top
[ ] No thick ridges or pooled wax in the foundation layer
[ ] Resisted starting with fine detail on layer one; saved marks for later fused layers

Exercise: Fusing Calibration Drill

On a scrap panel, lay a colour layer, then fuse it with your heat gun in steady passes held several inches off the surface. Stop the instant the surface turns glossy and just barely flows. Repeat ten times, deliberately under-fusing some and over-fusing others, so you can feel and see the narrow correct band. Then test bond by trying to lift an under-fused versus a properly fused patch with a fingernail.

• What did the surface look like at the correct just-glossy moment versus over-fused (colours running,

pooling)?

• How many seconds and what distance gave a clean fuse on your setup?

• Did the under-fused patch lift or peel, and did the properly fused patch hold as one mass?

• Which fusing tool will you reach for first (heat gun / iron / torch / lamp), and for what kind of passage?

Worksheet: Layer Build Log

Record the order of every layer as you build a panel, because the optical depth depends on sequence and you cannot separate fused layers later to see what you did. Keep this with the finished piece so a successful surface can be repeated.

Panel name / size

Layer 1 (colour or clear, fused?)

Layer 2

Layer 3

Layer 4

Layer 5

Embedded element(s) and at which layer

Fusing tool used per layer

Verified palette temperature

Result notes (glow achieved? any delamination?)

Exercise: Luminosity: Layers Versus One Thick Coat

On one scrap, build a colour through several thin, fused, partly transparent layers including at least one clear glaze. On a second scrap, apply the same colour in a single thick coat and fuse. Place them side by side in raking light. Then embed one flat element (a printed photo or pressed leaf) into a warm layer, pressing from the centre out and sealing under clear medium.

• Side by side, which surface glows from within, and how would you describe the difference?

• How many layers did it take before the depth clearly appeared?

• When you embedded the element, did any silvery air bubbles appear, and how did you release them?

• Did the clear glaze push the colour back and deepen it as expected?

Texture, Marks, and Image Transfer

Carve and incise cooled layers to reveal colour, transfer printed and drawn imagery into the wax, then finish and cure a textured panel.

Exercise: Incise-and-Fill Reveal Study

Lay several differently coloured fused layers and let the panel cool fully so it carves cleanly. Incise a simple line drawing through the top layer so the line reads in the colour beneath. Rub a contrasting darker wax or oil paint into the lines, wipe the surface back, then fuse only gently so the fill locks without flooding the lines.

• Did the cooled wax carve crisply, or drag and smear (a sign it was too warm)?

• What did chilling your metal tool in cold water do to the line quality?

• After filling and wiping, did the incised lines read with clear contrast like an etched plate?

• Did your gentle fuse soften the marks too much, or lock them well? What would you change?

Exercise: Toner Transfer Test

Print or photocopy a simple high-contrast image with a laser printer (toner, not inkjet), remembering to flip any text first because the transfer reverses. Lay it face down on a smooth, lightly warmed wax surface, burnish the back firmly with a spoon or bone folder, wet the paper, and rub the fibres away so the toner stays in the wax. Seal under a thin clear veil and fuse gently with a soft heat-gun pass or lamp.

• Did the transfer come out fully, or patchy? If patchy, was it under-burnished or was the wax too cold?

• Did you remember to flip text, and did the image land the right way round?

• When you sealed and fused, did the image stay crisp or blur from too much heat?

• Compared with directly embedding a printed sheet, which method suited this image better, and why?

Worksheet: Transfer and Texture Reference Sheet

Log each transfer and texture trick you test, with enough detail to reproduce it. Keep these beside small physical samples on a labelled test board.

Technique (incise / carve / scrape / toner transfer / embed / pour / drip)

Print method and settings (if a transfer)

Surface temperature when applied (cool / lightly warm / warm)

Tool used

Fused after? (no / gentle / full) and tool

Result (crisp / softened / patchy / failed)

Fix for next time

Checklist: Finishing and Curing Sign-Off

[ ] One or two effects carry the surface; the rest support quietly (restraint applied)
[ ] Final fuse complete and surface bonded as one film
[ ] Panel left to cure undisturbed for one to three weeks before buffing
[ ] Buffed only after curing, with a soft lint-free cloth or nylon, to a satin sheen
[ ] Edges finished (left clean or waxed to match)
[ ] Stored and displayed away from heat, direct sun, and freezing (about 40 to 100 degrees F)
[ ] Ship plan: rigid box, glassine over the surface, never plastic film pressed on wax, never a summer-hot vehicle
[ ] Layer order written down while still fresh in memory

Cold Wax and Choosing Your Path

Try the no-flame cold wax variation, compare it honestly with hot encaustic for your situation, and commit to a first finished panel and an ongoing practice.

