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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Can Professional Art Be Relaxing?



Carl Larsson, "Self Portrait in the New Studio" 1912

Ask the Experts: "When people find out that I am a professional artist, the reaction is often, 'Oh, that must be relaxing'. They don't realize that a lot of the time, there's considerable pressure involved. It got me thinking, though, if I wanted to use art for relaxation, would I even be able to?"

A: While professional artists have different motivations and objectives with their artwork compared to those who are entirely self-directed in their creativity, the two groups have a lot in common. The materials and processes are the same of course. Also, it's important to acknowledge that, whether they consider themselves a professional or amateur it makes no difference in the degree of seriousness with which the artist approaches their work. There are self-described "amateurs" who work full time at art and exhibit their work publicly, and there are many professionals who find that making art is a source of relaxation and sheer enjoyment.

It's undeniable that professional art involves unique pressures that are only encountered when working with clients, galleries and the public. Professionals must present their work to an audience of peers, agents, collectors and critics, while people who make art for pleasure don't have to show their work to anyone if they don't wish to. Career professionals generally thrive on these pressures, however, and use them to stimulate achievement.

The lack of external influence can actually be one of the biggest challenges for artists who work primarily on their own terms. Motivation and direction come from a different place for those who consider themselves amateurs. For

many, it's the discovery of new materials and techniques that keeps the experience perpetually challenging.

Professionals who feel they are too stressed out in their work can benefit from taking this same approach. Professional art is not "playtime", but every professional needs to retain some sense of playfulness and exploration. Every artist, no matter how successful or busy, needs to stay connected to what first kindled their interest. Whether it was a first real set of paints, an easel, or a sketch pad and pencils, each artist has a memory of where it all began.

Sketchbooks: A sketchbook should be a private space where ideas can flow freely without scrutiny or criticism. Divide pages into drawing and writing sections to combine journals with sketching, or select "sketch journals" with pages half ruled for notation.

Not For Sale...Yet: Instead of always thinking every work of art is potentially for sale, instead try thinking that every work of art is for your own enjoyment first, and only "released" for public view after the primary purpose is satisfied.

Master Copies: Rubens, one of the most successful and productive artists in history, made time while traveling as a diplomat to paint his own private copies of works by Titian. One of the most therapeutic and relaxing ways for professionals to enjoy making art is through copying works by influential historical artists. By faithfully copying a favorite work of art, you can reconnect to your early inspiration and suspend your usual technical and pictorial objectives. As a bonus, the result is a handsome work of art that is all your own.

Shopping Therapy:

For artists, purchasing new supplies is always exciting. Each new brush, canvas or sheet of paper is a reminder of limitless potential. There's nothing more healing than having possibilities for the future laid out in front of you in crisp, new packages.

Studio Improvements: Upgrading your most important tools and studio furniture makes it easier to relax and enjoy yourself while you work. Improved easels, lighting and seating can make the studio a haven where work becomes part of essential self-care.