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ASK THE EXPERTS

Making Art In Your Living Space: Special Considerations



"Marie Kroyer paints in Ravello", P.S. Krøyer 1890

Ask the Expert: "I'm a studio artist, but due to circumstances outside my control, I am going to have to work from home for at least a month. I know this means scaling back what I do somewhat, but what advice can you give for staying productive?"

A: You're far from alone in needing to move your studio temporarily to your home. Many artists find themselves in this situation at one time or another, even historically famous ones. For example, painter and Bauhaus instructor Paul Klee worked at his kitchen table while caring for his infant son; avant-garde American artist Joseph Cornell created his assemblages in the basement of his mother's house in Queens, NY. And, while it is true that working from home may limit the scale, materials and processes involved, it's definitely possible to make significant works of art in your living space.

Designate a work area

If at all possible, dedicate a work space for your art. This will allow you to save time setting up each day, and leave in-progress work from session to session. If you are working from live observation, use easy-release painter's tape to mark easel foot position and photograph your subject, in case it's necessary to put away your kit temporarily.

Lighting

"...Artificial light suits me a great deal better; it's absolutely steady, and much more exciting." -Pablo Picasso

Lighting is often a challenge no matter the location. Even if you're not so lucky as to have high ceilings and north-facing windows at home, carefully placed artificial lighting can provide all the illumination needed at the easel and subject for dramatic effects and accurate color mixtures. If glare is a problem, use sheets of foam core board to reflect diffused light.

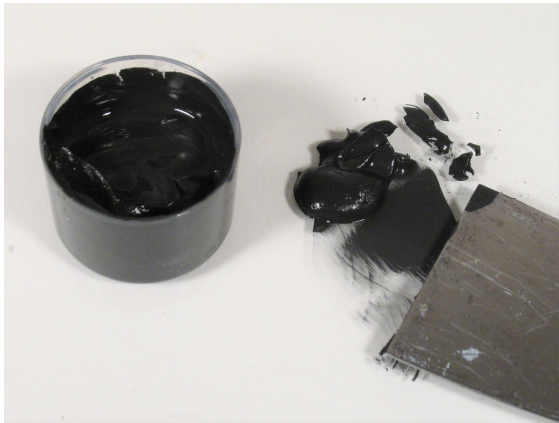
Protecting Surfaces

If space is limited, you may need to work from a table or desk temporarily. Before opening any jars or tubes, make sure to cover all surfaces to protect them from stains, spills and scratches. If fluids aren't in use, a canvas drop cloth may work, but if spilled liquids are a possibility, an impermeable vinyl cover may be a better choice. Self-healing cutting mats and drafting table covers are perfect for a temporary work surface. Likewise, floors in the work area should be covered appropriately for the media in use. Make sure to select floor coverings that don't pose a trip hazard- a vinyl flooring remnant makes a good, inexpensive protective mat for the painting station.

Dust and Particles

No matter what medium you'll be using, it's important to control dust and particles in the living space. Sanding should be done outdoors (using adequate protective equipment), with special attention to cleanup to avoid carrying dust back inside. Friable drawing media like chalks, charcoal and pastels can make a mess, but this can be managed to some degree if blowing dust can be avoided. If managing dust isn't practical for your temporary home studio, consider non-dusty alternatives like oil pastels and wax-based crayons instead.

When working with pigments and powders, it's a good idea to prepare them as a paste for easy storage and handling, to reduce dust and mess. Distilled water and denatured alcohol are generally good carriers for pigments; alcohol in particular enhances wetting of stubborn pigments that don't easily mix with water-based vehicles.



Pigment mixed with denatured alcohol for easy storage

If space doesn't permit a full, standing easel, consider a collapsible field easel or French-style box easel which can be folded away as needed. Tabletop easels are also available, some of which can handle fairly impressive canvas dimensions.

Cleanup

In the studio, we sometimes get used to leaving supplies out for the next day, but that's usually not a good idea when working at home. Brushes should be washed and put away nightly; use a good brush cleaner to remove all residue and preserve the condition of the tufts. Avoid leaving a messy sink by doing most of the washing in a bowl or bucket.

A single rag soiled with oil paint can be laid flat to dry, but if there are several at the end of the day, they should be placed in a lidded container with water to prevent combustion, and taken outside for disposal.

Even in the studio, it can be challenging to store wet paintings. At home, some creativity might be required to ensure fresh artwork can be left to dry undisturbed. An attic, basement or garage can provide a good location for your makeshift drying rack. Smaller works can be placed inside cardboard boxes and taped shut to dry in a dust-free environment.

Fumes

Tube oil colors are safe to use indoors, but not all thinners and mediums used with oil paints are appropriate for use in the living space. Volatile solvents should only be used with adequate ventilation, to avoid risk of health consequences and fire. If the temporary studio space isn't large enough, or lacks sufficient air movement, it may not be possible to use turpentine or mineral spirits in any but the smallest quantities (if at all). Substitute walnut oil for hydrocarbon solvent, consider water-miscible or solvent-free oil painting supplies, or use acrylics, gouache or tempera. Above all else, read and follow all package directions.



"A great artist can paint a great picture on a small canvas."
-Charles Dudley Warner



"Mischievous in the Artist's Studio" by Marie Yvonne Laur

Pets and Children

Artists who are used to working in a dedicated studio space can sometimes forget that not everyone at home is equally mindful of wet paint and spills. A covered palette with tightly-fitted lid can help prevent pets from walking through paint and covering the house with paw prints. Shatter-proof plastic or metal containers with lids for wet media are preferred over glass for avoiding breakage. If there is a real concern over materials safety and whether children and pets may get into art supplies, consider selecting only supplies that carry the AP seal of the ACMI, indicating safe for all ages (no toxic ingredients at levels that would cause harm).

Scale

The scale of your working space will unavoidably limit the dimensions of your work. Ceiling height may restrict easel positioning and canvas size. Even if a larger canvas can be set up, make sure to check door height to make sure it can be transported when finished. It may be possible to work on unstretched, primed canvas so paintings can be rolled for later transport. Make sure to obtain wide PVC pipe or cardboard rolls as core material, and plan to unroll and stretch paintings as soon as possible.