Exercise: Cold Wax Layer-and-Scrape Study

Mix artist oil paint with cold wax medium (start about 1 part wax to 2 parts paint) and apply a thin layer to a rigid panel with a brayer or palette knife. Let it set firm to the touch (hours to a day), add a second colour, and once that is firm but not fully cured, scrape or incise through it to reveal the colour below. Keep ventilation on for the solvent even though there is no flame.

• How did changing the wax-to-paint ratio change body, set speed, and matteness?

• How long did each layer take to set firm enough to work over?

• How did scraping firm-but-not-cured cold wax compare with carving cooled hot encaustic?

• What did the patience between layers feel like versus the instant set of hot wax?

Worksheet: Hot vs Cold Decision Worksheet

Score your own situation against each factor to decide which method (or sequence) to invest in. There is no right answer; the goal is to match the method to the studio you actually have.

Ventilation available (strong exhaust / window only / shared space)

Comfort with open flame and molten splash (high / medium / low)

Budget for equipment (griddle, fusing tools vs just medium and panels)

Dedicated studio space or kitchen-table only

Need for instant results vs willingness to wait days between layers

Surface priority (deepest inner glow / matte buttery scraped)

Reworkability need (remelt forever vs paint-over only)

Chosen starting method and the reason

Checklist: First Finished Panel Plan

[ ] Small panel chosen (about 6x6 or 8x10 inches) to keep stakes and wax volume low
[ ] Ventilation verified and griddle confirmed holding about 200 degrees F; extinguisher out
[ ] Clear-medium base coat brushed and fused into the support
[ ] Two or three colour layers added, each fused at the just-glossy moment, including one transparent glaze
[ ] One element embedded or one simple image transferred, then sealed under clear medium and fused gently
[ ] Panel cooled fully, then a line incised or a passage scraped to reveal a lower colour (filled if desired)
[ ] Final fuse done; panel set aside to cure one to three weeks, then buffed
[ ] Layer order written down immediately after finishing

Exercise: Plan a Three-to-Five Panel Series

Encaustic rewards iteration, so plan a small series exploring one idea (one colour palette, one texture technique, or one image source) across three to five panels. Sketch what changes from panel to panel and what stays constant, so the series teaches you something rather than repeating.

• What single idea or constraint ties the series together?

• What will you deliberately vary from panel to panel (colour, layer count, texture, transfer)?

• How will you capture results (raking-light photos, layer logs, test-board samples)?

• After the series, what one skill do you most want to have improved?

Your Action Plan

1. Set up cross-ventilation and fire safety, then complete the Studio Safety and Ventilation Check before melting any wax.
2. Assemble a starter kit: thermostatic griddle, thermometer, hake brushes, heat gun, metal tools, panels, and clear medium plus three colours.
3. Make one batch of 8:2 medium, filter it, verify it against the Medium Batch Record, and mix three tested colours.
4. Choose a rigid absorbent panel, lay and fuse a clear base coat, and complete the Support and First-Layer Check.
5. Run the Fusing Calibration Drill until you can hit the just-glossy moment reliably and prove a bonded versus a peeling patch.
6. Build one panel in thin fused layers with a clear glaze, compare its glow against a single thick coat, and embed one flat element.
7. Carve an incise-and-fill reveal on cooled layers, run a toner transfer sealed under clear medium, and log every technique on the Transfer and Texture Reference Sheet and a labelled test board.
8. Try a cold wax layer-and-scrape study and complete the Hot vs Cold Decision Worksheet to choose your main method.
9. Complete one small finished panel end to end, cure it one to three weeks, buff it, and record its layer order.
10. Plan and begin a three-to-five panel series exploring a single idea to keep improving through iteration.