Staying well as a professional artist

The art of Roberto Parada | making natural paints | and staying well as a professional artist

A dialogue based on the essay
'One Artist Changes His Art and Saves His Life', by Leah Fanning, founder of 'Natural Earth Paints'.

Roberto Parada is an internationally known oil painter and illustrator, having been published in Time, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, ESPN, The Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, Esquire, and Huffington Post.

Few people know that his art process came close to ending his life in 2004.

I had the honor of interviewing him about his journey in discovering which of his art supplies were literally killing him, how it happened and what he did to change his process while continuing to paint very high quality, archival and professional paintings.
Over the last decade, Roberto has advocated for studio safety, with regards to, artist materials and the health repercussions related to some of those products.

In 2003, Roberto was diagnosed with severe
plastic anemia, possibly as a result of contact with studio materials.
Roberto was successfully treated and cured with a bone marrow transplant through the generosity of his donor, Hector, in 2004.

below, follow the dialogue between
(LF) Leah Fanning
(RP) Roberto Parada, and also
(FK) Friedhard Kiekeben
with an additional text on organic pigments by Robert Maynard

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(Leah Fanning) Were you ever taught about the toxicity in art supplies in art school?

(Roberto Parada) I went to a very prestigious art school in the late 80s and early 90s — Pratt Institute, NYC– and was never taught about any hazards in art supplies by my painting and illustration teachers. I did have one sculpture teacher who adamantly forbade the use of fixatives, solvents and chemicals because he had gotten lymphoma from the use of those chemicals. He never really explained why we shouldn't use them but just told us not use them in his classroom. My painting teachers all used toxic materials themselves and probably just didn't know the health risks involved.

(LF) What was your painting technique throughout your school years and career?

I have always been an oil painter and I am guilty of never wearing gloves or having adequate ventilation or even thinking that I should. No one ever taught me the risks and on the warning labels on paint thinners I only saw warnings about difficulty breathing and respiratory issues. There was nothing about the fact that it can get into your bloodstream and cause death risks.

The warnings are very ambiguous and limited considering the fact that I can list 5 different types of cancer that come from paint thinners. For example, 3 kinds of leukemia AML, ALL, CLL, and Multiple Myeloma and Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma. I also used all of the heavy metal based paints, cadmiums and

cobalts and didn't think much about it. In the 90s the Odorless Mineral Spirits came onto the market and we all thought that this was a healthier alternative. Now I know that Odorless mineral spirits still have petroleum based distillates and benzene which is exactly what brought about my illness.

photographic self portrait. *"My Canon self timer was a great help.*

The coffee is what allows the art to be done on time." (laughing)

Roberto Parada's Homepage: www.robertoparada.com

(LF) Will you talk about what exactly your illness was and how you contracted it?

(RP) Paint thinner was my ultimate downfall. Through the illness process I learned that paint thinners evaporate into the air and you then absorb the benzene (which is an odorless carcinogen and in petroleum products and can do huge

amounts of damage besides cancer). You absorb the benzene through your nose, skin and eyes, which most people don't realize, and it goes directly into your bloodstream. I absorbed it in a slow progression over many years. When benzene gets into your bloodstream and into your bone marrow (where you make your blood) then your white count lowers.

In most cases, that kind of exposure over the long term would cause lymphoma or leukemia. I got something different 'Severe Aplastic Anemia' which is an

autoimmune reaction. My T- cells, which are your warrior cells in your immune system, began destroying things that it sees as foreign and it started seeing my bone marrow as foreign. There was no way to turn this response off. Looking back I see that I had years of weak, low blood counts and I didn't realize it. I was always tired but thought it was normal.

Bill Gates, oil painting, 2014. It appeared in Rolling Stone as an intro for 'the richest man in the world'

Rolling Stone,

https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/bill-gates-the-rolling-stone-interview-111915/

(LF) What can be done if you have aplastic anemia?

(RP) First, I removed all exposure to solvents and toxins. Many people die from this illness because when your marrowâ€™s being destroyed you donâ€™t have any defenses or immunity to outside viruses or infections.

