

GUIDELINES FOR “EARTH-SAFE’ ART MATERIALS

Truly Earth-safe art materials can be used without causing harm to any living system. Unfortunately, most art materials contain hidden man-made chemical ingredients, some of which are potentially harmful to the environment. Ideally, each art product would be required to list all ingredients, indicating which ones are known to be damaging. However, this is not the case. At this time, the best that artists can do who wish to follow an Earth-safe practice is to use the most natural, biodegradable, least synthetic materials for their work. When using man-made materials, you should contact the manufacturer to request an accounting of the processes and chemicals involved in production. You may well discover that the manufacturer does not really know all the components of the product; some are produced in other locations, and most of the chemicals and processes themselves have never been studied or had even a preliminary screening for environmental impact.

According to William McDonough and Michael Braungart, in *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, we find that “of the approximately eighty thousand defined chemical and technical mixes that are produced and used 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.” However, McDonough and Braungart also state that everything we use and make can be reformulated to cause no harm to the Earth. But until that time of environmental enlightenment has arrived, what can the Earth-conscious artist do?

Given our limited ability to know, we can still make wiser choices. And where more Earth-safe art materials are not available, we can advocate for change. It is interesting to note that in a related field of the arts, architecture, there already has been a lot of progress towards awareness and change in this direction. In fact, you might look to architectural resources for some of your art-making materials, especially for natural, Earth-safe paints and building materials. Architects even have magazines focusing entirely on Earth-safe materials! We should do the same.

When looking for Earth-safe art materials, consider the following suggestions:

- paper products marked “non-chlorinated”, “recycled, post consumer”, etc.
- organically grown cotton products, such as mat boards and cotton rag papers.
- natural, Earth-safe pigment paints and dyes in natural, Earth-safe bases.
- sustainably harvested wood for frames, sculpture, etc.
- other natural, Earth-safe materials for sculpture, ceramics, etc.
- environmentally appropriate packaging.
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(Remember, even with natural materials, the artist must observe safe studio practices.)

As much as possible artists should avoid any materials that obviously cannot be re-cycled or composted. This may include a wide range of plastics, packaging, foam core, mylar, etc. And, to be truly “Earth safe”, if you can’t compost it, you shouldn’t use it!

Prepared by Linda Fries for **WEAD, THE WOMEN ENVIRONMENTAL ARTISTS DIRECTORY**. WEAD is an international group of artists involved in a wide range of environmental issues. For more information visit our website: www.weadartists.org