

# Cleaning an Old Oil Painting

Carol Carney and Cheryl Lekas  
Gainsborough Products, LLC

## Introduction

As time passes, oil paintings tend to darken due to the accumulation of dirt and yellowing of the protective varnish layer. Since 1974, oil painting restoration professionals have used Gainsborough Products' supplies to reveal color and detail that has been obscured over the years.

## A Word of Caution

Improper cleaning can harm a painting. Therefore, we suggest that beginners engage a conservator to clean paintings having monetary or sentimental value. Always practice on an old, inexpensive painting before cleaning a painting of importance to you.

## List of Materials

- Gainsborough Emulsion Cleaner
- Gainsborough Varnish Remover
- Gainsborough Neutralizer
- Gainsborough Gloss Varnish
- 6" Wooden Handle Cotton Swabs
- Surgical Cotton
- Surgical Gloves
- Small Plastic Container



*Half of this 19<sup>th</sup> century oil painting has been restored to its original appearance by removing the old yellowed varnish with Gainsborough Varnish Remover.*

## Instructions

The procedures for removing household dirt, tobacco smoke and yellowed varnish from oil paintings are the same; only the cleaning products are different. Gainsborough's oil painting cleaners are based on time proven museum formulas. Avoid using water based formulas: water can seep through minute cracks and penetrate the canvas size, causing the paint to flake off in time.

Before beginning be sure to take a photograph of both the front and the back of the painting. If there is any writing on either the front or the back take a close up photo. Take a photo upon completion for later comparison.

**Step 1:** Lay the oil painting to be cleaned face up on a piece of kraft paper. Wear surgical gloves to protect your hands and be sure to have adequate ventilation. Take care not to press down on the canvas too much or you will stretch the canvas. We suggest using a piece of linoleum cut out from a sink under the area of the painting you are working on to prevent excessive pressure on the canvas.

**Step 2:** Apply Gainsborough Neutralizer to a piece of cotton wool or white cotton cloth and gently wipe over the face of the oil painting to clean off the surface dirt. Use a cotton swab to test a corner of the oil painting with Gainsborough Emulsion Cleaner and Varnish Remover to determine which product will best clean the painting. Emulsion Cleaner will remove dirt and smoke, whereas Varnish Remover will remove yellowed varnish in most cases. For more difficult or special situations, Kotton Klenser™, Varnish Softener, Mastic Varnish Remover, or Linoxyn Remover may be required. Immediately after each test, apply Gainsborough Neutralizer to a clean piece of cotton and gently wipe over the test area to neutralize the cleaning action.

**Step 3:** After establishing which product to use, you can begin cleaning the oil painting. Dip a cotton swab into the Gainsborough cleaning product you have selected. Use a rolling motion rather than a scrubbing motion when applying the cleaner. Watch your swab carefully to be sure that you are removing only dirt or varnish and not the paint. Do not dip the swab into the cleaning product again, once it has been used. We recommend cleaning a 2" square area at a time and then neutralizing the area with Gainsborough Neutralizer before proceeding to another area. We suggest doing the sky at one time, then the trees, etc. because it is easier to watch for any color that might be coming off, and different pigments respond differently to cleaning.

Always take a half and half photograph before you clean the entire painting. Dispose of your used swabs and cotton in a covered metal container.

**Step 4:** The final step is to varnish the oil painting with Gainsborough Gloss Varnish. This will bring out the colors and protect the painting for years to come.

Additional oil painting restoration instructions can be found in *Gainsborough's Complete Manual of Oil Painting Restoration*.

Gainsborough Products, LLC

Tel.: 800-227-2186

Web: [www.gainsboroughproducts.com/](http://www.gainsboroughproducts.com/)

E-Mail: [service@gainsboroughproducts.com](mailto:service@gainsboroughproducts.com)



*Use a rolling motion, rather than a scrubbing motion, when applying the cleaner.*



*The left side of this painting has been cleaned with Gainsborough Emulsion Cleaner.*