They do these treatments where they re-boot your whole immune system. They get antibodies from a horse and mix it with a serum (ATG) and you use it for 4 days. It basically wipes out everything (blood cells, white cells, platelets) and then you have to get blood transfusions once or twice a week for 2-3 months.

(LF) Did this help?

(RP) My platelets unfortunately never came back up so I had to do it again. It was such a shock to my marrow that it still didnâ€™t come back after the second time. I still continued to paint and had good days right after a transfusion but on bad days I couldnâ€™t do anything but sleep. I did everything I could do to protect himself from toxins and infections but I still felt like I was falling apart. I bled very easily from my gums and nose. I continued to get platelet transfusions until one day I had to go to the emergency room. I had a 0 platelet count (platelets are 30% of your blood) and I was so vulnerable that a hard bump to the head would have killed me.

I was very worried to get a full bone marrow transplant which is the last option because it is extremely risky and dangerous. But I ultimately decided to because a life like this was so lousy. Iâ€™m incredibly lucky that I had a bone marrow donor, Hector, who was extremely generous and brave and is now fine and healthy.

‘The Alexa Family’, oil on canvas, 2019

(LF) What changed after the transplant?

(RP) Amazingly I had no real complications. I felt extremely tired and fragile and could barely walk 2 blocks. I then felt like I was slowly recovering but my immune system was like a 1 year old. About 1 Â½ years later I had double pneumonia and had to go back into the hospital. Since then I have been recovering and have learned to be very careful. Iâ€™m okay now and out of the woods of danger but I could always contract another illness if Iâ€™m not careful.

“That was one of my favorite project this year.

My initial idea for the opener was to have family sitting down for a meal with the Alexa chandelier spying over them with cameras and mics. Then they came forward with the idea of a 50â€™s like nuclear family with the human size Alex in a family

style moment. I liked where it was going. My idea for the opener was a little too dark and foreboding, So I was able to spin them off as spots."

(LF) How did you change your painting process?

(RP) I tried using acrylic and hated it and discovered that it also contains toxic ingredients. So I decided to go back to oil but do it in a different way. I wanted to now avoid Cadmiums, cobalts and heavy metal colors and I chose new paints that had alternative but similar colors to the toxic ones. I use oil to clean my brushes instead of paint thinners and realized how simple it was to eliminate solvents and have no fumes and no exhaustion from headaches.

I adjusted my painting style just a little bit but it wasn't a challenge. It wasn't that hard. I paint with walnut oil and walnut alkyd medium as my medium.

I know you're a teacher of college age Illustration students. Do you have any advice for this next generation of painters? For students, unfortunately most find that there is little incentive to work in a safe way until they get sick. And artists are sometimes the least health conscious people since they're mostly just thinking about the quality of the art. Most just don't know how easy and inexpensive it is to paint in a safe way.

My advice to young artists is to make your life really simple and eliminate toxins from your painting process. If you don't you may have a lifetime of issues and it may shorten your life.

I just want my students to know that this is the reality of how I work and it's totally feasible to be professional, produce very high quality work and work this way. The famous artist, John Currin used to use lots of chemical concoctions and toxic mediums and then switched back

to the pure simplicity of oil and paint.

(LF) Are there any other benefits to painting safely?

My brushes have lasted longer and stayed conditioned because my solvents would eat away at the bristles in the past. Also, I save a lot of money. It's very cost effective to work healthier. I save money on brushes and on buying solvent (which was very expensive). Artists would save money on medical bills which is important since most artists don't have insurance. Painting with all of these chemicals is basically an expensive way to kill yourself.

(LF) Do you see hope for the future?

Yes, it's so encouraging to see that the consciousness about working healthier is starting to happen now in contrast to how it was in my art school days when people would spray fixative right next to you in a classroom. I have a lot of hope for the future of non-toxic art processes and I'm so glad word is now spreading.

Roberto Parada's unique Artistic Process

(FK) Roberto, how do your magazine contributions and illustrations come about?

