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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Drawings as Major Works of Art



Degas- Dancer at the Bar ca. 1873

Ask the Experts: “Can drawings be major works of art? In other words, can an artist make drawings as finished works instead of just studies for paintings or sculptures? And, if an artist who paints is a painter, what is the term for an artist who draws? “Drawer” isn’t going to work for me!”

A: Drawing began, and remains, a fundamental method for building skills, recording images and planning larger projects, and today drawing is also a full-fledged mode of expression.

There is no modern requirement for artists to self-identify their art with a single, traditional craft like drawing, but making this distinction can still be significant (and useful) for the artist and their audience. The ambitious specialization in an

alternative to painting or sculpture can be a powerful statement that can help viewers better understand the intentions and objectives of your art.

Terms derived from historical trades like “painter” and “sculptor” don’t have a direct analog for those who practice drawing. “Draftsman” doesn’t accurately describe artistic drawing, and is not gender-neutral. We think “drawing artist”, like “ceramic artist” or “fiber artist”, is a good alternative.



Portrait of the violinist Paganini, Ingres, 1819

Like the violinist Paganini who also loved to play guitar, there have been many artists primarily considered painters and sculptors who have held a special, personal love of drawing. Some historical drawings, like those by leading Renaissance artists,

are now celebrated as major works of art. In some cases, it's not hard to imagine that was the artist's intention, because of the careful execution and highly resolved imagery some of these works display.

While there have always been artists who produced highly developed drawings, those dedicated to a special focus on drawing emerged in the Modern period, in the midst of a dramatic expansion of the definition of what constitutes a work of art. During the last century, many have chosen drawing as a primary means of expression, rather than as prototypes or rehearsals for major works in other mediums.



What makes a “major” work of art, however, is not always quality, but intent. If a drawing was made expressly for practice, or in development of a work in a different medium, the artist certainly took a different approach than if the drawing were made as a standalone piece for presentation to an audience. An artist conceives a major work of art as a complete statement for a public audience, and drawings executed for this purpose tend to have this quality.

The availability of new, high quality drawing mediums and papers expanded the tools available to artists who create drawings as presentation pieces. Some of these new materials can be used to produce highly resolved surfaces and imagery exceeding what was possible using traditional sketch and drawing media.



Colored pencils have evolved into a major expressive medium, available in thousands of colors

Some artists still favor charcoal, chalk and graphite, but the supplies available to drawing artists are far from limited to these. The ongoing development of drawing materials has encouraged the exploration of drawing mediums on their own merits, not just for sketches or as rehearsals for paint. Colored pencils, crayons, pastels and pigment pens now keep pace with the complexity of paints, with huge color assortments that are sufficiently lightfast for permanent art. These can be used to create surfaces that are as engaging as anything done in oils or acrylic. Watercolor pencils, oil paint sticks or “oil bars” and oil-based, pigmented markers can be used in combination with dry media to create works of art that blur the boundary between painting and drawing.



Paper can be acrylic-mounted to hardboard for a rigid drawing panel

One special consideration for drawing artists is the display requirements of works on paper. Papers and boards are inherently vulnerable to damage from physical contact and liquids, and works on paper require special protection from dust and other airborne grime.

The traditional approach to displaying drawings is framing under glass, and for friable (dusty) media on standard papers, this is probably still the safest choice. Not all artists want to display under glass, however, and have looked for ways to display drawings more like paintings, with the surface exposed. Papers mounted to rigid panels are protected from punctures and tears. Artists experimenting with this approach may want to prepare paper-faced panels rather than mounting finished, loose art. Dry transfer adhesives and gloss acrylic gel medium are ideal mounting adhesives. There are other possibilities for drawing on rigid supports, including silverpoint on acrylic primed panels.

While framed drawings typically receive no more than a light coating of fixative, some artists choose to varnish finished drawings heavily like paintings, with a coating which repels moisture and dust, so that the artwork can hopefully be displayed without glass. Because the top coat on a paper drawing becomes a permanent part of the art object, and cannot be removed (the varnish may actually fuse with the medium), artists should consider this a non-standard technique. Also, it's important to anticipate that the drawing will darken permanently with application of varnish. This approach is not always the best choice for typical display environments, because even when varnished, works on paper are generally more delicate than canvases or panels.

Another challenge that artists specializing in drawing will face is the misconception about the "real value" of works on paper versus canvases. While attitudes toward the basis of artwork value have evolved, there is still a widely held belief that works on paper offered for sale can't achieve the same prices as paintings on fabric and panel supports. This seems particularly unfair, considering the number of hours and cost of materials invested in high quality drawings can easily exceed what an artist devotes to a canvas painting.

Just as a growing number of artists have chosen to specialize in drawing, however, more and more dealers and collectors have cultivated a special interest in this type of work. It's easier now than at any time before for artists who love drawing to find opportunities to exhibit and sell their work.

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