



Making Glair Paint

Many paints have a long and publicized history, but paint made from egg white (called, “glair”) remains quietly interesting. At no point that I’m aware of has glair ever been mainstream, but it is the paint used to decorate the royal tombs of the pharaohs and the beautiful illuminated manuscripts of the middle ages. The anonymous artists of these periods were looking for a paint that worked well as an ink, and they found it in glair. This binder continues to have a lot to offer today. It creates beautiful effects on paper, and is non-toxic and easy to clean up ... Just make sure your pigments are, too!

Making glair paint is quite easy—you need an egg and some pigment. In the process I’m outlining here, I also use a jar with a lid that seals and some form of stir stick.



Get an Egg

Either the henhouse or the fridge will do ... but, in my experience, the fresher the egg the easier time you'll have with this process and the better the paint will be. A trip to a local farm (or farmer's market) to get fresh, unrefrigerated eggs might be a worthwhile side trip.



Separate the White

The first step is to separate the egg white from its yolk. There are any number of ways to do this (I recently saw a video with someone using an old pop bottle to suction out the yolk!) but its simplest to crack the egg shell and let the egg white run into a container while holding back the yolk with one half of the shell.



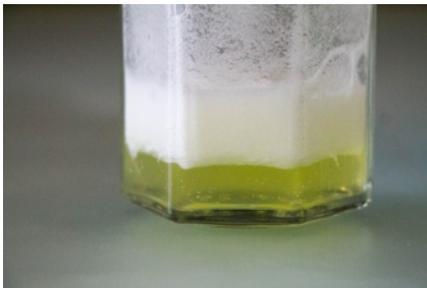
Beat the Egg White

Once the egg white is separated, the next step is to beat the egg white into a froth. I personally find it quick and convenient to seal up the jar in which the egg white has been collected and shake it well for a couple of minutes. The resulting eggy foam should look firm with no liquid remaining.



Pour off the Glair

The egg white now needs to rest. Over the next couple of hours the liquid will begin to appear below the foam. This liquid is our glair binder!



Here's a stinky secret: While the glair can be used immediately, traditionally it was left for a month or two before use. This does improve its paintability, but that comes at the cost of a terrible smell. If you wish to go this route, I suggest getting a eye dropper and filling it with the binder outside before you use it!

Oftentimes I get the foam ready the evening before, and leave the jar overnight to sit—by the next morning the glair has separated and is ready to use.



To remove the liquid glair from below the film you can gently tilt the jar and it will usually seep out. Occasionally the foam doesn't allow for this, in which case a toothpick (or similar object) inserted along the side of the jar will create a hole through which the glair can run.

Mixing into Paint

All that's left is to combine the glair binder with a pigment to make our paint.



Scoop your dry pigment into a palette (or some other form of waterproof container) and add the glair binder to it drop by drop. It's easiest to add the binder to the dry pigment because it allows you to see when the paint becomes wet enough. Mix these together, first with a toothpick and then with a brush to create a smooth paint.



Experience will teach you which pigments are thirsty, and which aren't, but a good rule to begin with is to simply add enough glair binder to wet the pigment into a brushable consistency.

Painting

It's important that you always test the paint you've made before you use it. This small step can save a lot of headaches later on ... The glair should look fairly matt. If it dries glossy, it has too much binder and will likely crack over time; if it dries matt but the colour rubs off once its dry, you have too little binder and the colour will smudge. With experience, all this becomes second nature, but in the beginning pay attention to what you're experiencing. I still create a quick swatch every time I make paint.



You're ready to paint! Prepared properly, and applied to an acid free paper, your glair paint will give lasting and beautiful colours in your artwork.