

ARTIST ALERT!

ARE YOU USING “EARTH-SAFE” ART MATERIALS?

YOUR ART MATERIALS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE EARTH. JOIN US IN CREATING A DEMAND FOR “EARTH-SAFE” MATERIALS.....

By Linda Fries

THE PROBLEM

Art materials are among the most toxic consumer products available! In response to artist demand, toxins in studio materials have been reduced, but the manufacture, distribution, and disposal of most art materials still cause ecological harm. As artists we need to become more aware of the nature of our materials and the possible harm that our art-making activities can cause.

WHAT ARE “EARTH-SAFE” ART MATERIALS?

If your materials threaten the Earth, chances are that they are a threat to you. Truly Earth-safe art materials can be used without causing harm to any living system. Most art materials fail this standard. How can we find ones that meet it?

Some materials are clearly marked as potential hazards. Other products state that they are “non-toxic.” Still others, like mat board, foam core, plexi-glass, papers, plastics, canvas and packaging, are unmarked but may carry known, unknown, or hidden environmental costs. Can we use these items without concern?

“NON-TOXIC”-WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

You can't count on “non-toxic” to save your health or the Earth. Real improvements have been made in many products for art, but the label “non-toxic” still leaves many unanswered questions. Read your product labels carefully. For example, a typical label on a “non-toxic” product states: “Based upon toxicological review, there are no acute or *known* chronic health hazards with anticipated use of this product. (Most chemicals are not fully tested for chronic toxicity.) Always protect yourself against this and other chemical products by keeping them out of your body.”

Other “non-toxic” labels highlight that the concerns about hazards are focused on human health, as in this label: “...this product is certified by a medical expert to contain no material in sufficient quantities to be toxic or injurious to humans.” (!!!) So what about the effects of so called “non-toxic” art materials on all other life forms sharing the Earth with us? After all, humans and other life forms are all in one big web of interactive life.

THE LARGER PERSPECTIVE

In the ground-breaking book [Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things](#) by Michael Braungart and William McDonough, we find that “of the approximately eighty thousand defined chemical and technical mixes that are produced and used by industries today (each of which has five or more by-products), only about three thousand

so far have been studied for their effects on living systems.” Thus, the effects on the Earth of most of the synthetic chemicals in conventional paints, dyes, solvents, finishes, personal care products, household cleaners, furnishings, building materials, etc. are unknown and in many cases untraceable. Each year hundreds of new chemicals are created and included in products we use but very few have had even a preliminary screening for health or environmental impact.

ASK QUESTIONS! DEMAND CHANGE!

How should we respond to the known and unknown hazards of materials? We can demand environmental accountability and pressure art stores and manufacturers to change. We can begin by asking questions...

QUESTIONS FOR EARTH-CONSCIOUS ARTISTS

- Does the manufacture, dispersal, use and disposal of an art product cause harm to the Earth?
- How can we greatly reduce or eliminate unknown toxic hazards in the art world?
- How can we demand development of Earth-safe products?
- How do we take responsibility not just for studio safety, but also for the health and well being of others and of all life forms?

POWER IN NUMBERS

Many people think that we artists are few in number and our use of some questionable materials doesn't matter much. Perhaps we should reconsider! According to one survey, over 10% of the American public identify themselves as artists (amateur or professional). And each of us counts! Are we providing a good example of environmentally responsible art-making? What can we do to improve? Acting together, so many artists can make a difference, and our demands for change will be heard!

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

The good news is that everything we use and make *can* be reformulated to cause no harm to the Earth. (Read Braungart and McDonough's book Cradle to Cradle). And, towards this end we offer the following opportunities on our website, **www.weadartists.org**:

- Find out about “Guidelines for Earth-safe Art Materials.”
- Hold “An Earth-safe Art Materials Workshop” for artists in your community. It's easy, we'll tell you how.
- Learn about WEAD, the Women Environmental Artists Directory, an international group of artists involved in a wide range of environmental issues.

“...if what we make with our hands is to be sacred and to honor the Earth that gives us life, then the things we make must not only rise from the ground but return to it—soil to soil, water to water—so everything that is received from the Earth can be freely given back without causing harm to any living system.”

—William McDonough