

6 Secrets about Art

Understanding the Qualities of Good Art,
Trusting Your Own Judgment,
Enjoying Your Art



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You know more than you think about art.

Really.

You may not know enough about investing in art—what to buy that will increase in value over time, even outperform the stock market. But that's not what you're after. You want art for your home or business that will enhance the place, make you feel good, and bring pleasure to you and others who look on it.

And for that, you do know plenty. Art is not meant to be some snooty, highfalutin, hard-to-understand creation for only the educated to appreciate. And any that is has missed the mark. Good art draws you, the viewer, in. You relate to some aspect of it and connect to it. It touches you in some way, emotionally.

You do know the most important aspect of art: You know what you like. And only that matters. What your friends think, what the critics have to say, even what your significant other believes matter not. What will you think as you look upon this creation time and again in your home? Will you think, "I should like this, but ... I just can't see what they do," or will you say, "I love this now more than I did when I bought it"?

If you buy based on others' opinions that run contrary to your own, you will only feel inadequate every time you look at it. You'll wonder, "What's wrong with me that I can't see what they do?"

We don't all wear the same clothes, enjoy the same food, have the same favorite color. Likewise, we have different tastes in art. Honor yours. Take time to learn what you like—you don't need to know why you like what you do. Just have confidence in your own opinion mattering to you and you alone.

Once you feel comfortable in what you like in art, you can have fun analyzing it. You don't need to do this, but looking more closely at the artwork can help you appreciate it more. Ask yourself, when you see a piece that moves you, "What in this am I responding to? What do I especially like about this?" It could be the colors—bold and bright or soft and subtle or jarringly in contrast. Maybe they play upon the mood you're in at the moment, or maybe they take you from a downer to a happier feeling. Or it could be the scene—one that reminds you of a special place or time, one that makes you feel relaxed, or one that energizes you. Or it could be the movement in the art—the way lines swirl or how the eye moves around the piece as you look at it or that nothing moves at all and instead everything just rests in place and makes you feel calm.

Compare what you see that you like with what you do not like. What explains the different reactions? Go beyond, "I don't like that," and discover why you don't. Play with this, get others to join in, and have fun. Let everyone have an opinion and allow yourself to see through others' eyes, too.

2

You can tell what's quality art.

Maybe not now, but you can learn to. I'll give you some simple tips to consider. But first know that artists and any gallery worth its salt will gladly help you see what goes into quality art. Artists love to talk about their art—the process they use, the inspiration for each creation, what distinguishes it from others. And any gallery that wants to succeed will employ people who welcome the opportunity to connect a visitor with a piece of art by discussing it. Helping you feel comfortable and knowledgeable about art only contributes to appreciating the art, which leads to purchasing it. So don't be shy about talking about the art you see. Ask questions and make the artists and gallery personnel feel good while you have fun learning about quality in art.

In the meantime, here are some points to consider when looking at framed art. Details in the presentation of the artwork reflect upon its overall quality. Artists who care about their artwork put the same high level of care in all aspects of it—the matting, frame, clean handling, etc., as well as the art itself.

- Some colors fade, even when kept out of direct sunlight. Will these?
- Some mat boards have chemicals that, over time, can destroy the work of art they rest against. Will these, or are they acid free?
- For a picture under glass, does the back have a dust cover to keep unwanted creatures and dirt from getting to the artwork?
- Does the frame have a cheap sawtooth hanger or a more secure and adaptable wire-and-screw setup?
- Was the frame made to fit the artwork, or was the art forced to fit a standard-size frame?
- For the matting, are the sides wider than the top or bottom? Not good. Are all four sides the same width? Just okay. Or has the matting been bottom-weighted with a wider bottom so that the overall appearance looks balanced? The best.
- Frames should enhance and take a second seat to the main event, the artwork. Does the frame overwhelm the art or enhance it? What do you notice first—the frame or the art?
- Traditionally, artists have used a white or almost white mat to set off and highlight the art. Colorful mats take attention away from the art. Does the matting overwhelm the art or enhance it?
- Does the mat or artwork show wear, dirt marks, or other careless handling?
- If under glass, is it clean?

