

Studio Craft: Economizing Without Sacrifice



Image: "Imitation" John Haberle, 1887

Ask the Expert: "What are some ways I can spend less on art supplies without trading down to lower quality materials? I want to spend less, but I don't want my art to look like I did!"

A: There are plenty of strategies for reducing costs on art supplies besides sacrificing quality or doing without.

Weigh value against perceived convenience:

Lots of small, portable packages might seem convenient, but the cost of paint, mediums and nearly everything is higher (per single unit of measure) in small package sizes. Most product come in a range from small to bulk, with several sizes in between. To obtain the best value, find the package size that best offers the combination of convenience and cost.

Step out of your familiar groove: Don't be afraid to evaluate potential alternatives or replacements for established staples. Sometimes we're forced to try something new when a preferred brand is out of stock or gets "retired", and other times it's price or novelty that

tempts us. Often, the results can be refreshing and stimulating, and you may end up sticking with a less costly option.

Know Your Consumption Patterns: In order to objectively determine what represents the best value, keep a record of your patterns of use. Use this information when purchasing items you are buying very frequently. Take note and consider whether larger quantities or bulk purchases might yield a better unit price.

Look past the brand

Learn how to perform objective evaluations ("benchmark tests") of materials through procedures designed to isolate specific performance metrics. Benchmark tests strip away marketing, romanticism and nostalgia, revealing the bare facts of performance and permanence.

Avoid Waste, Consider storage space: There's no use buying in bulk if the remainder can't be stored without drying out or otherwise getting ruined. Stocking up makes sense when there's room to store the surplus, but be careful not to exceed the studio capacity. Papers and boards need to be kept flat, clean and dry, so make sure to choose an appropriate space. Acrylics must be kept from freezing. Oil paints can tolerate a wide range of temperatures, and generally store quite well in most studios.

Spend where it matters most

Some artists spend lavishly on framing, while others go no-frills with presentation and instead invest more in linen canvas and high-end stretchers. Each artist sets different priorities for their work, but be honest with yourself about what is too much or too little in any one area. Ideally, the viewer should not really notice where the cost saving measures were applied.

Minimum necessary cost

Ultimately, there is an unavoidable cost associated with making art- artists must have art materials. Careful budgeting and a knowledgeable approach to purchasing can make it possible for artists at every income level to produce permanent works of art at a high professional level. Cost has a strong relation to the quality, source and preparation of the product, but there are other factors involved, such as overall demand and brand recognition. Understanding how these less tangible factors affect overall value, along with a good grasp of your own usage patterns, can give artists a lot more control over what they get for their art supply budget.

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