(RP) Fortunately, for me, some of my work has stayed in the memory of Art Directors and Creative Directors from my early days to present. I come to mind when thereÂ's a project that they want a 'painting look' and may have a concept they want to put forth.

(FK) Do clients contact you with a brief?

(RP) There's either a first draft of a feature story or a synopsis of the piece. That will usually tell me the story, as it is still being written and edited. Which could also change the assignment. But generally, the client has a concept of what they are looking for. I will try to develop my own ideas along with the suggested one or oneÂ's, by the client. IÂ'm always hoping they select mine, of course. (Laughing)

(FK) How to you go from early concept to copy-ready artwork?

(RP) A lot of my ideas are sort of broken down to simple conceptual metaphors in the intial phase. While researching related topics, one visual will lead to another idea and it becomes like a mystery puzzle. You have 75% of an idea but you need the missing link to make it work. IdeaÂ's can live or die that way. In many cases the art director can give you that critical help you need to make it work, or kill it out right. That happens quite a bit. I try to develop at least 3 ideaÂ's to present. When the Art Director has a great concepts to begin with, I get excited about creating that visual in my own way. I will not argue against a good idea, even if it didnÂ't come from me. The final result is what matters.

(FK) Once a collaboration is finished, do you exhibit and sell the resulting paintings?

(RP) They normally don't get exhibited. They are stored here in my studio. On occasion thereÂ'll be a request for a painting in a group show, or I'll be contacted about the availability of a painting for purchase. Although, I will be having a one man show, my first, of my work in the gallery space of a local biotech company here in Northern Virginia called Janelia.

(FK) How do you ensure your current oil painting and studio technique is safer? ... how did you change your studio routines?

(RP) The first thing I did is remove all paint thinners, spirits and anything that had petroleum distillates in them. Second, I donÂ't use any oil paint that has a health label warning. I generally look for the ASTM standard labeling and the AP labeling. I would never use paint that didnÂ't have this labeling. So no toxic metals. Third, I clean my brushes and palette with mineral oilÂ... bought from my local CVS. Its non toxic and odorless and relatively inexpensive.

(FK) Are you avoiding solvents?

(RP) Most definitely! and many dryers, for paint as well. They have the toxic Petroleum Distillates in them. If you need to use some kind of solvent there is a proper way to use it with polypropylene gloves and a respirator with proper filters and goggles.

(FK) How about walnut oil?

(RP) Artist Walnut oil is what I use as a painting medium.

(FK) Thank you so much for these insights into your working process!

Leah Fanning in front of Earth Oil Paintings

Leah Fanning's Art Homepage:

www.fanningart.com

"My painting process can be summed up by the word Â"playÂ". Coming from my former life as a professional ballet and modern dancer, I always return to my body while I paint, sticking to the present moment of the experience. I follow my breath through every muscle in my body as I swish the charcoal and swipe with a paint brush. Playing with paint feels like an intricate dance of guided chance."

some of the topics raised in the original essay were discussed further in a recent dialogue between Friedhard Kiekeben and Leah Fanning:

(Friedhard Kiekeben) How did the essay collaboration between Natural Earth Paint and Roberto Parada come about?

(Leah Fanning) I had read about Roberto's experience in another article and I immediately contacted him to ask about his experience. IÂ'm always trying to educate artists about the severity of the toxicity in certain art supplies. I find that most artists have a general knowledge that you should be somewhat careful with certain supplies but very few actually know the true severity of what could happen and what itÂ's doing to your body or how you can protect yourself. Telling RobertoÂ's story was a great way to get that across.

(FK) Were you ever taught about the toxicity in art supplies in art school?

(LF) No, I wasn't taught anything about safety, toxicity or how to protect yourself in any of my classes: photography, oil painting, print making, etc.

(FK) I noticed that much of your original motivation to move towards safer art materials came through pregnancy and having children near a studio environment.

Could you explain a little more how that came about?