3

When you get the art home, you can be sure it will work where you want it.

This concerns two aspects, the physical and the emotional. First, for the placement of artwork in a certain space, many galleries will allow you to “try out” a work of art so you can make sure it fits, looks right, and works in the spot you want. You’ll need to leave a deposit or credit-card information as insurance should anything happen to the art when you have it. But most galleries and local artists can accommodate you. Believe me, if it helps make the sale, they’ll do what it takes. Just ask!

The other aspect concerns your emotional response to the art. Simply, if you truly like the work of art, you will find a place for it. Take it home, and let it sit with you for awhile. Eventually, you’ll find the right spot for it. Also, if you chose the furnishings where you live, your same sense of style, the same fondness for certain colors, the same emotional impact will come into play when you select artwork—as long as you follow one and only one rule: Choose art you like.

4

You can afford good art.

Yes, you can!

First of all, you can start with a simple piece of art. And I’m talking about original art here, art done individually by the artist and not mass-produced by machines. Keeping your budget in mind, you can shop for small artwork and, if two-dimensional, unframed. Then find an inexpensive frame for it, hang it up, and see what effect it has on you. Make sure you put it in a spot you’ll often see. But do not put a little picture on a large wall. It will only look tiny and lost, and you’ll never appreciate it there. Instead, put it in a nook or in the hallway you walk by every day or even the bathroom. If you’ve kept true to what you really like, you will continue to enjoy the artwork every time you look at it. And during such moments of pleasure, congratulate yourself on having made such a wise purchase.

Eventually, you will see that such art deserves a nicer frame, one that better matches the quality of the work. So you’ll move up a notch and replace the inexpensive one.

Once you experience the pleasure that one little work of art gives you well beyond the day you purchased it, you will see the value in artwork in general. So start your “Art Envelope.” Put money in it on a regular basis—skip the latte twice a week or eat in instead of out once a week or forgo that

pair of shoes this week, the blouse next week, the purse ... You get the idea. When the funds reach a certain level (you decide how much), go art window-shopping. What's out there? Does anything call to you? No? Then wait. Nothing lost; the money won't go away—don't you dare! Just keep contributing regularly to your Art Envelope.

Then go looking later. Eventually, you'll find the perfect piece, the one you've been waiting for. Will your Art Envelope savings cover the cost? If yes, then great! You've got it. If not, ask about layaway. Most galleries, stores, and even artists will accommodate you there.

Know that if you want good art and find what you love, you will find a way to buy it. You'll get creative (while remaining honest, of course) in finding the money. And every time you look at your purchase, you will smile and tell yourself you made the right choice. EVERY time. Think of the vast pleasure you will derive over the years from that one expense.

5

You know how to respond to modern art.

Easy, now. You don't have to like it or even know what it's about.

Art asks only for a response from you. How does looking at it make you feel—happy, angry, calm, excited, sad, confused, elated? You don't need to know why you feel as you do about the artwork; just note whether you respond at all and in what way. Art that gets no reaction from viewers has utterly failed in its primary purpose. People will ignore it and pass it by.

Do not blame yourself if you need to understand the artwork in order to appreciate it. The artist, not you, has failed. Explanations that tell the viewer why the artist created the work, what experiences influenced it, who it is for, and so on may help you to appreciate it more. But art should not need those from the start. If it does, the fault lies not with the viewer but with the artist. (Or it lies with the times. Art created centuries ago used elements, ways of depicting people, certain subjects, etc. that had meaning then but now no longer does. Studying the history of art can provide insight here.)

Many of us have certain ideas about what art should look like, and some artists especially enjoy challenging those tightly held concepts. So if you want to understand works that lie outside your comfortable idea of art, open yourself up. Instead of saying, "This isn't art," ask, "What is the artist trying to do here?" or "Why did the artist do this and not that?" or "What could have contributed to this picture?" Just relax your mind and see what thoughts enter. You may well decide you don't care for it at all. It's okay to understand art and not like it. But, then again, maybe you'll start to appreciate styles well outside your familiar boundaries.

6

Poster, print, original art—they have significant differences beyond the price.

Yes, they're almost the same—but not quite.

