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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Perfection vs. Improvement



Julius Paulsen, "The Painter Agnes Paulsen, the Artist's Sister, at her Easel" 1886

Ask the Expert: "I am always so obsessed with making every piece of art perfect that I rarely finish anything. When I first started out, I just enjoyed the process and it didn't really matter whether I had a painting or drawing to show for it. Now that I want to start showing my art, my perfectionism is a problem. How can I get past this so I can get my career going?"

A: By nature, artists tend to constantly press the limits of their abilities, and always want to exceed what they have done in the past. The possibility that today's art can be better than yesterday's is one of the best things about being an artist, but "perfection" is such a subjective, personal concept, it's practically impossible to approach it as an achievable goal. Striving for something new and better can be a source of positive motivation, but there is also a strong temptation to want to cover every perceived imperfection, and that can end up making artwork less distinctive and interesting.

When most artists talk about the pursuit of perfection, they are often talking about an abstract dissatisfaction that's hard to define, as though something is missing that they can't quite identify. Instead of worrying about making

each piece of art "perfect", it helps to focus more on measuring improvement. In some ways, it's harder now to measure your own progress than it was for historical artists, who had to satisfy standards set by others before they could even think about making original work. Ever since the modern period, artists are expected to do something completely different from what came before, using materials, designs, and subjects in revolutionary ways. Originality and individual expression are today highly valued in art, even for students. Self-directed artists today have to be responsible for their own goals and objectives, and that's not always easy.

Every artist knows, the longer you look at a work of art, the harder it is to keep a fresh, objective perspective. A good way to stay fresh is by putting artwork away for a while and starting something new. For some artists, that might mean storing a piece after it's finished, but for others, it might make more sense to cover it after each day's work is finished. The next time it's uncovered, the initial impression will reveal a lot about what's working and what needs improving. Some artists work best when they have several things in progress at the same time, to avoid overworking and constantly getting stuck on one work of art.

Even when focusing on defined improvements like line quality, paint surface, proportion, and balance, it's important to keep perspective on what aspects are already working, and what needs fixing. Be mindful not to get carried away with hiding every perceived imperfection and smoothing out every surface. Often, the qualities of art that reveal the artist's challenges and difficulties are what makes it seem authentic and human. Hiding the evidence of process and struggle to make a work of art seem more perfect can result in covering up what's interesting about it. When it comes time to show your artwork, it's important to remember that often, the things that you like least about your work turn out to be the most interesting for the audience.