

Artists' Improvement Obstacles Overview

This list will inform you of some solutions to the artistic problems you may be dealing with so that you can then approach your art learning appropriately and ask other artists for the right kind of help or for elaboration regarding any of these topics.

Also see:

- Effective Art Study Guide:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cK9q7oeFRE58MVaSgUqI662iGqCXC8Ah/view?usp=sharing>

1. Physical Drawing Techniques (Ways to draw and paint):

Art is a physical skill so being conscious of how you use your body and how you're attempting to build up an image will make a huge difference for your artwork. It will take time, practice, and patience before you can easily use these skills.

- **Drawing from the Shoulder:** Writing (the root cause of "*Chicken Scratch Lines*" in art) involves bending your fingers and wrist. When drawing or painting, you should sit/stand up straight, lock your fingers and wrist (don't grip too tightly), then only move your hand with your elbow and shoulder. Draw your lines in long single strokes. Finger and wrist movement should be used sparingly for very small details or else you will increase the risk of wrist injuries and be more likely to draw a lot of unappealing broken lines that trail off to the wrong places. Your body will naturally gain more control with less conscious effort over time (improved "*Muscle Memory*").
- **Slowing Down:** Your hand can make marks on the page faster than your mind can think. Before every single stroke, spend a few seconds thinking about where your next line will go, and use your peripheral vision (what's outside of your eyes' direct focus) to check how that imagined line will relate to other lines you have/will draw. Your speed will naturally go up over time; don't force it before you build up better analyzing skills.
- **Draft the Big Ideas First:** The final lines and details of your picture do not have to be the first things you put down on your canvas. Like with writing an essay, make rough unfinished drafts and "*Thumbnail Sketches*" (multiple separate full-sized and/or smaller undetailed drawings) of what you wish to draw to better guide your thoughts when you make the final picture. This can include making a lightly drawn under-drawing built from simple 3-dimensional shapes (referred to as "*Construction*") or simply an undetailed draft both of which you can then draw the final image on top of on the same page.
- **Focus on Accurate Ideas Regardless of Messy Lines:** In trying to make the perfect image it is common to have tunnel vision resulting in lines and small details that seem fine at first but fall apart when viewing the entire picture as a whole. Combining the three techniques above while keeping your eyes focused on an area away from where your pencil is currently hitting the page will help you immensely with controlling the end result of your drawings. It will be difficult to keep your mind attentive to two places at once and your lines may end up horribly wobbly but so long as you thoughtfully place the elements of your drawing in proper relation to each other then you'll be moving towards being able to clearly visualize your ideas and getting them out accurately on a consistent basis. This will remove the fear and pressure keeping you from starting and creating a lot of artwork. You can later focus on making smoother lines.

2. Approaches to Studying Art (Ways to improve):

Just like any other subject, art can be learned and there are many different ways to learn it. While you shouldn't dismiss any methods before you've tried them for a long time, you should always question whether a study method is helping you and how you could tailor it to suit your individual needs.

- **Getting Critiques and Feedback:** Having other artists look at your work is immensely important for identifying the shortcomings in your artwork and finding out about actionable steps you can take to overcome your weaknesses. Join many real life or online art sharing communities, show a good amount of your work (it will be easier for people to see your strengths/weaknesses and consistent habits across multiple pieces), and ask for "*Constructive Criticism*" (critique that tells/shows you what's wrong and how to fix it) for your overall skills or for something specific about your art that bothers you. Not everything you're told will be correct or suitable for you but you must keep an open mind and accept that your mentality or knowledge may be wrong despite how strongly you feel (especially if given advice by a rude artist/someone who's not an artist, or if you're aiming for a certain style/expression in your art). Even with access to feedback, it is still important that you make sure you put things into practice enough on your own afterwards. You won't be able to immediately and consistently integrate good advice back into your work after a single piece so be sure to do multiple works focusing on the advice so that you are truly learning something.
- **Studying Life/Artwork/References:** Drawing solely from your imagination without ever using references will not give you significant improvement and will severely limit the things you can recreate or invent from your mind (your "*Visual Library*"). You need to observe some kind of reference (real life people/places/things in front of you, other artists' artwork, photographs, models in 3D software, etc.) and then analyze it while drawing it. There are many different ways to observe a subject (positive/negative space, measuring, squinting, silhouettes, contours, etc.) and many ways to take information from it when drawing it (replicating it by copying/tracing/grid drawing, simplifying a subject into shapes/values/colors/composition, rotating/combining/altering subjects, etc.). Drawing from life is the most recommended method (as it has no image distortion or human error like other references) and doing "*Master Studies*" (studies of artwork from the highly skilled "*Old Master*" artists of the past) is highly approved as well. It is important that you avoid "*Symbol Drawing*" (drawing inaccurate symbols based on what you think something looks like instead of what's actually in front of you such as a smiley face instead of a true human face) and to keep your mind conscious of what you are trying to learn at any given point in your studies (or else you will have a lot of new drawings but no new knowledge). Finally, you should not only analyze your references but also very frequently test/apply your knowledge by drawing something you've studied from memory or by incorporating it into an original picture (for more information see the Effective Art Study Guide linked at the top).
- **Focusing on the Fundamentals:** The fundamentals of art are aspects of art that can serve as the building blocks for many different types of artwork. The specifics of what is or isn't a fundamental varies but some commonly discussed topics are: Observation, Line Work, Shapes and Forms, Perspective, Anatomy, Gesture, Light and Value, Color Theory, Composition, Design, etc. Alongside studying to gain general knowledge, you

