

## Studio Craft: The Awkward Phase



Helene Schjerfbeck's 1921 Unfinished Portrait, scratched out by the artist and repurposed for a different painting

In painting, between the fresh, exciting rush of the first sketch and the serene satisfaction of the finishing touches, there exists another phase, one which provokes anxiety, dread, and despair. Every artist knows it: the stage of creation where a work of art simply isn't in a presentable state. Maybe it's due to unresolved issues with proportion, or the paint surface isn't attractive enough, or the color is out of balance, but for whatever reason, the work of art has entered a stage some call "the awkward phase", or "ugly". No matter what term is used, this transitional phase provokes mixed feelings in artists. For some, the awkward phase is a challenge, when skill and determination are tested. For others, it's a time to decide whether or not to abandon a problematic work, and start fresh.

**Recognize it:** Sometimes, with some unexplained good luck, a piece just comes out perfectly from start to finish, but most of the time that's not the case. The sooner you realize that a work of art has entered the "awkward phase", the sooner you can start to resolve it. Taking frequent breaks can help keep a fresh eye; so can using a mirror to look at the artwork in reverse. If you're lucky (and experienced), you might just catch something before it becomes a more significant issue.

**Analyze it:** By looking at each aspect of a problematic work separately, it's often possible to identify a specific thing that you can correct, and then set the project back on course. Consider questions like: Is it an issue with

scale or proportion? Is there a problem with balance in the composition? Are the colors in need of adjustment? Am I having difficulty with the medium? Have I worked too long on one area? Run through the list of everything, and after you've eliminated all else, the problem might stand out.

**Ignore it:** If you find that every work of art goes through a troubling stage, it may be that you're simply uncomfortable with how art looks before the finishing touches are in place. Anxiety about showing the underlying process could be something you can work through, and over time, you may find the intermediate phases of art more tolerable and enjoyable.

**Get a fresh perspective:** Consider putting a challenging work in progress away for a while. Often, a fresh look after a few days away reveals the source of the issue. If there's an artist you trust to give advice, ask them to offer an opinion.

**Set a deadline:** If you've become frustrated to the point where you're considering giving up, set a defined number of days or hours to resolve the problem or abandon the piece. How long that should be, and whether to stop and move on, are things only the artist can decide for themselves. Sometimes re-purposing a canvas or panel is the best way to move on.

**Embrace it:** There's always the possibility that a work of art will be hard to make, but that uncertainty and risk are what makes art interesting. Sometimes it's possible to consider the "awkward phase" the most enjoyable part of the experience. When a painting, drawing, or other work of art gets awkward-looking, it's probably because the artist was doing exactly what they were supposed to do: pushing the limits of the materials and their own skill. Embrace the awkwardness, and enjoy resolving it!