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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft- The Blank Canvas: Anticipation and Intimidation



Vilhelm Hammershøi, Interior with an Easel, 1912

Ask the Experts: “It never fails, every time I buy a new pre-stretched canvas, I feel nervous about putting down the first stroke. I want to be able to just start painting without worrying about messing up the perfect surface. Help!”

A: The first piece of advice we’d give is a reminder that the only reason canvases are manufactured is to become paintings, and only through the act of painting can the canvas ever fulfill its single purpose. Your art is waiting to exist, and you can only bring it into being by picking up that brush. If you need a “nudge”, however, here are some concepts to get you started.

Warm Up

Diving right into the deep end may not be the best approach if you feel apprehensive. Before picking up the brush, start with simple, 30-second gesture drawings in charcoal on inexpensive newsprint. Move on to ink wash studies, or acrylic on heavy paper. Once you’ve limbered up, it should be easy to carry that energy right over to the canvas.

Start with Canvas Boards

Canvas boards (heavy cardboard wrapped with primed artist’s canvas) cost a fraction of the price of stretched canvases, so they’re a popular choice where the painting experience is more important than the end result. An added advantage is that a thin profile makes storing and transporting canvas boards very easy compared to bulkier stretcher frames. Canvas panels are ready to use just like stretched canvases. Working on canvas boards can reduce the per-painting cost, but keep in mind that there’s always a chance you’ll end up doing something you wish were on a higher quality support. While there are top quality, linen-faced fabric panels available, canvas boards are generally less appealing to galleries and collectors, due to the “student grade” status of some products in this category.

Prime your own

Stretching and priming your own canvas can become part of the creative process, and as a result, by the time you’re ready to paint, there is already a feeling of continuity and familiarity. By crafting your own canvases, it’s easier to see the priming as just the first layer of paint on a picture. Working up close on a hand-stretched canvas, it’s also easier to spot imperfections and irregularities, which help the artist realize that the canvas isn’t so “perfect” after all.

Toned Grounds

On a white gesso ground, every brushstroke is inevitably a dark mark on a light background, no matter what color of paint you've mixed. A toned ground (uniform covering of a single color) creates a different sort of contrast, making colors glow and stand out. A field of color on the canvas helps the artist quickly envision chromatic relationships that can be established with the first spot of paint.

Purchase (or stretch) multiple canvases

When it's time to buy or stretch canvases, really stock up. Having plenty of backups means you can always start over, and any one canvas seems less precious.

Learn how to re-use a canvas

With the right approach, unfinished paintings can be re-purposed with results so good, no one would ever suspect. Acrylic paintings can be top-coated with acrylic gesso, and oil paintings can be removed from stretchers, flipped over, re-stretched and primed on the unused side. There's a long tradition of artists painting over abandoned works, some of which are only rediscovered centuries later. Knowing how to effectively re-stretch or re-prime a canvas takes a lot of the perceived risk out of using a new one in the first place, because you can always start over. New canvas is cheap compared to the time invested in a painting, however, so only consider re-purposing canvases that are genuinely never going to see the light of day otherwise.

Just go for it

At some point, the best approach is probably to just start putting paint on the canvas. As soon as you identify the first contour or shape that needs to be painted, there's no reason to hesitate. The minute you've started, the canvas is transformed into a work in progress. That's a good thing!