(LF) Yes, absolutely. I had been living in an earthen cob house in Southern Oregon when I was first introduced to natural earth pigments – which we used to plaster our walls. I had been a full-time, professional artist for 15 years at that point and had always wanted to find a replacement for my toxic oil paints – but IÂ'd never found an alternative. There was nothing available online and my teachers in art school had never taught us anything about non-toxic options. Then one day I found out that I was pregnant with my first child and within a week found out that I would be having my first one-woman art show a few days before my due date. So I would need to paint full time throughout my pregnancy! I quickly disposed of all of my toxic art supplies and dove into researching an alternative. Necessity pushed me to quickly figure it out. There was almost nothing online except one artist in Arizona who made natural paints for his own art and he recommended an out-of-print book on collecting earth pigments in nature.

This book led to finding other paint-making books from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and beyond. I was hooked and within a few weeks, I was exploring the woods of Oregon and Northern CA, harvesting green, red, yellow and orange pigments in creek beds, road cuts and abandoned quarries.

There was a lot of trial and error in my steep learning curve but I found it fascinating that the highest quality and most archival paintings in the world from the prehistoric people to Rembrandt and the Old Masters were all painted with 100% natural and non-toxic supplies. I also researched new, scientific developments in non-toxic materials and over that first year figured out a non-toxic and superior quality alternative for every toxic one that I had always used.

“love”, natural oil paint on canvas and mixed media,

40” x 40”, 2009

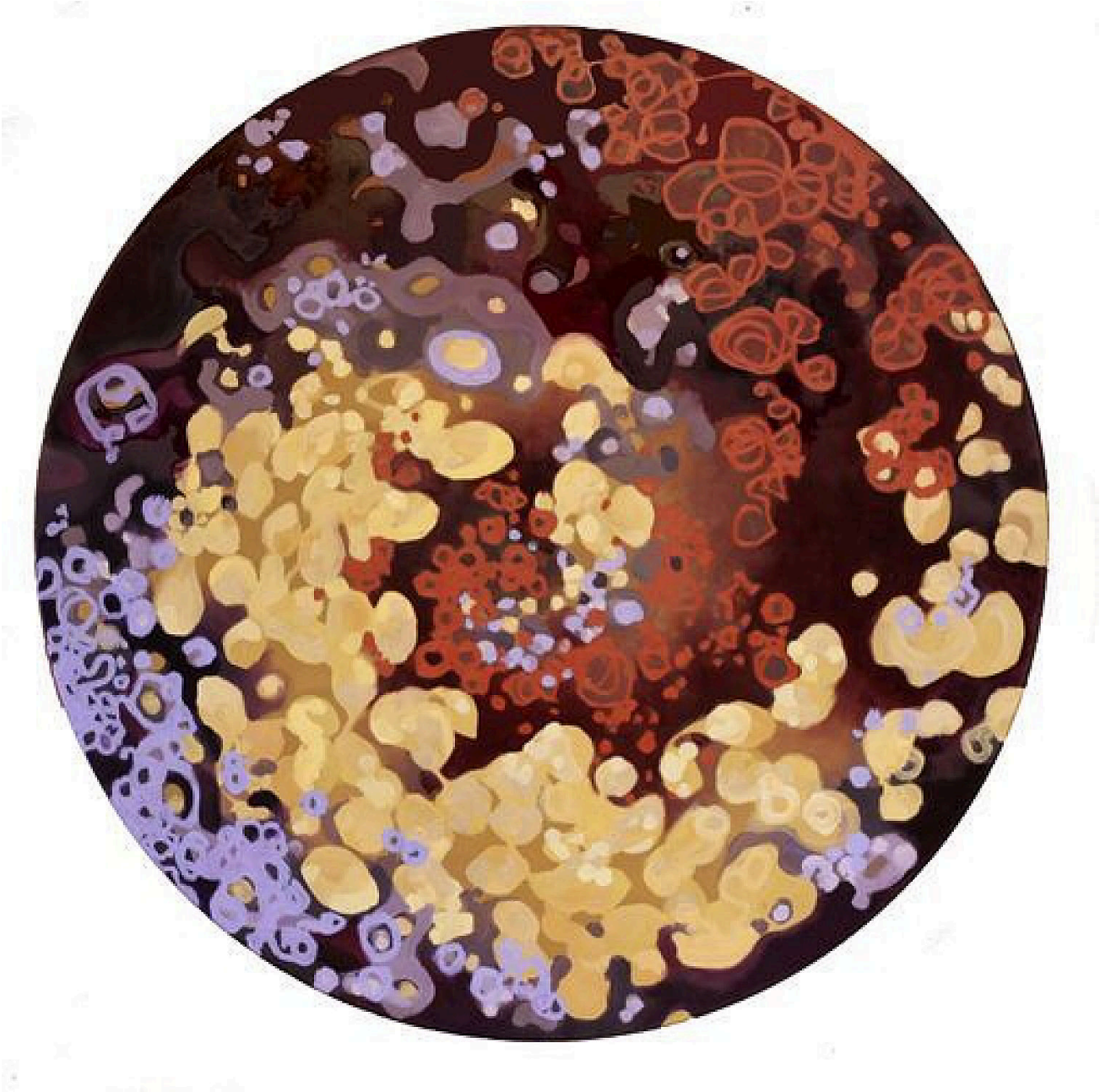
Pigments used: gold mica, emerald green, terre verte, french turquoise

