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Product Profiles: Easels- An Overview



Irène Lagut, 1922 working at an easel with an angled base

The essential function of an easel is to hold art for working and display. What design best serves this function primarily depends on scale or art, medium used, and the studio configuration. Other factors include number of users, duration of work session, the artist's preferred work position, and available lighting.

Because no single easel can satisfy every artist, a huge variety of designs have been developed. While some new form factors have been introduced in recent decades, most of the easels sold today are variations on long-established designs.

A balance between function and appearance is always important, but these mean something different to each individual. In selecting the right easel, personal preference for a particular material or aesthetic are just as important as mechanical utility.

There are obvious advantages to owning more than one easel. Even artists who use huge, complex studio furniture almost always retain small, basic easels. The tripod sketch easel and elegant, basic lyre never fall out of favor, and it's hard to find a studio that doesn't include at least one of these.



Slender, basic tripod sketch easel
(François Barraud- L'Atelier- detail)

Scale of artwork is a key deciding factor when selecting an easel. The maximum canvas height (the largest possible space between tray and clamp) is of primary importance, because this places a hard limit on the size of artwork the easel can handle. Maximum width is not usually specified, but a stable base and a low center of gravity are essential for bearing long, horizontal artwork.



H-frame easel with platform base and winch handle for raising and lowering the tray. (Traditionally called a "screw easel")



Three variations on the H-frame easel. Foreground model has diagonal braces which allow the frame to incline (Image: studio of Charles Bertrand d'Entraygues ca. 1900)



French-style field easel with attached paint box

Weight capacity is also important. Large, heavy panels may exceed what can be placed safely on a lighter-duty easel, even if artwork dimensions are within specifications. Easels with a wider chassis and rectangular platform are usually better for extremely wide artwork, compared to tripods. Lighter tray clamps may fail under too great a load. A ratchet mechanism or robust screw posts can usually hold the heaviest canvases and panels.

Indoor or Outdoor Use

Easels designed for use outdoors tend to be portable, collapsible, lightweight and easy to carry. Traditional wooden sketch easels are extremely lightweight, but may depend on a drawing board or panel to lend rigidity. Wooden field easels are often oil-finished for water resistance, but extreme exposure may dry out leather straps and corrode ferrous metal hardware. Many newer designs are made of metal and plastic for superior weather resistance.



Elegant lyre easels (Left: detail from an 1873 painting by Wyatt Eaton)

Most basic field easels look like a camera tripod, but there are also attractive alternatives based on the paint box and palette. (More recently, a box-style easel was introduced which mounts to a standard camera tripod.) The French Field Easel, a staple for painting en plein air, has the tray and mast attached to the lid, and legs on the bottom of the box. The inside of the box is usually lined with metal to guard against leaky tubes and bottles. Internal storage is usually sufficient to hold a full set of paints, dozens of brushes and a full sized palette. The French-style easel also serves as a wet canvas carrier.

The medium of choice may also be significant. Artists who work in fluid mediums like watercolor and thin acrylics may require an easel that inclines fully horizontal, to better manage liquid, dripping paint. Works on paper are best paired with a design that can accommodate a drawing board. Pastel painters are well served with a generous tray to catch excess powder, and a fully articulated tilt mechanism to help with spray fixative application.



Artist Giovanni Secchi using an outdoor portable tripod sketch easel, 1910, with attached umbrella shielding him and his artwork from the elements

Field easels are also good for indoor use, particularly for artists who need to work in their living space. A French Easel can serve as a portable studio, when it's necessary to put everything away between sessions.

Other paint-box field easel include the Pochade Box, held in the hand like a palette. A Pochade Box is suitable for very small sketches, and can hold a small assortment of colors and short brushes.

Studio Dimensions

Floor space, ceiling height and window placement are significant factors in easel selection. Most standard ceilings are tall enough to handle full size easels, but basement studios and those with low drop ceilings may not allow full extension. This is particularly true if the tray is fixed to the center mast, because this design makes it impossible to raise the bottom of the painting without also elevating the entire assembly.



H-frame easel with mast and tray which tilt independent of the chassis

Easels with a platform base can often be placed closer to walls than tripod designs, because the "footprint" of the tripod can be quite deep with all three legs fully extended. Uneven studio floors can be slightly problematic for platform bases, however, especially if casters (wheels) are attached.

Optimizing lighting on artwork is an important advantage of a good easel. Tilt control is the key feature that facilitates lighting control and controls glare. A basic easel can achieve an effective amount of control by changing the position of the feet, but this can reduce stability. Over the years, artists overcame this limitation by attaching the top of a canvas to the body of the easel with string, holding artwork in a forward leaning position. Much better control can be achieved with a center mast that tilts away from the chassis, or with a chassis that tilts on a rectangular base.

The ability to tilt the painting forward without changing the base position also helps reduce the amount of dust which settles on a wet surface.



Improvised forward incline, achieved by attaching the canvas to the easel with string



Unusual "sandwich board" easel design (Image: Detail, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, A Roman Studio, 1877)

The ability to collapse and store an easel is a key benefit in small studios and classrooms. The easel doesn't necessarily need to fold to an extremely compact size, as long as it can be made short and flat enough for storage. Most lyre, A-frame and easels fold flat, with masts that lower completely or detach for further space savings. Some smaller H-frame easels can tilt completely backward onto the platform for flat storage.

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