

## Not All Square Inches Are The Same – Here's Why!

If you've started selling your art, you might be looking quite hard at how to price it and once you do you realise it's a bit of a minefield. Many artists who sell through galleries use the square inch method, which basically means that every piece of work is priced according to size. Galleries love this for reasons which will become clear below, but for a lot of artists (myself included) it just doesn't feel authentic – and it can be massively detrimental to creativity.

The reasons? Production costs are one big messy thing here. We're spending a fortune on materials now, and then there's our time. If you're earning a living you need to have a basic hourly rate, so that has to be factored in too. Then all the other costs of running a studio – heating, lighting, rent, etc etc. Some of these costs will remain standard for each painting but unless you are always painting in exactly the same style and at the same level of detail for each work, your time costs may vary considerably.

Some artists are happy working in one style and genre full time, and gallery owners love them. The work coming off the easel is predictable, as is the price.

But if your work is a bit more eclectic, and you have several different 'styles' that are very different in terms of production time, how do you price it? I personally stick with the hourly rate rule -partly because it feels more honest and that's important to me, but also because these different genres of mine each draw a quite different client base; their objectives in buying art are different, as are their taste in art and their budget too. I've never set out to be a one-woman art supermarket but working as an illustrator for so many years has broadened my creative skills and interests, and I want to continue using those, feeling free to experiment and enjoy what I do.

Here are two examples that show how very different the two methods of pricing are – please note the sums quoted are not expected to be representative of all artists practice;

### **Method One – The Square Inch Rule;**

A painting measuring 20 x 20 inches has taken 30 hours of work but the artist uses the square inch rule. The studio and materials costs are an additional £150 (this will include cost of canvas, paint, brush replacement and other studio materials plus studio running costs for almost a week, and may or may not include framing too). As the artist needs to earn a baseline of £25 per hour that is used to calculate the square inch cost, which is going to work out thus;

$$£25 \times 30 = £750$$

Add on studio and materials costs £150 = £900.

The wall price in the gallery will need to be circa £1800 since the gallery owner takes about 50% in fees to cover their own costs. The artist will get £900 if the painting sells, but the price per square inch is set using the gallery price of £1800, which works out at £4.50 per square inch. Any other work the artist sells will be calculated using this figure so a 10 x 10 inch painting will be £450 etc. The artist must take care to keep their prices uniform, so that any work they sell on their own website uses the same wall prices as the galleries they sell through. Do not bite the hand that feeds you!

### **Method Two – The Hourly Rate Rule;**

The figures are basically the same: A painting measuring 20 x 20 inches has taken 30 hours of work. The artist takes an hourly rate of £25 per hour, so that's £750. The studio and materials costs are an additional £150 (this will include cost of canvas, paint, brush replacement and other studio materials plus studio running costs for almost a week, and may or may not include framing too). This gives £900 in total BUT the wall price in the gallery will need to be circa £1800 since the gallery owner takes about 50% in fees to cover their own costs. The artist will get £900 if the painting sells and they should also use the 'wall price' on their own website if selling direct.

And *this* is where it gets tricky. Here, the artist is using the hourly rate method to price their work (based on the honest fact that some paintings at 20 x 20 inches take 30 hours to paint and some take only 5 hours, because this artist paints work in a variety of styles) but *if* you work like this but your gallery reps want you to base all your pricing on a uniform square inch method, there's a dilemma. If you price ALL your work the same no matter what the style you're working in you will have to price *everything* on your own website up to match your most painstaking and intricate work, and you will likely lose those clients who loved buying your beautiful 'quickies'.

There are loads of lovely people out there who want to buy original art but don't have a massive budget, because we live in a capitalist system that constrains all of us to manage within its limitations. Yes, there are people who will happily pay the higher prices, and you'll get those sales occasionally, but there will probably be more who would be thrilled to afford a smaller sum for your experimental or more simple styles.

As an eclectic artist who loves to experiment and play, and who wants to share that work through sales, pricing this way allows me the freedom to do this by having a range of price brackets for different types of work. I enjoy selling directly to clients online, and the feedback I get from them is immensely valuable to me. Because I want to have some work in galleries too, my ideal scenario would be to place the most intricate and expensive work with them, as I know it's more suited to a gallery clientele anyway. But I can *only* do this if the gallery accepts that I'm not basing prices on the square inch

method and that they will see work on my website which is quite different and therefore considerably less expensive. Because not all square inches are the same.

So that's my pricing manifesto - and if you're an art buyer reading this I hope it's given you some insight into the business dilemmas of the artist. Most of us just want to paint and have no love for marketing, but given that we have to these days, I feel it pays to be candid about my own approach. Everyone works differently, and I haven't even touched on the pricing of art prints which of course can form a large part of an artists income – maybe that's a blog for another day, or another artist!