

WHY THE CURRENT CRAZE FOR ENCAUSTICS?

by Tina Manzer

Thirty years ago, artist Richard Frumess was “mass producing” encaustic by melting resin and wax in a pot in his oven, stirring in the pigment and then pouring the different colored mixtures into muffin tins to harden. The finished product was sold only at Torch’s, a small store in New York City, where the beeswax-and-damar-resin-recipe originated in the 1940s. As an employee of the store, Richard revived the stock after a 20-year production hiatus. It was, in those days, the only commercial encaustic available.

Six years later, he began R&F Handmade Paints, and high-quality encaustic became available to artists around the world. Today, as you know, encaustic is all the rage among diverse categories of creative people, from fiber artists to photographers.

Here, Richard gives us an update on the ever-growing community of encaustic users, and discusses how R&F’s technical workshops help spread the word.

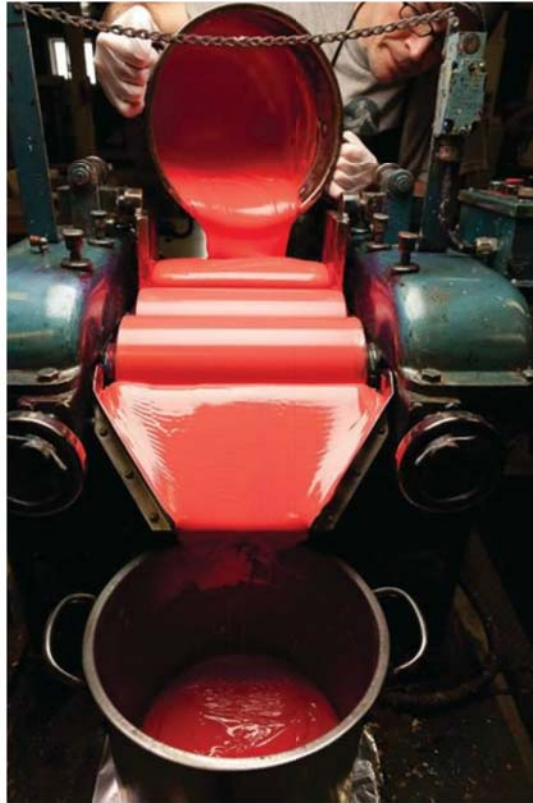
AMR: To what do you attribute the huge resurgence in encaustics? What role did R&F Handmade Paints play in it?

RF: What’s interesting about your question is that there have been a number of mini revivals of encaustic over the last 250 years that ultimately brought encaustic out of its 1,000-years-plus slumber.

Nevertheless, when R&F began in 1988 as the only manufacturer of commercial encaustic in the world, encaustic was still an exotic medium. It was not taught in the art schools, except occasionally as part of a materials course. There were few – if any – workshops, there was barely any literature on the subject (only small chapters in artist handbooks) and there was very little gallery or museum presence. The only art stores interested in carrying encaustic were New York Central Art Supply and Pearl Paint in New York City, Meiningers in Denver, and Sennelier in Paris.

R&F’s contribution to creating and building the commercial market was five-fold.

1. We made the first commercial product available in stores and



ensured that it was of a higher and more consistent quality than could be made by most artists in their studios. (Studio-made encaustic is much more difficult to make than studio-made oil paint.)

2. We promoted the artists who used encaustic through bi-monthly exhibits and an international biennial encaustic exhibit (the first was 1997) juried by prominent gallerists, artists and curators.

3. We collaborated with authors writing books on encaustic, and museums and galleries holding encaustic exhibits.

4. We provided technical support through our technical sheets, over the phone (half-hour-long conversations with artists are not unusual), our online forum, participation in other technical websites (such as AMIEN), our R&D work, and our technical lectures to schools and conferences.

5. Most important was our educational workshop program begun in 1995. These were the first regular, year-round encaustic workshop classes ever held. The program is still the largest and best known. In 2004 we began collaborative workshops with other organizations to explore the interdisciplinary nature of encaustic with photography, printmaking, papermaking, bookmaking, sculpture, and ceramic.

Many of the people we taught went on to teach their own workshops, their students taught theirs, and so on. This helped create an international community of artists who work in encaustic. They share ideas, create network organizations (International Encaustic Artists, New England Wax, Fused Chicago, Texas Wax, Encaustic Art Institute), and hold conferences and retreats.

The next frontier is to work with the art schools and art departments to begin teaching encaustic as a mainstream medium.

AMR: What has R&F done for the medium itself?

RF: We have energetically pursued the development of new

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encaustic products. One of these is our Encaustic Gesso, the other is Encausticbord™, a co-branded product developed in collaboration with Ampersand Art Supply. This collaboration led to the creation of the Encaustic Center, an all-in-one display of paint, panels, tools, and brushes, which made it easier for retailers to present encaustic to their customers.

Another project has been developing new tools. R&F has worked with artists and toolmakers, such as Sculpture House and Wall Lenk, to design special tools to expand the techniques of working the encaustic surface.

AMR: Who is a typical end user?

RF: Both our encaustics and our Pigment Sticks™ are pretty much used by artists in every discipline. They're especially popular in mixed media work. It would be easy to say that our typical end user is the painter, but encaustic more than anything is a collaborative medium. It attracts photographers, sculptors, ceramicists, papermakers, bookmakers and printmakers. Pigment Sticks™, because they bridge drawing and painting, are also used by many artists outside the painting field.

AMR: How do the technical support and classes you offer "feed" your business?

RF: As I mentioned earlier, in 1988 only a very few stores were interested in carrying an exotic medium like encaustic. Over the next several years, though, a number of stores began stocking it. That occurred as more artists became involved with encaustics and stayed involved because they learned how to work with the medium in workshops. We also offer workshops in oil stick technique. We depend on the network of former workshop participants to train retail store staff and introduce both encaustic and Pigment Sticks™ to their customers.

Our technical information is based on years of laborious testing and research. This includes the first-ever lightfast tests on encaustic paint run according to ASTM regulations. The prepared panels of paint were sent to a lab in Arizona where they were exposed to the sun for three months. We've also conducted elaborate testing of the adhesiveness of encaustic on various surfaces and grounds. Another study has tested how various pigments affect encaustic over many years.

Neither the workshops nor the research nor the exhibitions program contributes to our bottom line. What they do is to help us expand the market for both encaustic and Pigment Sticks™, and build a support network for both artists and the retailers.

AMR: Do you have plans to diversify beyond encaustics and pigment sticks?

RF: Our main concern is to make sure that the products we make are of the highest quality, and that the best tools and surfaces are made available for working with them. We are planning new colors for both encaustic and Pigment Sticks™.

AMR: What is your favorite part about your job?

RF: Everything. I love going to conferences and giving technical talks. I love promoting our paints and meeting the artists who use them. I love our relationships with the retailers, many of which go back 10 or 20 years. I love doing R&D work. I love developing complex color mixes. I love it all.

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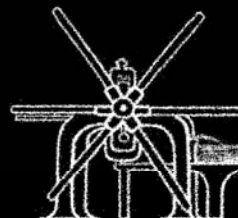
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