

My (Short) Life in Art

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My wife Cecille is an excellent amateur artist, and I have always envied her talents. For my part, I belonged to the "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like" school. I have had a nagging suspicion that there was more to it than that, and was embarrassed by my simple-minded approach to this subject.

A few years ago, striving to correct this situation, we signed up for an Elderhostel tour of French Impressionists. This included many lectures and visits to museums and places where the great Impressionists painted. The highlight of the tour was a seven-day cruise on the Seine, with stopovers at the places such as Giverny, Auvers sur Oise and Moret sur Loing, where Monet, van Gogh and Sisley had lived and painted. Extensive lectures accompanied each visit. I loved it, but Cecille considered it a form of intellectual boot camp, and hated it. I feel certain that her opinion was colored by the fact that smoking was not allowed on the cruise, but that's a different issue.

I returned from this trip with great enthusiasm, and a heightened awareness of Impressionist Art. Still, I felt that I should augment my appreciation by actually going through the process of art creation. My first instinct was to buy one of those Paint-by-Numbers kits which I had read about, but Cecille's rude and undiplomatic comments convinced me to return it to Target the next day.

I began reading Art Magazines from cover to cover, to get some insight into this world. I rapidly found that, in addition to the skill and the passion, art is a very complex technological endeavor today. There are oils, acrylics, pencils, charcoals, crayons, pastels, water colors, and a myriad of other media, each with its own chemical tricks of the trade. Since I was a beginner, I decided to restrict my approach to black and white pencil drawing, and slowly graduate to something more complex. After all, it made sense to walk before learning to run, eh? Even here, there was a choice between graphite and a variety of natural and formulated charcoals, so I decided to go graphite. There was comfort in knowing that I would be working in a medium which I had used since my childhood days.

Having made this decision, I was now faced with the choice of hot pressed versus cold pressed paper, papers and paper boards of many different weights and sizes, and papers with background tones ranging from chalk white to dark puce. Cecille could give me no advice here, since she had done all her work with pastels and oils, and on canvas.

In desperation, I signed up for Beginning Drawing, a course offered by Palomar College as part of their Adult Education program, and went to their first class, armed with a spiral notebook and a ball point pen. Here we were told that we would require one HB, one 2B, one 4B and one 6B pencil for our work. Also, a kneadable eraser, which was far superior to other types. Finally, a sketch pad of something called Newsprint. This came in a 14" by 17" size, but the 17" by 21" was preferred. A Masonite clipboard was highly desirable, but not essential. This was all that

was needed, said our instructor, to explore the world of "Art Work". My heart leaped when I heard these heady words, "Art Work", and I sensed that I was on the threshold of launching my new career.

Off I went to the art store to purchase these items. Here, my first shock came when I found that each pencil cost \$1.47, since pencils purchased in any drug store retail at a dozen for this price. Obviously, there must be some sort of an Art Surcharge. Undaunted, I went for it and sprung for the entire set of HB, 2B, 4B and 6B pencils. I passed up on the non-essential clipboard, settled for the smaller size sketch pad, and culminated my purchases with a kneadable eraser (\$2.47). I left the store with these items in a large plastic carry bag, and set off for my next session that week.

Upon arriving for class, the first thing I noticed was that the female-to-male student ratio was about 20 to 1. Coming from an Indian background, I shyly sat down beside the other budding male artist, who was laying out his art materials. First, he opened a large zippered canvas bag, from which he pulled out an enormous sketch pad, attached to an even larger Masonite clipboard. Next, reaching below the table, he brought out something which looked like a Sears Roebuck tool chest, and plunked it on the table. When he opened it, I saw that he must have had at least a hundred pencils, both black and multi-colored. He also had a variety of black twigs, and some unidentifiable objects labelled "Made in China". His next move was to bring out a battery-operated electric pencil sharpener, with which he sharpened each of his pencils with a grinding noise. He also had a special chamois cloth for removing the dust from their freshly-sharpened points, and sand paper to mold them to an appropriate shape. He prepared three pencils in each grade, with sharp, rounded and flat points respectively.

Finally, he laid out his erasers in a row beside his pencils. He had white erasers, pink erasers, blue erasers, gray erasers, plastic erasers, hard erasers, soft erasers and kneadable erasers. Thoroughly intimidated, I surreptitiously opened my plastic grocery bag when he was looking in the other direction, laid my sketch pad on the table together with my lone kneadable eraser and four pre-sharpened pencils, and began studiously observing their points. I was so nervous that I dropped the 6B pencil, which fell to the floor with a tremendous clatter, and broke its point. Upon recovering it, I noted a somewhat superior smile on the face of my neighbor. Perhaps I imagined his disdain; still, he did not offer to sharpen my broken pencil, and I did not dare ask him if I could use his electric pencil sharpener. However, reaching into his zippered canvas bag, he produced a spare pre-sharpened 6B pencil and handed it to me without a smile. I was so mortified, I would have stabbed him in the heart with it, were it not for the fact that the one he lent me had a rounded point. Fortunately, the requirement for that day revolved around the use of 2B and 4B pencils, so I returned his 6B pencil to him. We spent the session drawing Boxes, and I left in dismay, with no intention of returning to the next class. The teacher had told us, with great excitement, that we would be moving on to Circles and Ellipses at that time.

Upon coming home, I described these events to Cecille, who assured me that I would do much better after a few sessions. "Just think of it", she said, "someday you will graduate to Nudes". This was a mighty comforting thought and I dwelt on it for some time. That night, after going to bed, and mulling over the events of the day, I suddenly realized why my art experience had been so disappointing. Turning to her, I said, "Darling, if only I had an electric pencil

sharpener, I would be more successful in my art". Cecille, almost asleep by then, rolled over and mumbled "Van Gogh didn't have an electric pencil sharpener", and went back to her slumber. Thoroughly dispirited, I did the same.

I think I'll take a course on Fiction Writing next semester.