The three differ in important ways. Posters are mass-produced and, therefore, have a relatively low price. They work wonderfully in filling up blank walls when you can afford nothing else. Many depict artwork by well-known artists and can help you learn what design concepts constitute good quality art. And because of their relatively low price, you can handle them in ways you never would higher priced art—tape them to the walls, stick them on the ceiling, cut them to make them fit a space. But because of the reproduction methods used, the colors will likely fade within a few years.

Another common type of reproduction of original art is giclée (pronounced ZHEE-clay). This high-quality method uses expensive, often textured, paper, special inks, and usually has the artist oversee the process to make sure the colors match the original as closely as possible. Many people have a hard time telling such reproductions from an original. Gicleés cost considerably more than posters but not nearly as much as the originals from which they are derived.

Prints are reproductions overseen (and often done) by the artist. Some require multiple passes through the printing press. For instance, silkscreen and lithographic prints have a separate printing for every color on them—and each sheet with the image must be positioned just so to ensure the next color goes in the right spot. High quality (often black-and-white) photographic images are hand developed by the artist on special paper; this isn't just a big Kinko's copy. Tremendous time and care go into each print. These works normally have two numbers in one of the bottom corners, something like 47/100. That number means the artwork is the forty-seventh one done out of one hundred. Each one will have slight variations; and each one is an original. (Sometimes you'll see *A.P.* instead of a number. That stands for "artist's proof" and is the first one or ones done, usually made to ensure the colors align correctly. These sometimes have minor imperfections that the numbered ones do not. But, like the numbered ones, they all are originals.) Some artists destroy the block or stone or plate used to make the prints after completing a set number so that no more can be done. That gives greater value to those prints since they are the only ones available.

While prints are original art, people often mean paintings and sculpture and other non-print artwork when they say "original art." For these works, you will find no other same or similar original artwork. (But note, as mentioned earlier, that some artists make reproductions of their original art and, naturally, sell them at a reduced price.) Besides the inherent value in the composition of the artwork, these have a greater value because of their uniqueness.

No one of these different forms is best. The one you choose depends upon your requirements and preferences, and many homes and offices have several—posters, prints, and other original art—all working well within the same four walls.

About the Author

Hello. I'm Julie Scandora, creator of fine art, painter of big skies, and shaper of scenes to soothe the soul. I've been creating winning works of art since second grade when I cleverly adapted the Al Capp square-triangle-and-circle puzzle contest into a geometric drawing to secure the national prize of the *World Book Encyclopedia* (worth a small fortune back then).

During my elementary and high school years, I continued to garner awards. Then taking a break as I worked on my art major at Smith College, I concentrated on finding the art form that best fit me. And when one of my professors offered to purchase a painting I had completed there, I became a professional artist. But only after graduation in 1974 did I discover my “voice on paper”—my unique style—while studying at the Philadelphia College of Art, and I honor it in all the artwork I create to this day.

I still win awards, such as first place in watercolor at the Mukilteo Lighthouse Festival Art Show. I still have my work accepted into competitive art shows, such as the Northwest Watercolor Society Open Juried Show and the Edmonds Arts Festival. And I still enhance my skills through art courses taught by leading artists, such as Lois Silver, Mark Mehaffey, Caroline Buchanan, and Judi Betts. But, overall, I concentrate on painting and sharing my creations with others.

My artwork hangs in various venues in the Puget Sound area of Washington State. Galleries that regularly display my paintings include the following:

Semantics Gallery
110 Fourth Avenue N.
Edmonds, WA 98020
425-777-3176
info@semanticsgallery.com

Bainbridge Arts & Crafts
151 Winslow Way
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110
info@bacart.org
www.bacart.org

What My Art Will Do for You

Make an Impact

My full-sheet watercolors and large oils draw attention—from you, your visitors, anyone in their vicinity. In addition to the large size, the drama of the scene, the deep colors, the dominating sky all serve to set the artwork apart from other scenes and say, “Look at me!”

Calm You

Even with my dramatic scenes, balance prevails, and my artwork will give you a wonderful sense of peace. I work with a palette of limited colors, which unifies the whole piece and contributes

to the calming effect. Most of my watercolors are wider than they are tall, and such a horizontal orientation, alone, is more restful than a vertical one. Finally, nature and reminders of it in pictures, such as my landscapes and flowers, help to quiet us within.

