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Oil: Sgraffito or how to carve oil paints

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Sgraffito? An odd term for such a simple technique! Use pointed objects (paintbrush handle, utility knife or comb) to carve the paint to show the support or the previous layer of paint.

What you need to know

How carved lines and patterns look depends on the thickness of the paint, how dry it is (wet or dry) and the tool used (anything and everything).

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1. Carving wet paint

For representing details or precise patterns: wrinkles, hair, the pattern on a fabric or an object, ripples or light reflecting on water.

- Use a narrow tool, like a paintbrush handle or the tip of a knife.
- Carve the final coat of paint as if you were drawing.
- Wipe the tip of your tool regularly with a rag to keep the paint from accumulating.

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2. Carving dry paint

You can scratch dry paint with a very pointed object, such as a utility or palette knife.

The process is the same as for wet paint, but with very different results. When you scratch, you remove all the layers of paint and the support is what shows. It is therefore advisable to use:

- a support with a white background (primed with gesso or an acrylic coating) for excellent contrast;
- a rigid support (panel, plywood) so it doesn't tear while scratching.

Sgraffito is often used on dry paint to define the contours and patterns on objects (in a still life, for example) or to add relief to a color block background.

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A significant advantage of painting with oils: your mistakes are usually easy to fix!

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