

Richard Frumess

Founder of R&F Handmade Paints

The encaustic medium has been around since the 5th century B.C., but it nearly disappeared before the early 20th century. Until just a few decades ago, most artists who wanted to use encaustics had to make their own, a nearly impossible task due to the laborious mixing of pigment and wax, and the archaic and sometimes dangerous methods of heating and fusing. There was only one source of ready-made encaustic on the market, and it had only a few colors.

In 1981, painter Richard Frumess walked into Torch Art Supplies in New York City, where he was a regular customer. He asked for encaustic supplies and any related technical information. During the late-1940s, Torch had launched one of the first and only ready-made encaustic lines for artists, but by 1981, the line had dwindled to just a few colors.

“The director of the Belanthe Gallery in Brooklyn, which represented me, suggested I try working in encaustic because of the emphasis I put on the waxiness of my oil pastel drawings,” Frumess said.

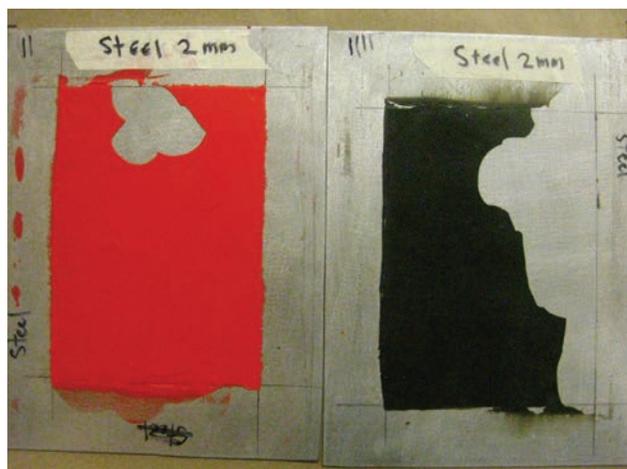
The 1980s was seeing a wave of experimentation in mixed media art, which included a rising interest in

encaustics. Torch recognized this, as did Frumess, and a year after Frumess began painting in encaustics, Torch hired him to write technical information on the medium and try his hand at making new colors for them to carry. This was easier said than done.

“I was a guy who loved making his own egg tempera and casein and sometimes oil paint, but making encaustic was totally different in that there was no way to mill the pigment into the medium. Stirring the pigment in didn’t prevent it from simply sinking in clumps at the bottom. High-speed mixing in blender jars was my solution, but it was not highly effective.”

Still, Frumess persisted. He achieved a moderate level of success in creating a marketable product, but Torch closed its doors in 1987. Frumess decided to take a risk and go into business for himself, launching his new encaustics production business from his rented studio basement the following January. In order to get potential clients to take him more seriously, he named the company R&F Encaustics (using his first and last initials) because he thought it would make it seem like at least two people worked there, though he was the sole employee. His hope was to sell enough of his product to support his painting; plus, he wanted to see the medium gain the respect and interest it deserved.

Frumess funded his operation by getting a part-time job, enabling him to purchase the necessary wax, packaging supplies and molds. He begged pigment companies for leftover samples of pigments, and by the end of the year, had developed 40 colors, plus a new encaustic medium. More than that, he had managed to get the products on store



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shelves in both New York and Paris. It was not an easy task.

“Although I had an understanding of an artist’s mind, I had no understanding whatsoever of business — of pricing, promoting or selling. While I understood materials and how to work with them, I had no knowledge of manufacturing — building inventory and producing for multiple stores, not just one. Nor had I given much thought to the market for encaustic — i.e., that there barely was one.

“Most of all, I had no idea that you don’t build a business on a part-time basis. I started the company in January 1988, while preparing for what turned out to be my last one-person show. I worked 19-hour days, seven days a week. The instant the show went up in October, the business swallowed up every tool, every inch of space in my tiny studio and every minute of my time.”

As Frumess began to tackle the business of *being* in business, he was fortunate to be able to rely on his friend and former Torch co-worker, artist Carl Plansky, who had also recently decided to launch his own art supply business, Williamsburg Handmade Oil Colors.

“We collaborated on business decisions, colors mixes, where to get pigments, oils, waxes, cans, tubes, boxes, even how to get credit from our suppliers.

“It was also Carl who encouraged me to develop a high-quality oil stick, which became Pigment Sticks.”

Extremely soft and pliable, Pigment Sticks are almost like having a thick oil paint in your hand that can be easily pushed and manipulated. Plansky had



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1 Encaustic tests on steel, 2012, by Richard Frumess. Part of Frumess’s ongoing research on the adhesion of encaustic to different surfaces. 2 Product image courtesy of R&F Handmade Paints.

suggested that exploring such a product would be a natural step for Frumess, since there was a close relationship between the oil and wax of oil sticks and the oil and resin of encaustics. Though production for the sticks is still labor intensive, with each stick being molded and wrapped by hand, the result is a product that is unmatched.

Although the market for encaustics and oil sticks was slim early on, Frumess was able to break in with the help of two major art supply retailers: Steve Steinberg from New York Central Art Supply and Allen Shefts of Pearl Paint.

“They were the first to take me on, and it was through their stores that R&F began to develop a reputation both among artists and among other stores.”

In 1990, Frumess expanded his operation slightly, moving to a 500-square-foot space in upstate New York and hiring his first part-time employee, Jim Haskin, an art student from the local university. A former electrical engineer, Haskin helped Frumess adapt to the computer age, and eventually took over the administrative parts of the business, becoming co-owner in 1998.

After changing its name to R&F Handmade Paints and continuing to refine its production methods, the company grew in both size and reputation. Frumess and Haskin hired more employees, almost all of whom were art students or artists, and built an organization that doesn't just create quality art supplies, but educates the public on how to use them. They have a national workshop program, developed by artists Cynthia Winika and Laura Moriarty, and even a gallery space, curated by Moriarty, to support artists working in encaustics, oil sticks or mixed media, so they can pay homage to the great work being created with the products they make. In recent years, another employee joined Frumess and Haskin as a partner in the business. Darin Seim oversees the entire diverse operation as general manager.

While the bulk of Frumess's own artwork is now primarily the test panels from his materials research, he is happy to have been able to play a significant part in the revival of encaustics and in creating products that allow other professional artists to create artwork not possible with any other medium.

For more information on R&F Handmade Paints, visit www.rfpaints.com.