

WHAT IS CANADA BALSAM?



Canada Balsam is part of a class of materials called resins, used throughout history to add luminosity and viscosity to oil paint, and to protect the paint film. Resins are often used for glazing and for enhancing detail.

Historically, two of the most widely used resins are natural damar and copal made from the dried sap of trees. The problem is, dried sap must be dissolved in a strong solvent such as turpentine, toluene, or zylene. This process introduces an element of toxicity, and also has potential for darkening from natural contaminants in the dried sap crystals. Enter Canada Balsam! Canada Balsam comes directly as sap extracted from the tree – not from the dried crystals. So it is cleaner and lighter in color, and darkens much less. Further it has the refractive index of glass, and the smell of fir trees. Canada Balsam is a perfect addition to oil paint, when enrichment of color and enhancement of permanence are desired.

Our 100 percent pure Canada Balsam comes from a fir tree that grows in Canada and the United States. Canada Balsam is used as a cement for optical lenses, and in oil painting it enhances colors and permanence. Since it does not crystallize with age, its optical properties do not deteriorate. Historically, painters have used balsams, including larch (Venice) and fir (Strasbourg) balsam, because of the quality balsam gives to the colors. Until recently Canada Balsam was too expensive for common use, but the availability has now increased.

It is important to note the difference between balsams, resins, and essential oils. In general, when you distill a balsam, it separates into an essential oil and a resin. Examples of resins include the Copal and Damar we sell. Examples of essential oils include Oil of Spike Lavender and Oil of Rosemary. Manufacturers sometimes dissolve resins with chemicals such as xylene, rough turpentine, benzene, toluene, and other chemicals. While this saves money, it introduces an element of toxicity. Our Canada Balsam has no such chemicals – it is pure, direct from the tree.

Historical Note: Canada Balsam has sometimes been referred to as the “English Balm of Gilead.” This may be due to the fact that it is used in folk medicines and various herbal products.

Canada Balsam from The Art Treehouse

<https://www.arttreehouse.com/store/content/canada-balsam>