After using these natural materials and techniques for my own art for about 2 years, I started experimenting making natural childrenÂ’s paints for my growing baby too. One day, I was quietly nursing my son, Django, in our tiny cabin in the woods and it literally hit me in a flash – a true aha moment – that I should create a business to share what I had learned and re-discovered! I was so excited about it, I felt like I was going to explode – it felt so right and so meant to be. I anxiously waited for Django to finish nursing and then jumped up and ran to the computer to see if the url naturalearthpaint.com was taken, it wasn’t!

I had been researching the ingredients in conventional children's paints and face paints at the time and was utterly shocked at the harsh toxins and chemicals in almost all of these supplies. So everything seemed to conspire and lead me right to the path that I was meant to take.

(FK) Do you have any personal experience with ill health from exposure to toxic art materials?

(LF) Yes, I didn't experience issues nearly as severe as Roberto's illness but I definitely had health issues from using heavy-metal oil paints, solvents and acrylic gesso throughout art school and for about 9 years after. My health issues from that time period continues today. I developed severe allergies, which IÂ'm still trying to heal, as well as intense headaches and trouble breathing while painting. I'm currently getting weekly heavy metal chelation treatments to remove all of the cadmium, cobalt and lead from my system. I sit with an IV in my arm for 2 hours, once a week, to remove all of these heavy metals.



“River Deep”, natural oil paint on birch wood and mixed media, 36” diameter, 2018

Pigments used in this piece: yellow ocher, burnt sienna, titanium dioxide, burnt umber, ultramarine purple, copper mica. The work is part of the “Sacred Water” Series – painted at the water’s edge next to the rivers and creeks of Southern Oregon.

(FK) Not being a scientist by training, how do you go about establishing the safety and low toxicity of the products that you’ve developed?

Leah: We ask for the Material Safety Data Sheets for all of our pigments and raw ingredients before we buy them to make sure they are heavy metal and toxin free. After mixing the ingredients into paint, we sent them to 3rd party labs to test them for every possible toxin or contaminant. We also have every product certified non-toxic by a government certified toxicologist. see link and information below

(FK) I won't go into a lot of detail, but while significant efforts have been made to introduce much more health-friendly methods and materials into professional art practice since the late 1980s, there is now more resistance among a majority of artists, art schools, and materials manufacturers, than ever before. This is the current reality.

Just to give an example, in 2015 the European Union rejected a Swedish proposal to somehow restrict the use of cadmium compounds in artist paints, or introduce stricter labelling, so most artists — many of whom are hobbyists — are left quite unaware of the high risks associated with these materials.