After a hectic day—or during one—looking upon my art will ease your mind, settle your soul, and relax your body.

Get Better over Time

You may look at my art and think you see it all. But subsequent viewings will show you more. Subtleties you had not noticed before will suddenly pop out. The multiple layers of colors I apply in the watercolors bring nuances that you see at different viewing angles or under different light. For the oils, I rarely use a single color in an area. Applying and mixing multiple colors adds richness and variety that you will see upon closer inspection. Relationships of elements in the picture also will take on greater meaning as you become more familiar with the painting.

Like a good friend, you will come to value the artwork more over the years.

My Art—The Technical

Although I work primarily in watercolors, I continue to explore other mediums and have recently begun branching out into oils. Read the following to learn more details about both watercolor and oil painting.

Watercolor

All of my artwork labeled “watercolor” is done on paper. I use Arches 140# pound, cold press for my full-sheet works (22” x 30”) and others almost as large. For smaller works, I sometimes also use the same, sometimes 90# hot press. What does all of this mean? Read on.

Hot press gives the smoothest surface, and the lighter-weight paper is less forgiving of mistakes—scrubbing them out won’t work and will only tear a hole in the paper. This combination presents the most challenges to work with, and the paper must be stretched to keep from wrinkling during painting. But it requires less paint for showing deep, rich colors while also allowing extreme subtlety in washes. And it dries faster.

Rough watercolor paper has pebbly-like dimples, which can collect paint, concentrating the color in the little spots, or, when the artist pulls a brush with paint quickly over the surface, can leave white speckles of the paper showing through. When not overdone, both give interesting variety to the painting and are hallmarks of the watercolor medium. In fact, watercolorists usually prefer to leave some of the white of the paper showing in such small speckles or in larger areas, such as clouds or

flowers or highlights of a face, to keep the overall look of the picture light and fresh. The alternate method of getting a white on the paper by applying an opaque white paint tends to “thicken” the feel of the painting and destroy the “wateriness” and transparency that the medium is all about.

The properties of cold press paper fall between hot press and rough. It has some texture but not as pronounced as in hot press.

The pound designation of papers indicates the individual sheet’s thickness. The higher the number, the thicker and heavier the paper. The heavier papers tend to wrinkle less from the applications of water-laden paint than the lighter-weight ones do. I work very wet, meaning that I use a lot of water in my paintings, so how much the paper curls makes a difference to me. I begin by soaking the entire sheet in water and applying a soft underlayment of three colors (a red, blue, and yellow) in an abstract design over the whole surface with little regard to the scene I have drawn. Once the paper has dried at this stage, I begin painting, applying multiple layers of washes (paint mixed with a lot of water, usually done with a large brush).

These practices cause even the 300-pound paper to ripple in places. I do not stretch these full sheets because I work to the edges and want them to show in the final work. The edges on these sheets are called “deckle” and result from the papermaking process, as opposed to the hard, exact edges of watercolor paper that is cut to size. The deckle edges give a softer sense to the final work and add a touch of variety, both of which I prefer.

The lighter-weight papers require stretching to prevent undue curling. Stretching the paper involves wetting it and securing it (with glue, tape, staples, or special grips) to a frame. When paper dries, it shrinks, so the wetted paper dries to a taut sheet that will return to that form after watery paints are applied. But the stretching process covers the edges and usually requires a mat to cover still more of the edges when framing the final work. Because I like the whole painting to show in the frame, I place my finished larger works on an acid-free board with the surrounding mat about a half inch from the watercolor.

So how to handle the wrinkles of the full sheet? I iron the completed work! Some waviness remains, but it is minor and gives a subtle reminder of the medium.

Oils

Rather than using oil paints with toxic solvents, I use oil bars, basically oil paint in stick form, similar in shape to a fat pastel stick.

First, the surface to be painted needs one or two layers of gesso to keep the oils from penetrating into the board or canvas. I use Venetian red gesso, preferring its more earthy color, which complements my subject matter, to show through than a harsh white. Invariably, some areas will expose the gesso surface below, similar to the white of the watercolor paper being exposed.

