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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Sketchbooks, Perfection, and Privacy



Ask the Experts: “On social media, I see artists doing sketchbook tours where every page looks perfect, the whole book is full from start to finish and it looks like a storybook. I can’t seem to finish a sketchbook, and even if I have one nice drawing, there is a lot of ugly stuff in between. I love sketching but I don’t want to show these to anybody and it’s making me feel bad about my art. How do I get my sketchbooks to look perfect like so many other artists?”

A: You never know who might see your work online, and opinions matter. Artists who give “sketchbook tours” on social media are conscious of the wide exposure their work can get, and they naturally want to show their skill, creativity, and productivity, so we think it’s clear that some of these sketchbooks are created expressly for public display. Some of these videos show dazzling skill and storytelling ability, but in our experience this work isn’t necessarily reflective of how artists use personal sketchbooks when they know nobody’s looking, when there’s no pressure.

Each artist has their own way of using a sketchbook. For some, it’s an experimental safe space where they can

take chances on concepts, subjects, and themes without worrying about success or failure. Sketchbooks are also diaries, training exercises, and a bank of ideas for larger artwork, and whether to share them with others is an entirely personal choice. Finishing a sketchbook means something different to each artist, too. For some it’s an important goal, like recording a significant life event or developing an important series of artworks. Others see keeping a sketchbook as a casual, practical exercise with no urgency to fill every page.

One situation where artists do need to show the contents to a critical viewer is where a sketchbook is a required part of a portfolio submission. Usually, this is part of the admission requirement for college or a scholarship competition. In this instance, the artist knows in advance and has the opportunity to assemble a sketchbook intended for public inspection. We think when artists display an impressive, polished sketchbook in a video “tour”, it has more in common with this type of professional portfolio than a private visual journal.

In this situation, the artist is naturally going to want to be selective about what they show, and edit items they feel are less strong or too personal. Often, the sketchbook entry can be satisfied with a folder of select loose sketches, but artists are always well advised to learn and follow the submission requirements. If using a bound book is a requirement, a spiral-bound sketchbook allows clean removal of any pages you feel aren’t representative of your best work.

Artists always want to show their work in the best possible light, especially where prospective clients, collectors, and students are concerned. That sense of perfectionism can lead to feelings of self-consciousness about our art even when no one can see the results. We think creating a sketchbook for public display makes sense when you want to give a glimpse into your creative process, but there’s a lot to be gained from reserving some of your experimental work for your own enjoyment and development.