Leah: Yes, Roberto mentions this in the interview and I see it as well that artists are sometimes the least health conscious people since theyÂ're primarily concerned with the quality of the art and creating specific effects that they are used to achieving with toxic supplies. They feel the most important thing in the end is what the final product looks like, and since using toxic materials is all they were taught and they know, the formula that creates their desired result they tend to be very hesitant to diverge from that. Most just don't know how easy and inexpensive it is to paint in a safe way or that they can get ever higher quality results with natural and non-toxic supplies. For art students, unfortunately most feel that they are invincible or it won't affect them — remember feeling that way. They tend to resist changing their method, until they get sick. I hope to reach art students with our social media campaigns and save them a lifetime of health issues and medical costs.

murals being painted, (right):

exhibition featuring 'Chakra Paintings'

Homepage: www.naturalearthpaint.com

pigment being mixed with oil, using a glass muller

(FK) I know a number of artists who suffered quite significant ill health from cadmiums in paints, and Roberto Parada also mentions his own experience with such issues above. I noticed that in your own range of products you are avoiding both heavy metal pigments as well as any of the now so prevalent organic and synthetic pigments that are everywhere. Many of our readers are aware of the risks

associated with heavy metals, but few have in-depth knowledge of what the risks can be with organic pigments.

(FK) What's your take on this matter? What are the risks of heavy metal pigments, and what are the risks from organic pigments?

(LF) Heavy Metal pigments will go directly into your bloodstream as soon as it gets onto your skin. And if the paints are mixed with a solvent, it will soak through the skin faster and do more damage. They are neurotoxins and can cause a huge array of health issues and major diseases –too many to list. They are very hard to remove from the body after they've gone in –I can attest to this after sitting for over 50 hours with an IV in my arm, going through huge detox symptoms and spending thousands of dollars for these treatments.

Synthetic organic pigments are derived from coal tars and other petrochemicals. They are mixed with a variety of preservatives, fillers and additives to give the paints specific properties, to keep the oil and pigment mixed in suspension, to preserve the paints for a long shelf life in the store, and to bulk up the paint to create more of it. Some also contain solvents.

What About Organic Pigments?

note: in the section below, Robert Maynord gives an added commentary on what artists should look out for in connection with organic pigments.

(FK) How do you see the future of more health-aware art practices?

(LF) Yes, I'm VERY hopeful. The word is spreading bit by bit and year by year. When I started out, there wasn't a single option or article or any information online about natural and non-toxic supplies. Now, the options are growing each year. Through education and lots of social media outreach and mainstream media, I'm hoping to continue educating artists about how to protect themselves and the Earth.

I'm very excited to continue developing and formulating much needed art supplies that do not currently exist. After much testing, research and experimentation we're excited to release two new products this year that currently don't exist but are in demand. We have other revolutionary projects in the works including one in

particular that could eliminate massive amounts of toxins regularly washed down drains around the world.

“Solar Plexus”, natural oil paint on canvas and mixed media,

40″ x 40″, 2009

Pigments used in this piece: yellow ocher, brilliant yellow, mayan red, ultramarine purple

This is part of the Chakra series and is based on the Solar Plexus chakra – center of personal power and self confidence.

I never stop getting excited about teaching people about natural art materials and how you can create higher quality and more archival paintings with absolutely nothing toxic –using all plant and earth-based ingredients. Most people have the misperception that if it's natural or eco-friendly it must not be as permanent or radiant but it's actually the opposite.

If you walk through any art store today, there are absolutely no truly non-toxic options for artists. It seems strange to me because most other markets these days are embracing the eco-friendly or earth conscious option, but the art market seems to be lagging behind. We're working on changing that and changing people's perception of "natural" being inferior. It's not just paints that need to change but

almost all supplies – markers, inks, primers, mediums, solvents, printmaking supplies, fabric paints and dyes, the list goes on and on. By the time we're through I want to have created a non-toxic option for every toxic supply out there.

In the beginning, I simply created products that I wanted for myself but didn't exist: a completely non-toxic solvent that I could paint with and clean brushes with, a non-toxic gesso for my canvas that didn't have formaldehyde, ammonia and petrochemicals, a professional quality oil paint that is so harmless I could eat it, and natural nut oils to thin my paint. Now, I'm listening to the demand from our customers and formulating what they request almost daily though email.

