

Studio Craft: Making Art that Lasts

Ask the Experts: “I’m a beginner, and I read that artists should be making paintings that last for the ages. I know the supplies I’m using aren’t probably good enough to get there. How can I start making art that lasts?”

A: We wouldn’t necessarily agree that every work of art, or every artist, has to constantly meet the standard of “for the ages”. That’s a lot of pressure for any artist, especially students who are on a tight budget and need to produce a lot of work. Standards of permanence and materials durability are very different for beginners and professionals; even more so for museums.



Sketch by Émile Deshayes on a piece of newspaper, 1931

Every artist places a different priority on durability in their work. It’s an important concern, balanced against other factors like budget, time, process and creative goals. Some artists shape their entire process around durability, selecting only materials with the highest degree of lightfastness and stability, using controlled practices designed to promote permanent results. At the extreme other end, some consider long-term preservation of the

artwork subordinate to creative expression with whatever materials and methods they choose.

The majority of artists fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. Most are aware that colors have different degrees of resistance to fading, that some papers yellow while others remain crisp and white, and that support preparation and painting techniques have an impact on whether paints will resist cracking and peeling. Understanding these factors helps each artist make informed decisions about materials selection and process.

Developing and maintaining artistic skills requires a lot of work, and a high volume of supplies get consumed during the process. Especially during the early learning stages, warm-ups and exercise are done more for doing than keeping, so it may make sense to use less durable materials for this purpose. Affordable, but less durable supports like newsprint and canvas-textured paper aren’t as easy to preserve long-term as rag paper and primed canvas, but longevity may not be a high priority where warm-up sketches are concerned.

If an artist’s work carries a high financial or personal value, it may be worth using a high quality, well prepared support for every work of art, even sketches, paired with a palette made up of professional colors with high lightfastness ratings.

So, what if sketches are an important part of an artist’s work? Artists who keep or sell their sketches, or those who just don’t want to risk losing a nice sketch, have many options for low-cost, acid-free papers and lightweight canvas products so every work of art has the potential to last a long time. Look for acid-free or pH neutral papers to use in place of newsprint. Consider lighter-gauge cotton canvas for one-shot paintings and exercises, or use inexpensive primed hardboard panels.

Once artwork is offered for sale, artists should be prepared to engage collectors and gallery owners on the topic of how long their art will last in a typical display environment, and how much care it will require to maintain. Discussing materials and processes is always a great way to connect with those who enjoy your work.