Oil bars, originally developed for touching up or highlighting oil paintings, now are used by some artists as the sole medium. Thicker than oil paints, oil bars leave a pebbly trail on the surface. Just

like oil paints, they require mixing for greater color variation. I use my fingers to mix the colors on the board and protect them with nitrile gloves. This process involves much shoulder, arm, and finger work as the oil bars have varying consistencies. Some go on like lipstick; others give the impression of oily clay - thick. But all need to be rubbed into the surface to cover it smoothly and fully, and the thicker bars require significant rubbing.

Because the oils take on a crust after less than a day, except for highlights, I prefer to finish a work the same day I start it. Any colors added the next day will sit on top of the layers from the previous day and not mix into them. This one-day completion keeps me working with a consistent palette for the painting, ensuring I use the same colors, which gives an overall unity to the work.

Just as the oils on the painting surface dry, so do the oil bars. After a day, they form a skin, which must be removed, for subsequent painting—or left on to protect them.

Although oils begin to dry relatively soon, they need about six months to cure completely. You can handle them—frame them and hang them up—after about two weeks, but they need to remain exposed to the air for several months longer to allow them to dry thoroughly.

My Art—The Soul

I paint because I must ... express myself. And when I successfully translate my emotions onto paper or board, magic happens. You, the viewer, recognize my message, feel something similar, and connect to the art.

Skies enthrall me. Maybe my Midwest upbringing needs to come to the fore through my big skies. Maybe my optimistic nature reveals itself in looking up. Or maybe I want an excuse to blanket a painting with my favorite colors of blues. Whatever the reason, dominating skies mark most of my watercolor paintings.

As much as I enjoy the peacefulness of a clear azure sky with only wisps of clouds, I fall for more dramatic displays above. I love the play, the *force*, overhead as clouds clash with each other, constantly reconfigure the scene, and give expression to a whole gamut of human emotions. On a solo road trip from Seattle to my hometown of Milwaukee via Minneapolis, I took hundreds of photographs of skies. I still laugh when I look at them for inspiration for paintings because I know that most people would see nothing in them—or at least nothing more in one than in what all the others show, merely a sky. But to me, each skyscape shows tremendous variety over the others, each one displaying a different mood.

So my challenge as painter becomes to bring out what I feel when I see, for instance, those thunderheads threatening up above—forces in our lives that can wreak havoc. Whether the photograph shows it or not, I also see (imagine) a glimmer of bright light in the distance. I cannot paint a picture without the positive playing some part in it. I know that, in life if we hold strong, our challenges we will survive.

My work in oil bars seems to balance that in watercolors. With the larger oils, I am looking down at the land, at the flowers. Skies still appear but as the background, as a means to set off the main event rather than demanding most of the attention. But I still want drama so I paint huge, flowers two, three, or more times their actual size.

I am having fun with the oil bars, experimenting, playing, stretching what I would otherwise do with a watercolor painting. I consciously look for balance of parts of the painting, keep aware of the preference for thirds and off-center placements, use colors that work well together.

Artists commonly write an artist statement that summarizes what they do, what goes on in the background in creating their art, what distinguishes their work from that of other artists. Here is mine for my watercolor paintings.

Artist Statement

I'm a Midwest native, raised with strict standards but also allowed the freedom to explore fields and woods around me. I carry that play between tight boundaries and unfettered freedom to my paintings. In the skies above, I see opposites battling it out, extremes of human nature expressed in "sky form." But we can't live with constant battles; in the end, we achieve a balance. This ultimately, I express in my paintings—nature, skies, the world in harmony.

Vast views I find especially conducive for letting thoughts, dreams, the spirit meander away from the cares of the world. The spaciousness of skies above draws me in, but just as readily, I get pulled toward the never-ending horizon. I express the openness on paper from the start with an abstract underpainting that gives a subtle complexity to the finished work. Brushing on multiple layers of slightly differing colors adds to the depth of the watercolor. And my favorite themes of the great open areas of the West complete my vision of what I love—skies in which to get lost, fields in which to run free, landscapes in which to let the spirit soar.

