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Studio Craft: 5 ways you're (probably) working too hard in the studio



It's not always fully appreciated how much time and effort it takes an artist to create and present their work. Sometimes it seems like running a productive studio takes everything you've got, and there's never enough time to get it all done. Artists are, by nature, able to spend long hours on intricate, challenging projects, but if you approach every task with that level of attention, chances are good you're missing opportunities to work faster and more efficiently in the studio. Experienced career professional artists jealously protect the time they need to create art, and the best way to do that is through efficient work habits, planning and structure. If you examine the way you approach your work, it's likely you'll find some "time thieves" and draining tasks that can be done in a smarter way. Here are a few of the most common:

Not preparing materials in advance: Preparing paper, canvas, and other materials before they're needed

saves a lot of time when you're ready to make art. Most artists do tasks like canvas stretching in advance, but many fail to do enough at one time to achieve the best economy and efficiency. Setup and cleanup is nearly the same for two or three canvases as for a dozen, so if you know what sizes you'll be needing and if you have space to store them, it makes sense to prepare enough for a month or two in advance. Cutting and priming panels, stretching watercolor paper, tearing down printmaking papers, and coating supports for silverpoint can also be done ahead of time, but have a plan to wrap and store them safely until they are needed.

Not using enough brushes: If you're only using three or four brushes at a time, chances are good you're either spending a lot of time rinsing between colors, or compensating for dirty mixtures. In order to keep things moving at the painting station, start your session with at least two brushes per primary, one for earth colors, one for tints and one for black. In addition, keep clean replacements handy so it's easy to swap out a fresh brush for a dirty one. For situations where a limited brush kit is necessary, when at all possible, keep a brush just for yellow and one for light tints and white, because those colors get "dirty" first. As an added benefit, using extra brushes reduces wear and helps keep your painting instruments in good condition longer.

Not mixing with the palette knife: Mixing color with the brush is something all artists do, but it's not always the best way to solve every color mixing task. For paintings that require broad coverage with a single color, or many separate applications of similar hues, it's a good idea to use a palette knife to mix a quantity at once, rather than trying to duplicate a color repeatedly with a brush. For important mixtures that you use often,

consider mixing in bulk and packaging your own custom palette using empty collapsible paint tubes.

Skipping warmups: Especially when time is limited, it's natural to want to go directly to work, but a few minutes of sketching before working helps achieve a good level of focus for the presentation piece. Doing a few preliminary sketches helps loosen up before starting a major work. This saves making adjustments and corrections and helps make the finished art look more lively and fluid.

Working in non-standard sizes: Not every painting needs to be made in an off-the-rack size, but working to standard frame sizes ensures that presentation is quick and easy every time. Artists who prefer to use non-standard proportions can still benefit from working to sizes within the range of ready-to-assemble frame stock. It's sensible to keep frames on hand for standard, "salon size" works like 16x20 or 18x24", in case there's an unexpected opportunity to show or sell.

Waiting to clean the palette: Think you're saving time and money by leaving leftover paint on the palette? Think again. Starting with a clean palette is one of the best ways to get straight to work. Oil paint that has partially dried lacks the full adhesive strength of fresh paint. Leftover paint inevitably comes with dry residue and skin, which looks bad on the canvas and feels terrible under the brush. Thrifty painters who have a system for saving leftover colors should still consider wiping down the mixing area of the palette so any irregular, half-dried material isn't mixed in with fresh color.

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