

The Nature and Cost of Artists' Materials

The 1750s and 1760s

During this period, paint was quite expensive. Colours were bought separately as solid blocks. They were then ground up and mixed with oil and varnish to make paint by the artist. A pound of one colour could cost around 1s 6d to 2s. Only a limited number of colours were available in the 1750s. The colours available often had names like 'King's Yellow' or 'Persian Blue'. Ground lead was commonly used to lighten colours, but this could be hazardous as lead is poisonous. The number of colours available gradually increased as new colours were discovered. Rare colours could be very expensive. Some artists made their own paint from natural products, such as plants. This was possibly done for convenience as well as for cost reasons, as not all painters would have lived close to a supplier of paint colours.

At this time, paper was not yet being produced in large quantities, so would have been relatively expensive in comparison to nineteenth century prices (see below). Some artists of this period painted onto canvasses. These could be made by stretching a fabric (often linen) over a wooden frame. Linen, however, was not a cheap commodity— one linen sheet could cost 3-5s..

Acquiring all the materials needed to paint a picture could have been time-consuming as well as costly. However, the rewards for a talented artist could be high. In the 1760s, Derbyshire artist Joseph Wright was charging 12s.12d. for a half-length portrait. He charged more as he became more famous. Eventually, he could charge £25 for a portrait and £150-210 for a large subject picture. Most artists could not have charged anything like these amounts, but it is easy to see that there were incentives for those who did have talent to seek to become professional artists. A skilled glass-maker in the 1750s might have earned little more than £1 per week, whereas an artist could earn several pounds for just one portrait.

The 1830s and 1840s

Paint was still generally bought in separate colours, but far more colours were available than in the mid-eighteenth century. Small blocks of colour called 'cakes' (often around 2x1x1 inches in size) could be bought for about 1s. each, but rarer shades were more expensive. Paint boxes containing numerous colours could be bought at this time (see Fig.2 overleaf) but these would have been very expensive. In 1835, the first moist watercolours were invented. This removed the need for artists to mix their own paint. Moist watercolour paint could be bought in small tubs called 'pans'. 1 pan, which was around the same size as 1 cake, could be bought for about 1s..



Fig.1. Cakes of paint manufactured in the U.S. in 1827-30. The manufacturer won an award because these paints were thought to be as good as the best British equivalents available at that time. (www.whimsie.com)



Fig. 2. A Windsor and Newton watercolour box dated c.1830-1840
(www.greenandstone.com)

In 1842, small metal tubes of paint (see Fig.3. below) were introduced. One tube containing a similar quantity of paint to one pan could be bought for around the same price. By the mid-nineteenth century, zinc had largely replaced lead as a whitening agent because it was safer.

Paint brushes varied in price from around 1-10s. depending on size and quality, and drawing pencils could be bought for a few pennies. Paper cost around 1s. per pound and linen, which could be used to make canvasses, cost around 1s per yard.



Fig.3. A surviving paint tube from the mid-nineteenth century
(www.smithsonianmag.org)

In the first half of the nineteenth century, landscape paintings became increasingly popular; as a result of industrialisation, many people began to regard the countryside with a sense of nostalgia. In the eighteenth century, the main demand had been for portraits. Those who could afford it generally commissioned artists to paint portraits of themselves and their family members. Although there was still demand for portraits in the nineteenth century, many people also wanted pictures of picturesque views. This broadened the options available to commercial artists.

The 1890s and 1900s

By the 1890s, paint colours could still be bought individually, but boxes containing numerous different colours had become more widely available. Small blocks of solid watercolour paint could range in cost from around 1s. to around 5s., depending on what colour was being purchased and how rare it was. A box of six colours and several brushes could be bought for around 6 shillings. A tube of liquid watercolour paint could cost between 1s. and 5s., again, depending on the rarity of the colour being purchased.

Brushes made from animal hair ranged in price from around 2s. to 5s.. Pencils cost between 1d and 6d depending on their quality. A small sketch pad (11.5 by 9 inches) with 32 pages could cost around 1s 6d. Prices increased with the size and quality of the paper used. Artist's canvas could cost around 2s per yard.

Around this time, coloured pencils became commonly available. Some of the companies who manufactured these specifically targeted children (see fig.4). Sets of twelve different colours could be purchased from around 6s. Some art suppliers also began to offer cheaper ranges of products, such as paint and paper, which were designed for use in schools.



Fig. 4. Original B.B. crayon boxes from the collection of Ed Welter