

DESIGNPOINT

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The Difference Between Linen and Cotton Canvas

The word canvas does not refer to any specific material in the field of textile fabrics but is applied to a number of closely woven materials of relatively coarse fiber that are used for sails, tents, awnings etc. In painting, the term canvas generally refers to the material upon which artists paint, stretched across a wooden frame. It can be pre-primed or unprimed.



UNPRIMED LINEN



UNPRIMED COTTON

Linen is by far, the better-quality support material because of its strength and resistance to decay. Woven from flax, the weave can show throughout many layers of paint. Most paintings created before the 1850s were made from linen which includes almost all of our most celebrated paintings in museums today. Since that time, Cotton has replaced linen's popularity due to low manufacturing costs.

Primed with an oil primer this is the classical standard for oil paintings made using linen. An acrylic primer which is less expensive than oil primer, can be used with either acrylic or oil paints. Linen is difficult to prime and stretch properly, but it offers the smoothest and stiffest painting surface, one with proven longevity. Typically, an artist would not use a low cost primer on linen because it is so expensive. It would be similar to setting a rather large, high-grade diamond in a brass ring. If you're going to invest

Some of the qualities linen has that makes it so attractive to painters are:

- Linen is the most durable fabric to put paint on. Linen's warp and weft threads are equal in weight so less susceptible to the expanding/contracting problems created by moisture
- Linen is very receptive to sizing and priming applications
- Linen retains its natural oils which preserve the fiber's flexibility and keeps the canvas from becoming brittle
- Linen has a more "natural" weaved finish than cotton and is available in a variety of textures, weights and smooth or rough finish

Cotton is desirable because of its affordable price and its ease of stretching.

Much less expensive than linen, it has become the most popular support for oil and acrylic painting. A properly prepared cotton canvas has longevity similar to linen, and is more flexible and easier to stretch properly. However, cotton is considered too flexible for very large paintings and is prone to sagging.

It is possible to stretch cotton tighter than linen, without straining the wooden support, because cotton fibers stretch more easily than linen fibers. Although not as strong as linen, a heavy grade cotton can make up for its lack of strength with its weight.

- For both oil and acrylic painting, an acrylic gesso primer is generally used

Cotton duck. There are 10 grades of cotton duck which distinguish from one, the most heavy, to ten, the most lightweight. The grades refer to the weight and thickness of the cotton duck, and are standardized across most of the textile industry. Grades are assigned on the basis of how much a piece of fabric of a specific size weighs. Individual traditional names for each grade are still used by some people, but they do not have specific grades attached.

Typical cotton duck for artists are:

- #8 Extra-heavy: difficult to stretch)
- #10 Heavy: stretchable but requires strength)
- #12 Medium: typical weight for paintings)
- #14 Light: easiest to stretch, prone to ripping under tension)

Students should never use linen unless the quality of their work and skill is comparable to that of a top selling artist. Even some of the most established artists don't use linen as a support due to its price. This material also demands you use the highest grade primer and oil colour, which adds still more to the cost of linen.