

# Gesso

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## Vocabulary and terms for further study

gesso ground gelatin sizing

## Materials and ingredients:

- 4 teaspoons unflavored gelatin (do not use jell-o)
- 1 cup finely ground chalk
- 1 cup water
- an old pot
- a heat source like a stove or fire
- an old brush, and maybe a stick to stir with

Gesso is a white paint used for sizing surfaces to be painted. Medieval artists would have used it on many surfaces, including wood and cloth. There are modern versions of gesso, but they are not all porous enough and tend to provide a poor surface for egg tempera paint.

The key ingredients in medieval gesso are rabbit skin glue and chalk. The glue provides a strong binder for the dry and porous chalk pigment. This recipe will use gelatin instead of a rabbit skin for a similar substance that does not include the harassment of any furry woodland creatures. Rabbit skin glue can still be purchased from some supply places, but gelatin has the advantage of being much less odorous.

Sizing wooden, cloth, velum, parchment or even paper was done to create a proper surface on which to paint. Cloth would usually be affixed to a wooden surface, and thin wood would be sized on both sides to minimize warpage. The initial sizing could also consist of a glue coating with no initial pigment. A second coat of pigmented sizing, called gesso, would then be layered over the first to provide a white ground.



To size a painting surface, first prepare it by cleaning it thoroughly, and mounting it if necessary. Wet surfaces should be allowed to dry. Also grind all chalk before needed so that it can be added while the gesso is still hot.

Next, bring one cup of water to a strong boil, and then remove it from the heat. Keep the heat source handy, but do not let the water actually boiling when mixing in the ingredients.



Mix four teaspoons of unflavored gelatin and about three quarters to one full cup of chalk into the hot water. If the water has cooled too much, return the pot to the heat source. Do not to actually boil the mixture, since continued boiling destroys the effectiveness of the gelatin. It is also much easier to mix in the chalk one tablespoon at a time rather than all at once.



Using an old brush, apply this gesso to the surface to be sized. The gesso should be hot when applied and allowed to both cool and dry before applying more coats. Chalk does not cover well, so multiple coats will need to be applied. If the chalk is not ground fine enough, it will leave a rough surface that may be sanded prior to painting.

