

Studio Craft: Sketchbooks: Myths and Reality



Myth #1: You have to “finish it”

Reality: There are artists who feel compelled to fill every page in a sketchbook, but it’s definitely not something everyone does. Most artists own multiple sketchbooks of different sizes and shapes, with different papers and bindings, and they often toggle between them. It’s also pretty common to keep separate sketchbooks for different subjects, themes, or events, and put one away for a while if you need to stop looking at it. There’s nothing dishonorable or “lazy” about that— if it’s how you work, that’s the way it is!

Myth #2: Every page has to be finished art

Reality: An artist’s sketchbook is usually littered with abandoned fragments. That is a normal part of testing and evaluating concepts. Some artists do execute long-duration, finished art in sketchbooks, but a few quick, essential lines can often capture the key essence of a subject, enough for the basis of a larger work of art.

Myth #3: You have to show other people your sketchbook

Reality: A sketchbook can be as private as you want it to be. If you treat it as a diary, and you aren’t comfortable showing it to anyone, then don’t. Some rehearsals are closed to the public and critics, and that’s just the way it is. A safe space to experiment, take chances, and fail when necessary is something every artist deserves to have! Even if you decide to keep your sketchbooks private, however, it’s a good idea to put some kind of contact information inside the cover, so you can be contacted if you lose your book.

Myth #4: It needs to have written annotation

Reality: Some people like to jot notes on the page with a sketch, but others prefer to keep the drawing clean, like a presentation piece. You may want to simply write the date or location small in the corner or on the reverse, or record the sketchbook start and finish dates on the end pages.

Myth #5: You shouldn’t tear out pages

Reality: Every once in a while, a sketch doesn’t work out, and looking at it really makes it hard to move on. Every artist should reserve the right to delete a sketch now and again. Failed and abandoned sketches aren’t the only things you might want to remove. Sometimes a drawing done in a sketchbook is so successful, you want to remove it and frame it.

Spiral bound sketchbooks make it easy to remove a page without a trace, but pages can also be trimmed cleanly out of a book with a sharp knife and straightedge.

In the sketchbook, the artist really is ruler of the cosmos. It’s often the only place where we can feel completely free to create in a consequence-free zone, where even the failures can one day form the basis for a full-fledged work of art!