should aim to do reference studies that focus specifically on one of the fundamentals you want to improve in or following learning material/doing exercises specifically geared towards a skill (“*Dynamic Sketching*” exercises for Line Work/Shapes and Forms, creating “*Value Scales*” for Light and Value, etc.). A lot of art books and video series will often center their teaching around the fundamentals.

- **Developing a Style:** Your art style and creativity are the combination of your physical drawing skills, the artistic knowledge you’ve gained, the experiences you’ve had in life (hobbies, traveling, media consumed, etc.), your conscious decisions (the specific things you wish to show) and your unconscious decisions (mistakes, thoughtless habits and exaggerations, etc.). It is necessary to have a good level of knowledge and control of creating artwork before you worry about trying to finalize a unique style otherwise your unconscious decisions and low skillset will leave you with a very limited inconsistent style. To gear your style into something appealing (to yourself and other people) simply continue to study references and the fundamentals, and experiment a lot. Your experimentation should involve both mixing together things you find appealing in other people’s art (colors, shapes, designs, human features, etc.) and trying out new things to find something that works. The best way to study artists is by making exact copies of their artwork and aspects of their style (both from reference and memory) until you understand them well enough to use it in new contexts with little effort. Then, you would be able to combine them more fluidly rather than a bad Frankenstein mashup.
- **Taking Notes:** There are many things to remember in art and while the primary way to do so is by drawing, it is beneficial to make written notes as well (both on your studies and in a separate book). Make notes for not only the knowledge based aspects of art (the names of bones and muscles, color relationships, your drawing process, etc.) but also for the visual aspects as well (the physical properties of objects you have observed or their likeness to others, characteristics of the styles you like, etc.). Also, always take notes as you go through instructional material (books, videos, classes, etc.) and of things you’ve been told when critiqued by others. Writing all of these things down will give you another mental association with the ideas you’re trying to learn (which makes recalling it easier) and something to look back on when you haven’t touched upon a topic in a while (which makes jumping back into it faster). Rewording and combining your notes for different concepts will work better for remembering them than simply reading them over. Figuring out how to put artistic concepts into words also helps you think about them in new ways that you wouldn’t have otherwise. Compiling a collage of pictures/screenshots of drawing concepts is useful as well.
- **Repetition, Consistency, and Flexibility:** Like with any skill, consistently executing the drawing process over months and years is needed to see improvement and truly internalize it. You need to repeat studying a specific subject a good number of times before you can expect to get significant knowledge from it. A good way to test your understanding is by drawing a subject from imagination (or in the context that you were aiming to finally use it in) numerous times to compare with your prior attempts. If the results still leave you with a lot of uncertainty, then you’ll likely need to continue repeating it and possibly altering your study methods. Balancing this process of “*Study and Application*”, being mindful while drawing, alongside tackling the difficult subjects that make you uncomfortable (stepping outside of your “*Comfort Zone*”) is necessary to avoid having your art skills “*Stagnate*” (cease to improve). It is useful to either make a

schedule (whether daily, weekly, and/or monthly, etc.) and/or keep a record of the time you allot to all of your daily activities so that you don't lose direction or exaggerate how much time you have actually studied.

- **Formal Education:** There are many ways to get formal guidance from an instructor such as: Art schools, Ateliers, Mentorships, Workshops, Local Art Classes, and Online Schools/Courses. The structure, feedback, and interaction they provide can greatly help you improve if you work hard enough. Many of the options are very expensive. The price doesn't always match the quality of instruction you will receive and even good instruction may not help you reach your artistic goals if your skills and work ethic aren't good enough going into it. If the price is of concern to you, then the best recommendation is to spend a few weeks/months self-studying art (with books, videos, and information shared online) while doing research on your options so that you'll have a better understanding of what education you need and how you can get it. Don't expect there to be one resource that will solve all of your problems; Find one closest to your needs and fill in the gaps with others.

