

## Living dangerously: Artists need only apply

Safety is a concern in any industry today, to which visual arts is no exception. Historically, the materials used in the production of artwork were very toxic i.e. lead white paints produced by the “Dutch Stack Method”, may have been responsible for a few premature deaths.

*“The method for the “stack” process is: Metallic lead in the form of strips is exposed for about three months in earthenware pots, which have a separate compartment in the bottom containing a weak solution of acetic acid (vinegar). The pots are stacked in tiers over a layer of horse manure in a shed. After the shed is closed, the combined action of the acetic acid vapours, heat and carbon dioxide from the fermenting manure, carbon dioxide in the air and water vapour slowly transforms the lead to basic lead carbonate.”*


[http://naturalpigments.com/detail.asp?PRODUCT\\_ID=475-11S](http://naturalpigments.com/detail.asp?PRODUCT_ID=475-11S)

Although we have improved materials and processes to produce them, artists can still be exposed to potentially dangerous substances, an example of such is cadmium, an extremely toxic metal commonly found in oil paints. Lead, arsenic, chromium, silica dust, etc., can also be found in selected art materials. A recent example of how harmful incorrect practice can be is that of Robert Hannaford, an Australian artist who developed tongue and neck cancer, by holding his cadmium coated paintbrushes in his mouth while he worked. Prolonged and accumulative exposure to these toxic substances is believed to have been the reason for this. Although some of the materials we use may be toxic, by observing a few safety practices, exposure to these toxins can be greatly reduced.

For further reference the following website provides excellent information on safety  
<http://www.tucsonaz.gov/arthazards/>

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### Basic Safety Rules for Visual Arts

1. *Do not put your materials or tools anywhere near your mouth. Many artists still shape their brush tips with their tongue, THIS IS DANGEROUS, not to mention disgusting. Paint media have a variety of material sources, such as petroleum, animal and vegetable; you don't know where they have come from and how they have been manufactured. The brushes themselves also vary in production; Kolinsky sables for example use the guard hair from the tail of the male Kolinsky (a species of weasel) from their winter coat.*
2. *Always use proper ventilation or work outside if you are using aerosols or solvents. It is not always possible to work outside, so make sure that airflow in your work area is sufficient to replace the complete air volume 6-10 times per hour. It also wise to be careful with odourless or citrus solvents, as these products have little smell but still evaporate into the air which you then inhale.*
3. *Look for caution labels, such as  which denote that they are hazardous to the environment (& you). They are not appropriate for children to use and the artist must think of correct use and disposal.*
4. *Never be tempted to use drinking cups, plates, serving bowls, etc. as palettes or rinsing vessels. Accidental ingestion is all too common when these items are not washed correctly.*
5. *Do not eat, drink or smoke around the materials (keep your food and drink elsewhere) and wash up before you do (away from your materials).*
6. *Oil or solvent soaked rags may self-combust. Keep them in a fire-proof safety can and dispose of them properly.*
7. *Keep the products off your skin and cover and protect cuts and open wounds.*
8. *Keep products in their original containers, so that the correct handling information is retained.*
9. *If you use cat litter to absorb oil and solvent spills, avoid scented or disinfected types as they have been known to self combust when they have come into contact with cooking oil. Best to err on the side of caution...*
10. *Be aware that your actions affect more than just you; consider your environment and those living with you and around you.*