

Colored Pencil as a Fine Art Medium

NOT JUST FOR CHILDREN ANYMORE

by Tina S. Gagnon

“Why colored pencil?” My standard answer is, “Because someone has to.” The truer answer is that it is the only medium that puts me in my “happy place.” I love the rich colors and the ultra-fine detail I can achieve.



“Skeleton Crew”

Colored pencils have had a tumultuous history with the fine art world in the last decade or so. Yes, you can make art with them – but is it really fine art? While every medium has their own arguments, I can only advocate for colored pencils. So here goes nothing...

HISTORY

Historically, the five main fine arts were painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry, and it was believed that they should be solely for visual attraction rather than being practical in nature. In our times, the fine arts are generally represented in the visual arts. Nowadays the classification is left up to whatever a particular group wants to define fine art as, from the extremes of the purists who limit it to the traditional mediums of paintings and sculpture to the all-encompassing who include such disciplines as pottery, photography, and fine jewelry among many others. The only commonality is NO CRAFTS!

The attribute most agree on is that Fine Art has to be done by an artist who demonstrates a proficiency in their medium and that it has a vision, a concept, and sometimes a meaning. Most of all, fine art should stir something in the viewer, whether it be a fond memory, happiness, wistfulness, or a provoking thought. And yes, sometimes, anger or sadness.

DEFINITION

The Cambridge Dictionary defines fine art as “a type of art that is admired for its beauty.” If fine art is admired for its beauty – what difference does the medium make?

Yes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and there has to be some limits. The question is where is the line?



“Tale of the Peacock”

COMMERCIAL ART

In High Fashion, a veiled insult is to call a designer’s creation “matronly.” In fine art, it is when someone calls a piece of art “commercial.” That never fails to makes me cringe when I hear it. Thankfully, it is not something I hear too often anymore. So let’s explore the concept of commercial art versus fine art.

While we have gone over the definition of fine art, the definition of commercial art is “art created specifically for use in advertising and selling.” By this definition, if I create a piece of art and hang it on the wall, it is fine art. But, in the case of Norman Rockwell, he painted his pieces for the covers of *The Saturday Evening Post*, therefore they were made for commercial purposes. Is his work not fine art?

A second definition for commercial art is “art used for commercial purposes.” If the *Mona Lisa* is used to advertise a brand of toothpaste, is it no longer eligible to be a fine art piece? If we take just the word commercial, as it is defined in the dictionary as “making or intending to make a profit,” then, in my opinion, most of us are trying to make money from our artwork, so every piece of art sold is, by default, a commercial piece.



"Valleys of the Lilies"

A good friend of mine, Bill, who majored in art in college and has 32 years in commercial art, sums fine art as: "If you appreciate the art piece for something that stirs in you, the work put into it, appreciate the subject, the composition or whatever reasons it appeals to you – it should be called 'Fine Artwork' not fine art."

I will leave you with my favorite saying . . .

"Art is not art until it is sold. Until then it is merely a storage problem."
- Freak Wynne

www.TinaGagnon.com

COMMUNITY

Colored pencil has gained a large following among many artists worldwide. I am not referring to the adult coloring phase that has been going on. Colored pencil has its own society; The Colored Pencil Society of America (CPSA), founded in 1990, currently has 1,600 members. The nonprofit's mission is to promote colored pencils as a fine art medium. They strive to elevate the medium, educate others about it, and encourage innovation with its use.

Let's face it, I could start the United Spirograph Association of Cleveland, but I don't think that it would ever make Spirograph a fine art. So, while CPSA is vital to the community of colored pencil artists and fundamental to the education of the public, it won't be the sole turning point to long-held beliefs in the world of artists or, just as important, the world of art collectors.

LIGHTFASTNESS

Historically, fine art mediums were limited because of lightfastness. Pigments in certain mediums did not hold up to time and, most importantly, light. Oil and some other paints and sculptures did not need much to hold up, not fade, or get washed away, and they could be somewhat cleaned. Pastels, watercolor, graphite, and other mediums did not have durability or were not fade resistant. Glass in picture frames was not available or widely used until the late 17th–early 18th centuries. Colored pencils now have lightfastness that rivals that of any of the other accepted fine art mediums.



"Allium Cepa"