3a. Productive Mindsets (Ways to avoid frustration):

Making large improvements in art is difficult and the fear of failing to create amazing art can be crippling. Shifting the way you think about art and addressing other issues in your life will make your art journey smoother.

- **Your Health Will Affect Your Art:** The other problems in your life unrelated to your art may be affecting your ability to draw. These problems can range from diet, physical fitness, depression, anxiety, relationships, work stress, finance, etc. Don't assume that being unable to push aside those issues means that you aren't fit to be an artist as those issues could prevent you from doing many other things as well. On the other hand, don't assume that greatly improving your art will make all your life problems go away since handling those issues may be faster and you likely won't reach your art goals before those issues bring you down again. Seek help from professionals, family, friends, and even other artists (as there are many artists who are/have gone through the same things).
- **Accept Art Improvement Takes Time:** Between learning the physical and knowledge based aspects of art, seeing the improvements you want will take a long time. Most subjects in post-secondary schools are given 2-4 years to be only partially learned and generally lean towards having no physical aspects to them. Keep your expectations of how good you can get over a period of time in check and brace yourself for a long journey (especially when self-learning as that can add additional years depending on the decisions you make). While you can speed up the process by "*Grinding*" (exclusively studying one or more difficult subjects with the goal of upping the quantity as quickly as possible), the increase in effort, plus warped expectations, will make it feel like your progress will never get you to where you want to be. Pacing yourself correctly and taking long enough breaks can help you avoid completely "*Burning Out*" (being unable to significantly draw due to being overwhelmed by the pressure and workload you forced upon yourself).
- **Hold onto the Enjoyable Aspects of Art:** Art tends to become less enjoyable when you feel that your study efforts aren't giving you the control you need to properly communicate your ideas and make quality artwork. The feeling of "*Art Block*" (wanting to draw but being unable to due to not having ideas) generally comes when you feel you

are “*Not Good Enough Yet*” to make something of value. This can be relieved by setting lower expectations for your finished pieces until your skills improve (not every piece needs to be groundbreaking) and by creating as many rough and messy drafts of your ideas as you can. This will help you sculpt your ideas, come up with new ones, and fit them within your skill limitations. Let yourself experiment and attempt to create all of the artwork with the ideas you want to express regardless of what your skill level currently is. The more enjoyment you can get out of drawing then the more you will draw and improve.

- **Find Self-Worth from Your Mentality and Effort:** It is a general trend for people to view their value as person based on the accomplishments they’ve made. A negative view of yourself and your art is especially prominent when faced with all the new high quality art being produced by artists of all ages. Art takes up so much time before you can get truly outstanding results, it is better to judge yourself by the aspirations you have (having grounded goals of doing great things makes you a valuable person) and based on how much effort you are putting in against your obstacles (making solid attempts at achieving your goals makes you an even more valuable person). It is also good to extend that mentality and effort into other areas in your life so that art by itself isn’t your entire identity.
- **Erase the Idea of Being a Perfect Artist:** The most extreme idea of a masterful artist is that they have rigorously studied only mundane difficult topics for years on end before being able to create extraordinary artwork solely from their imagination. In reality, you are free to create finished original artwork using any number of references, painting over photographs/3D models, or using “*Photo-bashing*” (digitally combining photos with paint to make a new image) and only need to gain enough knowledge to use those tools effectively. Trying to avoid “*Being a Slave to Your References*” (being unable to make art without constantly searching for/using very specific tools/references/etc.) is important and noble but can largely be a waste of effort and discourage you from doing art entirely if you take to extremes.

3b. Artistic End Goals (Staying on track):

In the act of trying to improve your skills to better express your ideas, it is easy to lose sight of the aesthetics and ideas you wanted to show in the first place. Always have your ultimate art goal as the focus of your studies to ensure that you actually reach them.

- **Draw What You Enjoy and Study to Improve It:** Studying other art topics indirectly connected to your goals is great for gaining new insights that you wouldn’t have learned otherwise, but it comes at the risk of not understanding how to apply your studies, having unreasonable expectations of how good you should already be when you finally attempt drawing in a style, and losing the willpower to continue. Think about what kind of art you want to make, find artists who make that kind of work, attempt drawing exact copies of their works often (both from reference and memory) and experiment instead of waiting until you’re good enough, and then improve your shortcomings with the fundamentals and reference studying. After you become competent with the more relevant skills for your goals then you can branch out to other skills to become well rounded.

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