(FK) Thank you so much, Leah, for your help with this essay, and good luck with your work.

Robert Maynord kindly provided some additional information on issues related to organic pigments in artists paints, in the context of this essay.

What About Organic Pigments?

by Robert Maynord

Over the past several decades, organic pigments have often supplanted inorganic pigments in areas where a high performance paint is required. In general, organic pigments are less likely to have heavy metal impurities such as cobalt, nickel, copper and chromium. However, organic pigments have their own concerns, and their usage should be evaluated closely by any artist wishing to use them.

Contamination in the manufacturing process is the number one issue when dealing with organic pigments. The largest group of organics includes specific pigments that are now known to release the carcinogenic amine dichlorobenzidine, as well as other carcinogens. PR 122 (Quinacridone Magenta) is prohibited by some regulations in Germany because it releases the carcinogen benzene when heated to high temperatures. One pigment manufacturer now offers a replacement for PR 122, that is made using a less toxic, but more expensive process. PV 23 (Dioxazine Purple) is also banned for certain applications for the same reason. PG 7 (Phthalo

Green) is considered a “moderate” toxicity concern, but is perhaps the single most problematic pigment because it is the hardest of all to replace.

One issue with knowing what is in an artist paint is pigment identification. It is common for a single pigment to be listed and sold under many different product names. For example, PB 15 (Phthalo Blue) may be called Helio Blue, Peacock Blue, Brilliant Blue, or one of thirty other names. To avoid confusion, the paint industry uses Color Index numbers such as PB 15 to refer to all Phalo Blues. The Color Index system is not perfect, as there are shade variations for any specific color, but it is an essential first step. Some pigment suppliers actually mix different pigments together before they are sold to the paint maker. This makes it very challenging for the artist. For that reason, any paint that does not clearly indicate the Color Index (CI) number on the packaging should be viewed with suspicion.

Recently, several pigment manufacturers have been working to improve their products by reducing contamination. The newest product information sheets show a much fuller analysis of contaminate levels for heavy metals as well as aromatic amines that are used in the manufacturing process. For the artist, this is good news. If the paints offer a full disclosure of contents, including and especially the Color Index number, the artist can better evaluate the paint and thereby avoid the most problematic pigments.

Robert Maynord: Goodbye to Turpentine

Natural Earth Paint Health and Safety Pages:

https://www.naturalearthpaint.com/pages/health-and-safety

here an excerpt:

Did you know.....

Arts and crafts products rarely list ingredients.

Artist's pigments are commonly made from petrochemicals, and the actual hazards of these materials are not always known. Heavy metal-based pigments and paints are very hazardous to your health and should be avoided at all costs.

Synthetic pigments that have never been tested for toxicity can be labeled "non-toxic." The reason? There is no data to prove otherwise.

Children's arts and crafts paints are exempt from consumer paint lead laws. They often contain lead, cadmium, and a host of toxic ingredients like formaldehyde (a carcinogen), one of the most common paint preservatives.

Some of the most dangerously toxic conventional oil paints include:

- antimony white
- barium yellow
- cadmium red, orange, and yellow
- chrome orange, and chrome yellow
- cobalt violet, cobalt yellow, cobalt blue
- cobalt yellow
- lead white, flake white
- lithol red
- manganese violet

- molybdate orange
- naples yellow
- strontium yellow
- vermilion
- zinc yellow

Are “Non-Toxic” Art Supplies Truly Toxin-Free? Leah’s Story

The article on Art Supplies and Poison Control by PediatricSafety.net states that, in 2009, the nations 57 poison control centers received more than 35,000 calls about toxic exposures to art products; of these, more than 26,000 calls concerned children younger than 6.

Natural Earth Paint Through the Ages :

The Middle Ages

A common misperception around natural materials and ingredients is that they're not very archival, luminous or of a professional quality.

Ancient Egypt

Back in their day, all of the buildings, pyramids, sculptures, homes and walls were covered in color and paintings. It's hard to imagine those iconic yellow pyramids covered in a multitude of colors...